Imagined Democracy:
Material Publishing, War, and the Emergence of Democratic Thinking
in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, 1855-1867

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation traces the evolution of Whitman's democratic thinking across the first four editions of *Leaves of Grass*, covering the auspicious years 1855, 1856, 1860 and 1867. While democracy is the master political term within Whitman's later editions, it was nearly devoid from the original one, in which republican political concepts were still regnant. The argument put forth is that in the space of twelve years, Whitman's relationship to democracy went through a strikingly classic dialectic trajectory: emergence, consolidation and fissure. The immediate engine driving this progression was the Civil War, but behind this immediate cause was the slower, broader motor of modernization, particularly modernization's expansion of markets, for in the market's circulation and interconnection of people and commodities Whitman saw a model for an expansive and integrative democratic collectivity. The first chapter explores the importance to Whitman of the physical print room as a uniquely hybrid site in the course of modernization, for while it was one of the first to exploit the expanding industrial market, it also maintained pre-industrial forms of artisanal labor late into that progression. The print room thus became a site where the industrial market's reach and pre-industrial labor's affective relationship to the product and its consumers could be combined, and the print room therefore plays a central role, in ways both subtle and profound, in Whitman's poetry, in his understanding of the emerging democratic nation, and in his own literary productive practice. The second chapter turns from an
investigation of democratic social space to an investigation of democratic time, noting how a nearly forgotten event, a loan between Whitman and James Parton, ended the “afflatus” under which the early editions were produced and prompted Whitman to revamp *Leaves*’ relationship to history. Whitman's experience of personal debt failure led him to reconsider the ways in which his political project was susceptible to similar collapse, for the circuits of affective connection upon which his democratic project was based depended not only on their reach through space but on their forward projection through time, particularly the continual recycling of death into life, what Whitman called the “perpetual payment of the perpetual loan.” Whitman sought to reduce this contingency by abstracting the political project of the work from his immediate social world (America) to a political philosophy (democracy) which stood above and outside of time. The 1860 edition thus marked the emergence of democracy as the book's central political philosophy. Yet this strategy proved insufficient when Whitman confronted the one barrier to affective exchange that his verse could not bridge: the dead bodies of the Union soldiers. This unbridgeable difference reverberated outward through the circuits of Whitman's poetry, dismantling the political and affective structures he had been building up to 1860. A text which previously declared the absence of both the past and death – “the greatest poet ... places himself where the future becomes present,” “the smallest sprout shows there is really no death” – now becomes doubly haunted by ghosts, once by the dead bodies of Union soldiers which, as much as Whitman declares he “will henceforth forget,” he cannot, and again by the strange emergence of new “Phantoms,
gigantic, superb.” These phantoms represent for Whitman the inversion of democracy's promise, democracy become nightmarish and zombie-like, and his fundamental triangle is haunted by its inverse: a melancholic Whitman; the overmastering re-emergence of the “bards of the past” and explicitly antiquated poetic forms; and a threatening, sovereign federal power autonomous from the people. The revisions Whitman introduced to the post-war edition of 1867 tell the story of a crisis in democratic confidence on behalf of democracy’s former champion. Taken all together, the first four editions of Leaves form a chronicle of the archetypal democratic poet's struggle with democracy during U.S. democracy's most critical decade.
dedicated to my father

William Buckner Haile, Jr.
1939 – 2008

this dissertation completed
on November 24th, 2010
his seventy-first birthday
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List of Abbreviations

LG1855......................................................................................Leaves of Grass 1855 Edition
LG1856......................................................................................Leaves of Grass 1856 Edition
LG1860......................................................................................Leaves of Grass 1860 Edition
LG1867......................................................................................Leaves of Grass 1867 Edition
NUPM............................................................Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts
WWIC......................................................................................With Walt Whitman in Camden

With the advent of readily available digital scans of Whitman's works, all page numbers
refer to first editions. When a particular edition saw variant publications, refer to the
bibliography for the text used.
Acknowledgements

If the purpose of an acknowledgement is to repay the kindness shown us, then this one cannot succeed: too much has been extended to me for me to ever be able to return it. A long project accumulates a long list of people to thank, and when those are as excellent and generous as I have had the good fortune to encounter, the debt is unpayable. I am humbled by their support. Rather than attempt a full requital, I will be brief, in the hope that they know my gratitude, and in the belief that the best way to show it is not here on the page but in the continuing life ahead. Every dissertation is a personal story as much as an academic one, and so I want to begin with my family: my wife Heather Settle, whose support was immeasurable and who was also my first and constant academic interlocutor; and my daughter, Josephine Viola Haile, who is the spark that makes it all worthwhile and who puts it into perspective. At Duke, I want to thank first my adviser, Priscilla Wald, whose honesty, intelligence and pervading sense of ethics are my model for how an academic life should be lived. Without her continuing support, particularly in the later stages, this project might never have come to fruition, and for that I thank her sincerely. Tom Ferraro oversaw the earlier stages of this project, and his enthusiasm and insight are my model for why an academic life should be lived. Sitting in his classroom, either as a student or as his teaching assistant, have been some of my most enjoyable moments with a book. Ian Baucom guided a great deal of this work's conceptual leanings, and his professionalism, theoretical precision and conceptual breadth were a source of inspiration. I am not the only one to note that his summaries of a lecture are
often much clearer and more compelling than the lecture itself. Matt Cohen contributed his exhaustive knowledge of Whitman and Whitmania, and gave quite a bit of excellent feedback on early versions of this project. Along the way, I also benefited from a grant from the Franklin Humanities Institute's Dissertation Writing Group, and from countless discussions with my graduate student peers: John Miles, David Mayer, Suzanne Schneider, Genevieve Abravanel, Jene Schoenfeld, Jacques Khalip, Kate Crassons and Mary Grace Immediata.
Introduction: Looking Back from 1872

The impetus and ideas urging me, for some years past, to an utterance, or attempt at utterance, of New World songs, and an epic of Democracy, having already had their published expression, as well as I can expect to give it, in *Leaves Of Grass*, the present and any future pieces from me are really but the surplusage forming after that Volume, or the wake eddying behind it. I fulfilled in that an imperious conviction, and the commands of my nature as total and irresistible as those which make the sea flow, or the globe revolve.

*As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free, And Other Poems, v*

In August of 1872, Walt Whitman published a slim volume entitled *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free, And Other Poems*. A few months earlier, he had been invited to deliver the Commencement Poem at Dartmouth College, and the new book, which was almost a pamphlet, with only six pages of prose and seventeen of poetry in a large font, was an attempt to capitalize on that event. A decade earlier, the Dartmouth invitation would have been unthinkable, for Whitman had been widely regarded as a social pariah. Since the end of the War, and since several public defenses of his character by other prominent writers, a gradual sea-change in public opinion had begun. Having spent most of his career in the entrepreneurial world of small newspaper publishing, Whitman was quick to see the opportunity in this shift. The new volume, which borrowed its title from his Dartmouth address, was published in the hope that some of the celebrants would purchase it as a souvenir. “Souvenirs of Democracy” was, not coincidentally, one of the
Unfortunately for Whitman, very few did, and with good reason. During the early 1870s, Whitman's poetry entered a phase which can best and most charitably be called confusing. Paradoxically, much of this confusion stemmed from his very attempt to recast his intimate and confessional poetic style for the kind of public and honorific events to which he was now being invited, but the confusion also had deeper roots. The charge of confusion had always been a touchy one for Whitman; his critics had considered his poetry confusing from the start – “perfect nonsense,” quipped a reviewer of the original 1855 edition – but one of Whitman's most exciting qualities had always been his ability to face that confusion with perfect confidence: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . . I contain multitudes” (LG1855 55).  

Now, however, the confident side of that equation was breaking down, and confusion was infecting the whole. To take a small but illustrative example, Whitman opened the Dartmouth address with one of his most favored topics, his disavowal of “ornament” and “conceit” in his poetry. On the same question, he had written in 1855, “Most works are most beautiful without ornament”; that line performed its own argument, in that it is beautiful in its concise simplicity. In 1872, he wrote, “The conceits of the poets of other lands I bring thee not.” With the affected “thee” and the inverted syntax, the plain confidence of 1855 was replaced by an oracular fog. The fact that these affectations occur in a line which claims to eschew such “conceits of the poets of other lands” leaves us wondering what Whitman could have been thinking. Rather than

1 In the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* Whitman frequently used four dots as punctuation. To distinguish between his punctuation and my ellipses, I write his dots with spaces as he did (“. . . .”) and my ellipses without (“...”).
supporting his argument. his language takes half of it back.

Subtler but deeper problems are found in the poem's invocation:

As a strong bird on pinions free,
Joyous, the amplest spaces heavenward cleaving,
Such be the thought I'd think to-day of thee, America,
Such be the recitative I'd bring to-day for thee.

As before, Whitman inverts his syntax in these lines, so much so that the underlying referential structure nearly collapses – is it the “bird” or the “amplest spaces” which are “heavenward cleaving”? – but the most perplexing element is also one of the smallest, the contracted “-’d” that Whitman attaches to his verbs and which moves them into the subjunctive mood. A single letter and the specifics of verb moods might appear to be pedantic concerns – the overzealous parsing of a too-close reader who cannot see the tree for the bark, much less the forest – but with Whitman, they happen to be quite profound.

The mood of a verb defines the presumed relationship between it and the world – indicative describes what we believe the world to be, subjunctive what it only might be – and in *Leaves of Grass*, the place and function of poetry within the world and history are two of Whitman's central themes. Given his reputation as a speculative and visionary poet, we would expect his major mood to be the subjunctive, the mood of hypothesis and conjecture; such is the case with most other visionary poets, from Blake to Ginsberg, whose poems rise through successive levels of subjunctive hypotheses to culminate in a final indicative epiphany: 'could be ... could be! ... could be! ... is!' Surprisingly, then, Whitman wrote the first edition of *Leaves* almost entirely in the indicative and
imperative; he speaks of what the world is and will be, and of what must be done, and only rarely entertains what might be or could be or would be. In that edition's long Preface, he worked out a kind of aesthetics of the indicative, in which the value of poetry lies not in its visionary energy but in its relationship to the immediate and actual world of “today”: “The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today” (viii). When he does introduce the subjunctive, like the “would be” of that line, it is a short flight brought quickly back to the indicative earth, “is today.” By contrast, he expresses impatience with long speculative chains of subjunctive verbs, whether it be the apotheotic crescendos of the visionary poets or the institutionalized metaphysics of religion, calling such airy conjectures “of no account”: “Whatever would put God in a poem or system of philosophy as contending against some [actual] being or influence is ... of no account” (xi). All his opening lines in the first edition are in the indicative or imperative – “I celebrate myself,” “Come closer to me,” – except for “To Think of Time,” which is the exception that proves the rule, beginning in the infinitive and subjunctive only to turn in its second stanza and make the point that its readers would be better off spending their time with the indicative: “Have you feared the future would be nothing to you? // Is today nothing?” (65).

Broadening scope from grammar to content, Whitman's preference for the indicative in his early poems is related to his familiar theme regarding the relationship between the body (indicative) and soul (subjunctive): while he is “the poet of the body / And ... the poet of the soul,” he prefers to explore that nexus through the material, “All comes by the body.” While other visionary poets fly through the soul to land in a new
body, Whitman delves into his body to rise into a new soul:

You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,

And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my

barestript heart,

And reached till you felt my beard, and reached 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;

And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own. (15)

Compared to the narrative arc followed by those other visionary poets – 'could be ...
could be! ... could be! ... is!” -- Whitman reverses the moods: 'is ... is! ... is! ... I never
knew I could be this!”

Consequently, Whitman's shift to the subjunctive in the opening of “As A Strong
Bird on Pinions Free” reflects a major change in his poetics. It also reflects a major
change in his politics, in what kind of conceivable futures he can entertain for his subject,
“America.” Something happened in the seventeen years between 1855 and 1872,
something to knock his confidence that his poetic vision for the future of America would
turn out to be the actual future, not just a theoretical one. The obvious, and correct, event
behind this shift is the Civil War, and that is an answer which this dissertation will
explore in depth. For the moment, though, I want to note two ironies: the first is that a
war which has been regarded, at least since Lincoln told us so in his Gettysburg Address,
as a great advance for democracy would shake the confidence of democracy's foremost
poet, a title Whitman assuredly holds, at least within his national context and even a good ways beyond. Wouldn't a war which demonstrated the nation's conviction to incorporate all within the umbrella of citizenship, no matter their race, and even at a tremendous cost in blood and profit, wouldn't that war instill Whitman with confidence in America's future, not doubts?

The second irony is that Whitman spends the bulk of “As A Strong Bird on Pinions Free” declaring that no shift has occurred. In fact, the poem comes up to the point where we would expect it to name the War, then perplexingly turns away. Looking again at his opening, it is not only in the subjunctive, but is also a trope which the deconstructionists called autodeixis, which is to say that Whitman does not merely describe America but points (-deixis) to his own act of telling (auto-), “Such be the recitative I'd bring to-day for thee.” Autodeixis was always one of Whitman's favored and characteristic tropes; he doesn't merely say “the body is electric,” he has to tell us he's saying it, “I sing the body electric,” “I sing America,” and so on through countless famous lines. Those earlier lines, however, were all in the indicative, and a different phenomenon takes place when Whitman switches over to the subjunctive. Whitman now appears to be setting up one of the most classic tropes – call it a “conceit” if you will – of lyric poetry, where the development of the poem follows a certain narrative: the poet says 'I would sing A, but for X, and so I sing B.' A paradigmatic example is Shakespeare's opening to Sonnet XVIII, “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate / Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May / And Summer's lease hath all too short a date.” At its core, the trope describes a kind of
cognitive event, where an event or realization X triggers a shift in world view, from one in which A was thought worthy of singing to one in which B reveals itself as the true song. I thought summer days were the most lovely thing imaginable, until you came along, and now I know their winds are rough and their lease short.

When Whitman declares “such be the recitative I'd bring to-day for thee,” we expect him to say except for X – which would be the Civil War – and to sing us a new post-war B song instead. Instead, he takes a different track. After the opening line given above – “the conceits of the poets of other lands I bring thee not” – Whitman continues his poem as follows:

But an odor I'd bring to-day as from forests of pine in the north, in Maine
—or breath of an Illinois prairie,

With open airs of Virginia, or Georgia, or Tennessee —or from Texas uplands, or Florida's glades,

With presentment of Yellowstone's scenes, or Yosemite;

And murmuring under, pervading all, I'd bring the rustling sea-sound,

That endlessly sounds from the two great seas of the world.

These lines are very similar to many of his national catalogs in the earlier Leaves, but, again, now laced throughout with the subjunctive marker “-d.” The effect is a strange one – Whitman is dwelling on scenes which he has sung many times before but which he now says that he, for reasons not yet disclosed, can no longer sing. He is fingering the relics of his former poetry. With such a long subjunctive introduction, our anticipation builds – why can't he sing such lines anymore? But right at the moment when we would
expect his extenuated preamble to touch down upon the interfering fact, the indicative X that makes his old song impossible, Whitman instead turns towards the heavens, shooting skywards on a string of exclamation points:

And for thy subtler sense, subtler refrains, O Union!

Preludes of intellect tallying these and thee—mind-formulas fitted for thee—real, and sane, and large as these and thee;

Thou, mounting higher, diving deeper than we knew—thou transcendental Union!

By thee Fact to be justified—blended with Thought;

Thought of Man justified—blended with God:

Through thy Idea—lo! the immortal Reality!

Through thy Reality—lo! the immortal Idea!

For once, his distorted grammar is not merely affected sophistication, it reflects a real tangle in his underlying argument. In fact, the cognitive drama implicit in subjunctive autodeixis here becomes so complicated that mere verb moods no longer suffice, and in his closing lines it rises into the open, as a contest between “Idea” and “Reality.” If the usual trope describes a cognitive reversal, from world view A to B triggered by fact X, Whitman is here describing a reversal reversed, a double or meta reversal, in which he begins with the expectation that he will have to change his song, only to find that, thanks to an altogether new and unexpected revelation, call it O for “O Union!,” he can continue his song as before. “By thee,” “transcendental Union,” “Fact,” like the fact of the war, is “to be justified,” which is to say that it will be brought into accord, “blended,” with what
he “Thought” the world to be. Expanding his argument, it is as though he began to speak the usual trope, only to be interrupted by the revelation of Union: 'I would sing my old songs, but for the war, and so I – wait, what's that? O Union! Transcendental Union! I can sing my old songs again!” Only here, the double reversal is prolapsed, so that O palimpsestically overwrites X, and Whitman never mentions the War at all: 'I would sing my old songs, but O Union! I sing my old songs!” Rather than having to make his “intellect” and “mind-formulas” “tally” with the experience of the last ten years, he can turn away from those experiences, gazing over and beyond them to the “higher [and] deeper Union.”

Whitman's double reversal, his breaking of the usual narrative of subjunctive autodeixis, draws a figure in time: “Union” functions like a temporal bridge, connecting the nation's pre-war promise with its deferred but still possible future fulfillment and allowing Whitman – so he claims – to step over the recent past of the intervening war years. Time is a difficult concept to talk about, yet it it is a central concern for Whitman, arguably his most fundamental. When I mentioned earlier that “To Think of Time” was an exception that proved a rule, the only poem to open in a non-indicative mood but one that makes it a point to turn back to it shortly thereafter, the opposite point could also be made: only time has enough of a hold on Whitman's imagination to send him into speculation. Furthermore, Whitman's temporal imagination is inseparable from his political one, such that he cannot begin to answer the question what is America without simultaneously addressing the question what is time. “America does not repel the past,” he says in the very first line of the very first edition of Leaves, “[it] accepts the lesson
with calmness.” And yet, that opening figure shows just how much Whitman's concept of time had changed by 1872. He is most certainly repelling his recent past in *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free*, and he is far from accepting the lesson of the war with calmness. In the original *Leaves*, time functioned in one of two modalities: either it was generational time, the successive churn of generations building forwards into the future – “the life which served it [the past] ... has passed into the new life of the new forms ... it was fittest for its days ... he [the future] shall be fittest for his days” – or it was revelational time, where the future arrives in a sudden rush of ecstatic recognition – “You ... plunged your tongue to my barestript heart ... Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth.” In either case, the path to the future lies straight through the present, either as a steady step-by-step climb or as a sudden leap up to a new plateau. On the contrary, Whitman's “O Union!” says that the path to the future vaults over his present, rising over all the war's recent history into a space above time, a “transcendental” space, from which it will not descend until some unspecified event in the future. The war may have preserved the Union of states, but it disjointed the Union of time, breaking the successive chain of “life” and “action.” Whitman's present is exiled from the nation.

Whitman repeats a key verb to describe the future reconciliation, “blend”: “By thee Fact to be justified—blended with Thought; / Thought of Man justified—blended with God.” The “blending” of polar opposites was, for Whitman, part of the nation's regenerative metabolism, the source of its “life”: “Out of the dimness opposite equals advance . . . . Always substance and increase, / Always a knit of identity . . . . always
distinction . . . always a breed of life.” His job as poet was to facilitate such junctures, to be the “arbiter of the diverse” who coaxed the pairs into sexual and spiritual congress. In 1855, that linkage was complete: “I am the poet of the body, / And I am the poet of the soul.” But in 1872, it had been fractured into a chiasmus, as in the final two lines above: “Through thy Idea—lo! the immortal Reality! / Through thy Reality—lo! the immortal Idea!” Each side of the binary, “Idea” and “Reality,” has itself been split in two, between a present incarnation – “thy Idea,” where “thy” refers to the present world of “thee today, America” – and a version which stands outside of time, “the immortal Idea.” What used to be a reciprocal link between “opposite equals” now figures as a criss-cross, as each present entity links to its immortal opposite but not back:

The war had knocked Whitman’s linkage from below, breaking it into an X. Had he written the lines about Idea and Reality in 1855, he would have omitted the qualifier “immortal,” for at the time he saw no distinction between present time and higher time. Even in 1872, he was still the poet of the immanent world, in that his lines pass “through
“thy” present world into the immortal, just as he preferred to explore the body/soul nexus via the body. But as he tries to draw the old linkage across the divide, it keeps bending upward, to its immortal non-equal. Imagine Whitman on the shore of a lake – not a far stretch, given that he had by then converted the 1855 Preface into a poem entitled “As I sat Alone by Blue Ontario's Shore.” He stands upon a bank marked body and tries to throw stones across to the opposite shore, the soul. But instead the stones keep veering upward, landing not on the opposite shore but high above it, on a tremendous and overawing bridge that spans far above his head, the bridge of transcendental Union. If he could only get a stone to come back, to link from the immortal back to his present world, then the reciprocal circuits would be re-established, “life” would be restored, and the nation would once again start churning its way into the future. But he cannot. The stones only go one way. He is left waiting for a grand historical event, when the bridge, through forces undisclosed, will lower itself back down to the present. Only then will his throws once again cross the water horizontally, skipping back and forth between “opposite equals” and fulfilling his role as poet, the builder of linkages.

Ultimately, the most perplexing as well as the most touching part of As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free is Whitman's passivity before this historical crisis. The 1855 Leaves had been a paean to doing in all its endlessly variegated forms, “Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world.” Whitman saw a continuum of creative activity that began at the smallest and most particular acts of labor – “The pure contralto sings in the organloft, / The carpenter dresses his plank ... / The pilot seizes the king-pin” – and extended through a series of associations all the way up to the largest, the
making of the world and of time itself. Making things, we make our selves, like blacksmiths whose work shapes both metal and muscle into beauty: “From the cinder-strewed threshold I follow their movements, / The lithe sheer of their waists plays even with their massive arms, / Overhand the hammers roll—overhand so slow—overhand so sure.” From these “wellshaped” bodies we in turn gain noble selves – “the noble character of the young mechanics and of all free American workmen and workwomen” – and from these noble selves is born a great nation, “a grand producing land of nobler men and women.”

The poet's work is, as Whitman says from the blacksmith's door, to “follow [our] movements,” to observe our acts and witness them back to us, thereby making sure that their “lesson” is not lost and that the chain of associations keeps ticking upward. “Without effort and without exposing in the least how it is done,” says Whitman, “the greatest poet brings the spirit of any or all events and passions and scenes and persons some more and some less to bear on your individual character as you hear or read” (LG1855 vii). If the full associative chain is achieved, from task to body to self to nation, then each single act of labor resonates upward and outward to the furthest reaches, and a “stonecutter” at his bench is simultaneously enmeshed in a wide network of national “love,” and his cuts shape not just the stone before him but “the future” high above him: “Here comes one among the wellbeloved stonecutters and plans with decision and science and sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms” (LG1855 v).

The ultimate product of the poet's work, then, is for the chain of associations to
extend not just upward and outward, but forward and backwards as well, through time, thereby establishing the continuity of time and turning it from a repository of the dead past into a living, productive entity:

To do this well [instill the “lesson”] is to compete with the laws that pursue and follow time. ... Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet . . . . he says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson . . . . he places himself where the future becomes present. (vii)

These are beautiful lines, but they beg the question: So where, then, does Whitman “place” himself in 1872? On a podium in New Hampshire, evidently, summoned there by his erstwhile betters to deliver the lesson on the day in which they celebrate the arrival of the “new life,” now trained and “fit for its days” and ready to succeed the generation that came before. He knows the script by heart, for it came pouring out of him in those ecstatic days of 1855 and '56. But as he tries to summon those words, as he tries to face the crowd as they face the future through him, he finds his tongue tainted by a tincture of the past – a small “d” here, a modifier there, just enough to make those words land hollow, hypothetical. It should be a triumphal moment for him – “Give me the pay I have served for! / Give me to speak beautiful words!” he had demanded back in '56, thirsting for the mantle of national poet at a time when only a few hundred people had ever heard his rolling free verse. And now, such a day has arrived. But no matter where he places
himself, he cannot seem to face the future from the kind of present that history has bestowed upon him. For this podium also lies at the end of a long path, a seventeen year path full of the “plunges and throes and triumphs and falls of democracy”: first the impassioned attempts to write a book that would make the war unnecessary, then the hopes for an early and jubilant triumph, then the dawning resignation that none would come, then the grim work of tending to its many, many, many casualties – “during those three years in hospital, camp or field, I ... went ... among from eighty thousand to a hundred thousand of the wounded and sick” (LG1855 94, Specimen 78). Seventeen years also of career plunges and throes, from the unbelievable moment in 1855 when Emerson's letter “greet[ed] him at the start of a great career,” through the total collapse of ’57, back again with the publishing contract of ’60, then through the long and petty clerkships of Washington, D.C. Along the way there were some friends, many enemies, and a few cutting mistakes, as Whitman made his way from a twelve-year-old carpenter's son setting type at the presses, up into the world of democratic party politics, through the back doors of literary publishing, and into – and then into banishment from – some of the most exclusive tables in the nation. Finally, and strangely, he has come to this podium in New Hampshire. And as he looks out over the crowd, who can wonder but that the dead do not indeed rise before his eyes, eyes that have seen so many corpses. And if they've come, they've come for Whitman to perform his office, to “join” “past and present and future” by ushering their walking souls into the heaven of a democratic future. Only now, Whitman finds that he cannot, can no longer fashion the paratactic “consistence” of democratic time. The dead hang in the air like a long poem in the subjunctive. And if he
is not their master, the one who “realizes” them, then who is?

The goal of this dissertation is to trace the path between these two endpoints, between the wellsprings of the original 1855 *Leaves of Grass* and the poetic and political crisis Whitman faced after the war. More specifically, it is to follow a particular thread through that path: what Whitman means, and what it means to him, when he uses the word “democracy.” Democracy is a curious term within Whitman's writing and Whitman studies, more so than is usually acknowledged. Ever since Whitman described *Leaves* as his “epic of Democracy” in the preface to *As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free*, Whitman and democracy have appeared inseparable and co-constitutive. Two factors, however, complicate this symbiosis. The first is that the meaning of the term is often vague in the poetry; much like other central signifiers – America, the people, equality – it has the quality of being both foundational and indistinct, not quite empty but at the same time endowed with elusive properties to bridge contradictions. The second complication is that it is almost entirely absent from the original 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. When Whitman first published *Leaves*, republican political concepts of liberty, citizen and republic were far more common in the text than democracy, which was only mentioned twice and both times in passing. It wasn't until the last pre-war edition of *Leaves*, published in 1860, that democracy became the central political term within the volume, a position it held until the final edition of 1891-2.

Because of Whitman's tendency in the later poems to hypostasize and de-
historicize democracy, critics have generally viewed Whitmanian democracy as a static – though famously flexible and expansive – entity in his poetry. The near absence of democracy in the original edition of *Leaves* points to a more dynamic and complicated history. Reading Whitman's most political poems across their revisions shows that his understanding of democracy changed extensively, even fundamentally, through the successive editions. This dissertation traces the narrative of Whitman's democratic thinking across the first four editions of *Leaves of Grass*, covering the auspicious years 1855, 1856, 1860 and 1867. The argument put forth is that in the space of just those twelve years, Whitman's relationship to democracy went through a strikingly classic dialectic trajectory: emergence, consolidation and fissure. The immediate engine driving this progression was the Civil War, whose imminence first inspired him to engage in the “experiment” of the 1855 edition and then to expand and abstract that slim volume into the “completed” 1860 edition, and whose extreme violence then led him to radical doubts in the fractured 1867 edition. Behind this immediate cause was the slower, broader motor of modernization, particularly modernization's expansion of markets, for in the market's circulation and interconnection of people and commodities Whitman saw a model for an expansive and integrative democratic collectivity. In this representation of democracy – circulatory, “teeming,” realized in moments of exchange, labor-made – the poet plays the role that money does in the actual market, the “common referee” (Marx would say “universal equivalent”) through which the affective exchanges of citizenship and nationhood are realized.
Whitman's democracy inseparably fuses economic, literary, and political forms, and in his poetry, this fusion appears in his fundamental triangle between a new self, a new poetic genre and a new political nation. Yet this conception of democracy collapses when Whitman confronts the one barrier to affective exchange that his verse cannot bridge: the dead bodies of the Union soldiers. This unbridgeable difference reverberates outward through the circuits of Whitman's poetry, dismantling the political and affective structures he had been building up to 1860. A text which previously declared the absence of both the past and death – “the greatest poet ... places himself where the future becomes present,” “the smallest sprout shows there is really no death” – now becomes doubly haunted by ghosts, once by the dead bodies of Union soldiers which, as much as Whitman declares he “will henceforth forget,” he cannot, and again by the strange emergence of new “Phantoms, gigantic, superb.” These phantoms represent for Whitman the inversion of democracy's promise, democracy become nightmarish and zombie-like, and his fundamental triangle is haunted by its inverse: a melancholic Whitman; the overmastering re-emergence of the “bards of the past” and explicitly antiquated poetic forms; and a threatening, sovereign federal power autonomous from the people. The revisions Whitman introduced to the post-war edition of 1867 tell the story of a crisis in democratic confidence on behalf of democracy's former champion. Taken all together, the first four editions of *Leaves* form a chronicle of the archetypal democratic poet's struggle with democracy during U.S. democracy's most critical decade.
Chapter 1. Democracy from the Print Room: Affective Markets, Alternative Modernities and the Nation in Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*

COME closer to me,
Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,
Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.

This is unfinished business with me . . . . how is it with you?
I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.

*1855 Leaves of Grass, 58*

Preface: Trowbridge and Whitman at the Stereotype Foundry

One day in the spring of 1860 the novelist John Townsend Trowbridge heard some news that halted him in his tracks: “I was stopped on Washington Street by a friend who made this startling announcement: 'Walt Whitman is in town; I have seen him!'”

Trowbridge's excitement arose from both his own personal interest in Whitman -- “the tremendous original power of this new bard,” he wrote, “inspired me with an intense curiosity as to the man himself” -- as well as his knowledge that Whitman's arrival “in town” was something of a literary event, for the “town” in question was Boston, self-proclaimed capital, in equal parts arrogance and evidence, of literary nineteenth century
America. “The author of *Leaves of Grass,*” wrote Trowbridge, “had loomed so large in my imagination as to seem almost superhuman,” but so far he had loomed from a distance, an electric but perplexing provincial from the inauspicious shores of Brooklyn. But now, he was here, a fact so miraculous as to require personal corroboration -- “I have seen him!” -- and Trowbridge writes that he “was filled with some such feeling of wonder and astonishment as if I had been invited to meet Socrates or King Solomon.” Yet despite or perhaps because of such anticipation, the meeting proved a mixed experience for Trowbridge. His account, written forty years after the event for his memoirs, goes into some detail and is worth quoting at length:

> When I asked [my friend] where, he replied: "At the stereotype foundry, just around the corner. Come along! I'll take you to him." ...  

> We found a large, gray-haired and gray-bearded, plainly dressed man, reading proof-sheets at a desk in a little dingy office, with a lank, unwholesome-looking lad at his elbow, listlessly watching him. The man was Whitman, and the proofs were those of his new edition. There was a scarcity of chairs, and Whitman, rising to receive us, offered me his; but we all remained standing except the sickly looking lad, who kept his seat until Whitman turned to him and said, "You'd better go now; I'll see you this evening." After he had gone out, Whitman explained: "He is a friendless boy I found at my boarding place. I am trying to cheer him up and strengthen him with my magnetism." My readers may think this a practical but curiously prosaic illustration of these powerful lines in the
early poems:

To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door. ...

I seize the descending man, I raise him with resistless will. ...

Every room of the house do I fill with an armed force, lovers of me,

bafflers of graves.

The difference between the prosaic fact and the poetic expression was not
greater than the contrast between Whitman as I had imagined him and the
simple, well-mannered man who stood and talked to us. From his own
descriptions of himself, and from the swing and impetus of his lines, I had
pictured him proud, alert, grandiose, defiant of the usages of society; and I
found him the quietest of men. I really remember but one thing he said,
after sending away the boy. The talk turning on his proof-sheets, I asked
how the first poems impressed him, at this re-reading; to which he replied,
"I am astonished to find myself capable of feeling so much. " The
conversation was all very quiet, pitched in a low key, and I went away
somewhat disappointed that he did not say or do something extraordinary
and admirable; one of the noticeable things about him being an absence of
all effort to make a good impression.

Given his hyperbolic expectations, Trowbridge's experience of “difference” and
“disappointment” was somewhat inevitable, but he uses his novelist's eye to turn that
experience into a surprisingly vivid scene, the details of which are compelling. He has a
knack for letting his subjects skewer themselves with their own words. Here, Whitman's claim “I am trying to ... strengthen [the 'friendless boy'] with my magnetism” has the effect of turning some of his most stirring lines into the transparent grandiosity of an eccentric, who speaks of his own “magnetism” with a little too much credulity.

Trowbridge can participate in Whitman's flights of self- and other-realization on the page, but when that same impulse turns from books to reality, in the form of an actual “unwholesome looking lad ... who kept his seat” when the others rose -- how ill-mannered! -- then Trowbridge and Whitman part company. And his comparison of Whitman to “Socrates and King Solomon” is deliberately exaggerated, a bit of hyperbole meant to pierce, though perhaps gently, the bubble of Whitman's mystique. At the same time, Trowbridge is a clever writer, and his account manages to satirize himself along with Whitman. His disappointment at “the difference between prosaic fact and poetic expression” doesn't just deflate the august figure of “Whitman as I had imagined him,” but also makes Trowbridge look a little the fool for having imagined him such in the first place. At stake is not just Whitman's stature but also Trowbridge's expectations about how an author should and does act. Authors, particularly authors under the shadow of Emerson – which Whitman, writing in the Emersonian period of American literature, visiting Emerson's town, and having placed Emerson's endorsement on the previous edition of Leaves of Grass, most assuredly was – were supposed to leave you with pithy sayings to “really remember,” and to “do or say something extraordinary and admirable.”

The most “noticeable thing about him,” Trowbridge concludes, was “an absence of all effort to make a good impression.” As Trowbridge returns repeatedly to how “quiet”
Whitman was, the satire starts to cut into deeper meat. Just how “Self-Reliant” is it to always be on the lecture circuit, always be the center of every dinner party, always be expected to make – and do make – weighty pronouncements?

It wasn't only Emerson's model of authorship that Whitman threatened; in a more direct way, it was also Trowbridge's, and Trowbridge's intuition of this threat is what makes the memoir such good reading. At this point in his life, Trowbridge was a true insider and product of the Boston literary scene, having written ten of what would become fifty-eight books, gained friendships with all the leading literary figures and built a large brick house in the tasteful suburb of Arlington. Furthermore, the Trowbridge family had roots in Boston from the early 1630s and had intermarried with several prominent families, including, he makes sure to mention, the Danas. But in between those two dates his family, much like that of Herman Melville, had fallen into financial ruin. His father's father had lost the family riches through illness, and his mother's father had seen his wealth disappear when he co-signed a loan for a friend who subsequently went bankrupt. Trowbridge's own father had to relocate to western New York and become an indentured laborer on a farm. When Trowbridge was born, the family had their own property, but just barely, all ten of them living in a two room log cabin built by his father. So while the lions of Boston were delivering and receiving Harvard addresses and establishing salons, Trowbridge was attending a one room rural schoolhouse. Consequently, when his interests turned toward literature, the avenues open to him were decidedly plebeian. His early path was remarkably similar to Whitman's, who grew up in similarly humble conditions albeit in a more urban setting. Both published their first
stories in their early teens, both supplemented their writing income with skilled work in
printing offices, Whitman setting type and Trowbridge engraving, both turned to teaching
when publishing work dried up, and both were editors of small newspapers by their
twenties.

Then, in 1848, Trowbridge made his own trip to Boston, carrying with him a
“trunk full of manuscripts.” Like all class migrants, he was presented with a dilemma:
whether to ingratiate himself into the class to which he aspired by adopting their manners
and values, or to uphold the validity of his humble past by maintaining his difference
from those born into the elite. Trowbridge chose definitively, and successfully, the path
of ingratiation. Perhaps some of the social knowledge from his family's previous stature
endured in him, or perhaps he was simply a quick study when it came to social
interactions, but he quickly established connections with the leading figures of the Boston
publishing scene. Within five years he had come out with seven books, many of them
written to the specifications of editors. And when *The Atlantic* – effectively the house
organ of the Boston circle – published its first issue in 1857, Trowbridge appeared in it
alongside Emerson, Longfellow, Holmes and Lowell. He would not, of course, have
compared himself to those men in eminence, but he did want us to know that he knew
them and sat at their tables. He titled his autobiography *My Own Story*, but sub-titled it
*With Recollections of Noted Persons*. For an epigraph, he chose his family motto, *ne cede malis*, which translates as “yield not to evil/misfortune” but which in his gloss
comes close to “go along to get along.” Whatever anguish he may have felt from his
accommodation to Boston's elite literary society, he buried it so successfully – or so

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obviously – that when excerpts of his memoirs began appearing in *The Atlantic*, he had to publish a letter “to dispel the illusion … which some, I find, have followed … that in respect to discouragements and failures, human ills and frailties, mine has been an exception to the common lot. Strange illusion indeed!”

Strange illusion, indeed. To be clear, Trowbridge was a very talented writer, as is evident in the passage above, and his success owed largely to that ability, but the career he had chosen for himself was that of an ex-provincial attendant in the court of the native-born literary lions. His memoir contains many finely-drawn accounts of famous or soon to be famous authors, and Trowbridge treats his subjects with seamless tact and warmth, bathing them all in a tone of light but affectionate satire. Yet the more one reads, the more one gets the sense that there are two conversations going on at once in the book. Trowbridge's experience of exile and re-integration into the Boston elite left him with an astute awareness of the class dynamics and codes of Boston's literary establishment, and his ear is always attuned to the markers of social and literary success. He peppers his memoir with clues for the cognoscenti, intriguing details and quotes which he does not analyze but leaves for the aware reader to find, and this encoded subtext reveals the work of an observant and insightful social critic. To take a small example, his remark that Whitman was “at the stereotype foundry” as opposed to simply “the printers” is not just colorful specificity, for Trowbridge knows, and knows that insiders would know, that stereotyping was a method of publishing that was reserved for works expected to have a large circulation, as it had high initial but low marginal costs, and he therefore wants to communicate that, at this point in Whitman's career, someone in the Boston establishment
had decided to make a large bet on his future success. The narrative told by clues like this makes Trowbridge's memoir one of the best least-read commentaries on mid-nineteenth century U.S. literature, particularly on the relationship between literature, class, and the material publishing industry. And in the distance between the genteel surface and the critical subtext of his work, we can begin to find some of the missing affect that bothered the readers of *The Atlantic*: the smooth surface that conceals any trace of his past provincialness, the analytic subtext whose extreme class awareness betrays an anxiety that his class position or performance might slip. Once this duality is acknowledged, his surface tone of warm satire takes on a new interpretation: the warmth as cover, the satire bearing an edge of resentment, stealthily humbling his august subjects.

When Trowbridge went to see Whitman in 1860, he was aware of the parallels between Whitman's arrival in Boston and his own twelve years earlier. As literary critics, we tend to fixate on 1855, when Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, as his definitive break, yet while that issue was a real departure from predominant literary forms and themes, it was virtually a non-event within the publishing industry. Whitman had to self-publish to a degree almost unprecedented before or since, setting much of the type with his own hand, and while the book received some notable mentions from the literary establishment, it sold, by his own estimate, less than two hundred copies. The same remained true for the 1856 edition, with Whitman again fronting the printing costs and the resultant sales even lower. He spent four more years looking for a publisher without success when, in February of 1860, he received an unsolicited offer from the Boston firm of Thayer and Eldridge. Thayer and Eldridge were a new outfit, but they
were well connected in the Boston circle, particularly in its abolitionist camp, and they put their full efforts behind the book. Thus if 1855 was Whitman's literary break, 1860 was the year of his big break in the business.

Given all this, Trowbridge's “intense curiosity” in Whitman and his hope that Whitman would behave in the Emersonian model begins to take on shape. He hoped to find in Whitman that miraculous item, a true *provincial* lion to take on the native ones, someone who could achieve all the things that Trowbridge might have wished for himself had he not had to repress those desires in order to fit in with the Brahmins. Even better, he hoped Whitman might be a lion in the rough, who only needed the guidance of an ex-provincial fluent in the ways of social and literary Boston to take the town by storm.

From the very first line of his memoir, he signals this understanding of their potential relationship with a handful of carefully chosen signifiers.

I first made acquaintance with Whitman's writings when a newspaper notice of the earliest edition of *Leaves of Grass* reached me, in Paris, in the autumn of 1855. It was the most exhilarating piece of news I had received from America during the six months of my absence abroad. Such vigor, such graphic force, such human sympathy, such scope and audacity in the choice and treatment of themes, found in me an eagerly interested reader of the copious extracts which the notice contained. When I came to see the volume itself, -- the thin, small quarto of 1855, -- I found in it much that impressed me as formless and needlessly offensive; and these faults were carried to extremes in the second and enlarged edition of 1856.
Trowbridge's offer is clear: Whitman possesses the kind of “vigor ... force ... [and] sympathy” of which Trowbridge could only dream, but he needs an editor, someone like the unnamed newspaper editor who separated the “exhilarating .. excerpts” of his verse from the “formless” ones. He also needs a social guide, who can explain to him that there is no profit – *ne cede malis* – in being “needlessly offensive.” Furthermore, he needs a contact in the industry, which he evidently doesn't have, as the eccentrically published “thin, small quarto of 1855” is not something that the major houses would release. Finally, he clearly isn't on a path to rectifying these issues himself, since “these faults were carried to extremes in the second and enlarged edition of 1856.” What he needs is someone like Trowbridge, who has the skill, the contacts and the polish – did he mention he's been to Paris? – to help Whitman become a major figure of the Boston scene.

Instead, Whitman politely but definitively refuses to play the game: “The conversation was all very quiet, pitched in a low key, and I went away somewhat disappointed that he did not say or do something extraordinary and admirable; one of the noticeable things about him being an absence of all effort to make a good impression.” This from a man for whom “making a good impression” had become a career. Trowbridge went looking for a lion and found something like a wolf: aloof, independent, at peace with his distance from the Boston court. Confronted with the same choice that Trowbridge faced in 1848 between ingratiating and difference, Whitman opted to maintain his difference, and that put Trowbridge's own decision at risk. When Trowbridge made his trip to the stereotype foundry, he was returning to environs that,
once in his life, would have been familiar to him, in hopes of redeeming that past by finding in it a figure to rival the privileged patriarchs of his era. Instead, his would-be David politely turned him down, preferring to stay where he was. To Trowbridge, that decision is inexplicable, “needless.” Even he, usually so mum on “discouragements and failures,” must _cede_ a bit to this _malis_, and upon leaving the stereotype foundry he admits to being “somewhat disappointed.”

For his part, Whitman was likely aware of his effect on Trowbridge. While we don't have anything from Whitman as elaborate as Trowbridge's account of their meeting, there is a suggestive clue in a letter Whitman wrote to his Brooklyn friend Abby Price two weeks after arriving in Boston. “I create an immense sensation in Washington Street,” he writes, referring to the location of the stereotype foundry, “Every body here is so like everybody else – and I am Walt Whitman! – Yankee curiosity and cuteness, for once, is thoroughly stumped, confounded, petrified, made desperate.”
The Print Room

I have let Trowbridge introduce Whitman in this chapter because his covertly insightful commentary serves as both highlight and relief for my own analysis: highlight, in that the themes he brings to the fore – the print room, the literary marketplace, class politics, and the work of the author – are also important to my reading, but also relief, in that this essay attempts what Trowbridge found inconceivable, which is to leave Whitman in the print room. If the trajectory of Whitman's democratic thinking across the first four editions of *Leaves of Grass* moves through three stages, like a play in three acts, then this chapter is the first act, the exposition that sets the stage for the coming development. Like all first acts, it faces a double burden: the establishment of a point of entry to the story, and the need to introduce material whose relevance may not become apparent until the development begins. In the following chapters, the thread of analysis is given specificity by focusing on Whitman's revisions to a political subset of his poems, but in this chapter, which addresses the lead up to and content of the 1855 edition, there are no changes yet to track. Instead, I follow Trowbridge's lead and explore Whitman's democracy through his relationship to the site where Trowbridge first met him: the print room. From his earliest employment as a printer's assistant at the *Long Island Patriot*, Whitman had a deep association with the print room, one that did not cease but in some important ways increased when he became a poet. If Whitman's democracy is a fusion of the literary, economic and political, then the print room provides an actual, historical referent, for it is
the material site where authorship, the literary marketplace, and – given Whitman's involvement with party-affiliated newspapers – contemporary political debates meet. Whitman's iconoclastic relationship to that site, what Trowbridge calls his “quiet” and “needless” “difference,” therefore provides a window from which to explore Whitman's distinctive relationship to those constitutive discourses. This window is doubly significant for, as we shall see, the print room presented many exceptions to the literary, economic and political norms of the period, and this was an exceptionality which Whitman embraced and in which he saw astounding possibilities. Within this chapter, the print room serves not so much as a narrative thread to follow as a loose thread to pull, which gradually brings away greater and greater parts of the fabric until the momentum becomes self-sustaining. Beginning with the print room also lets this chapter take on a Whitman-like shape, for one of his most persistent themes is that to address sweeping questions, start with local, physical details: “All comes by the body, only health puts you rapport with the universe.” This chapter attempts to gain “rapport” with the “universe” of mid-nineteenth century factors influencing Whitman's verse by beginning with the site where the “body” of that verse, the physical object of the book, is produced.

This chapter makes four passes through Whitman's print room, each from a greater radius than the one before. The first picks up where we left Trowbridge, with a consideration of how Whitman's insistence on staying in the print room redefines authorial labor and contests a hegemonic articulation between authorship and class. The next section moves to address the importance of the print room to Whitman, noting that
the print room unexpectedly and unsettlingly emerges in *Leaves* at moments where Whitman imagines himself physically “passing” through the material text, thereby anchoring a process of eroticized affective connection between him and his readers. This affective connection transforms the market of commodities into a market of affects, where people relate not to commodities (Marx's commodity fetishism) but through commodities. The third section briefly pauses the argument in order to meditate on a particular trope of political party gatherings – the list of delegates called out from the podium – as a bridge between the political economic questions heretofore engaged and the rhetorical figures Whitman employed to reproduce the same kinds of affective circulation within his verse. Finally, the fourth section looks at how the affective market provides Whitman with a model for proto-democratic nationalism, and how this model generates a set of striking similarities between the role of the poet in the nation and money in the market.

Before commencing a few words are warranted on the position of this analysis within Whitman criticism. Right from the beginning of his poetic project, Whitman linked literary form and political form, declaring in the third sentence of the 1855 edition, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” This linkage produced two characteristic attributes of the volume as a whole: first, the work is explicitly self-conscious about its status as literature, particularly about the figure, labor, and social effect of its author, “the poet”; and second, the juncture of the literary and the political comes at the apparent expense of the historical, for Whitman's poetic depictions of mid-nineteenth century U.S. society are notably selective and idealized. In recent years, these
two attributes have produced two corresponding tendencies within Whitman criticism. One, call it the political economic school, looks at how Whitman's self-conscious introduction of “the poet” into his verse has a curious effect when juxtaposed with his many portraits of laborers, in that it causes a criss-cross between the two, rendering the poet's aesthetic work laborious and the laborer's manual work aesthetic. This introduction of an aesthetic component into labor re-configures, though without necessarily challenging, discourses of laissez-faire political economy to produce Whitman's characteristic political vision of an aestheticized democracy. Political economy thus becomes the absent but omnipresent middle in Whitman's poetry, linking his portrayals of “the poet” and “democracy” and rising to the surface of his verse in the persistent economism of his key metaphors (“possess,” “increase,” “tally,” “value,” “terms”). This school is best exemplified by Alan Trachtenberg, Wynn Thomas and Doris Sommer, and in its best moments, as with Trachtenberg, it is theoretically bold and analytically creative, traversing broad questions of literature, economics and politics.

The second school, call it the social historical, proceeds from the insight that Whitman's idealization of historical conditions is less a turning away from those conditions than an analysis and critique of them, and that we may unearth the content of those critiques by reading his poems against an in-depth account of his social and historical context. In order to achieve this depth, works in this vein often trade scope for historical richness, directing their analysis at an identifiable historical concern. In the last fifteen years, this has been the larger of the two schools and has produced the many recent books whose titles follow the formula *Walt Whitman and X: the Irish* (Krieg), the
Earth (Killingsworth), the Class Struggle (Lawson), the Culture of Celebrity (Blake), Nineteenth-Century Authorship (Pannapacker), Modern Music (Kramer), Nineteenth-Century Women Reformers (Ceniza), the Romance of Medicine (Davis), and so on.

This work attempts an intersection of these two schools. As the mathematicians know, an intersection is by definition less than its two parent domains, and this work runs that risk: more historically specific than the political economic works, losing some of the scope which makes them so exciting; more speculative than the social historical analyses, losing the focused historical depth that brings them alive. The goal, however, is a balance between context and perspective, between historical specificity and imaginative self- and world-creation, between where one stands and what one sees. Like the political economic school, I am interested in Whitman's portrayal of the work of the poet, but rather than compare it to the grand sweep of labor transformation during the nineteenth century, I contextualize it within the social and material practices of mid-nineteenth century publishing and Whitman's particular trajectory through those practices. The waves of labor transformation certainly passed through the print room, but the details of how those waves were refracted and engaged in that site are important. This is why Trowbridge is such a useful source, as he is a guide into the social and material life of literary labor. By reading Whitman's poems against capitalist economic models, the political economic school gains a structure with which to understand Whitman's crossing of aesthetic, economic and political boundaries, and this is one of the school's great strengths, but in seeking the greatest scope of relevance for these readings, these critics tends to stylize and idealize capital into a single, homogeneous “logic of capital.” Recent
scholars looking at the historical development of capital, particularly those working in or on post-colonial or oceanic contexts, have noted that capital proceeds as much by differentiation as homogenization, reversal and contradiction as much as progress and synchronization. Capital may have an overriding logic, but for any particular situation, that logic is a low but persistent whisper, while local inflections are a varying and noisy shout. Capital doesn't so much dissolve place as re-configure it, and Whitman's place within capital developments is therefore important.

To read that place requires the kind of detailed historical work that is the chief strength of the social historical school of criticism. In this chapter, that place is not just a historical concern, like “the Irish” or “Nineteenth Century Women Reformers” in the titles above, but a literal place, the print room. While the print room may be literal, it has rarely been considered literary. The writer's desk has always been the central imaginary place in our understanding of literature. Since Wordsworth, it has been joined by the site of inspiration, and in recent years, by the scene of reading (reception) and the publishing contract (access) as the defining places of literary production, but the site where the physical book is produced, the printing press, has been treated as invisible and ignorable. Whitman, however, was insistent throughout his career that he could not produce the kind of books he did without being himself present at their printing, at “the cold types and cylinder and wet paper” of the presses. The aim of this chapter is to honor that preference, working outward from the print room to the ways in which print production reconceives commodity, market, nation, poetry and, finally, democracy.
Class Politics in the Print Room

Despite their rocky start, Trowbridge and Whitman did go on to become friends – Trowbridge, true to his motto, gave it another try – but only after Trowbridge had gotten Whitman out of that “dingy little room” with its “unwholesome-looking lad.” “I got on vastly better with him,” continues Trowbridge in his memoir, “when, the next Sunday morning, he came out to see me on Prospect Hill, in Somerville, where I was then living. ... The few friends I introduced to him were congenial spirits.” Given the length at which Trowbridge described their first meeting, the brevity of the turn in their relationship is surprising. The key to subduing, if not unraveling, the many multi-layered “differences” and “disappointments” between Whitman and Trowbridge turned out to be surprisingly simple: change the setting. By meeting Whitman in his own dining room, Trowbridge was sacrificing the most grandiose possibilities of Whitman the class avenger springing forth from the print shop, but he was also protecting himself from the tangled affects the print shop represented for him.

Trowbridge may have been the first, but he was far from the last to believe that in order to “get on” with Whitman, Whitman had to be pulled out of the print room and into suitably elite environs. According to Horace Traubel's summary of Whitman's notes of a conversation with Trowbridge about Emerson – admittedly a long and suspect provenance – Emerson warned the visiting Lord Houghton against seeing Whitman, saying that “Walt Whitman ... belongs yet to the fire clubs,” low-class entertainments run by the Irish fire companies, “and has not got into the parlors.” During the mid-century
boom in Whitman scholarship, critics developed the convenient fiction of some transformative event – a failed romance or religious vision – to wall off Whitman's early career as a printer from their consideration of his later poetry. Even today, biographers select Whitman's dinners and walks with Boston's literary dignitaries as the most important part of his 1860 trip, while the direct cause of the journey, his insistence on being in the print room when the new edition was assembled, is given only hasty mention and cloaked in managerial language, Whitman having come to “oversee” or “supervise” the publication. Trowbridge had specific biographical reasons for being uncomfortable with Whitman in the print room, but the persistence by these other authors hints at a larger tendency. Call it compulsory authorial eliteness, the conviction that all authors are, if not in actuality then at some fundamental level, of elite social status, that, as Emerson said, there is no such thing as an author who is “not” elite, only authors who are “not yet” elite.

For his part, Whitman insisted that being in the print room was entirely natural to him and that 1855 was a year of continuity rather than rupture. When he contracted the Scottish immigrants Andrew Rome and his brother to print the original edition, his decision to work with them in the room, setting type and running plates, was one of choice not necessity. In fact, Whitman may have chosen Rome precisely because he wanted to be an equal partner in the process, for the Rome brothers, like Whitman, had no prior experience printing books, and therefore were just as much novices at that particular kind of publishing as he was. Years afterward, the time he spent at the press and the camaraderie felt between him and the brothers were an integral part of how he
remembered the 1855 edition. With the 1860 edition, Whitman was explicit in his
negotiations with Thayer and Eldridge that he would only accept their offer if he could
participate in the book's publication. The “dingy little room” where Trowbridge found
Whitman was the office of Rand's, one of the most established and advanced printers in
the nation, and Whitman therefore had double reason to feel awkward: outclassed as a
printer, out of place as an author. His letters to his brother Jeff confess that when he
arrived in the office, “the printers and foremen thought I was crazy, and there were all
sorts of supercilious squints,” but nevertheless Whitman followed the book attentively
from compositing to plating to pressing, and by the end the shop workers had come
around: “since it has run through the press, they have simmered down. Yesterday, the
foreman of the press-room ... pronounced it, in plain terms, the freshest and handsomest
piece of typography that had ever passed through his mill.” Even late in his life, he
rejected one publisher because “he never wanted me to go up stairs into the composing
room,” and when a series of strokes left him too feeble to participate in the day-to-day
work, he told his assistant, Horace Traubel, “I want you to reach the workmen direct—
treat with the craftsman without an intermediary—with the man who sets the type, the
man who puts it into form, the man who runs the foundry.”

These shops were so familiar to Whitman because they were the print rooms of his
eyearly career. He gives us a brief portrait of print shop life in a line from the 1860 edition,
in which he delights in his knowledge of the specific tools of the trade: “The four-double
cylinder press, the hand-press, the frisket and tympan, the compositor’s stick and rule,
type-setting, making up the forms, all the work of newspaper counters, folders, carriers,

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news-men” (154). Such shops proliferated in the years between Jackson and the Civil War, as industrialization lowered the cost of presses, denser populations facilitated distribution, the fledgling public education system expanded literacy and modernization demanded specialized printed products of many kinds. The economic collapse of the Civil War nearly destroyed them, as did the rise, already threatening in Whitman's day, of more industrialized printing operations using stereotyped plates and automated steam-driven presses. One of these industrialized presses was the very Rand, Avery of Boston in whose office Whitman met Trowbridge in 1860. More typical of his career was the shop of Andrew Rome, who built his business around pre-printed legal forms – the original “paperwork,” a word which the OED dates to 1845 – as such forms changed often and had to be customized to a client, meaning that the print run was too small to attract the large factory presses on the other side of the East River (Folsom Whitman Making Books). Any item which needed too many copies for a copyist but too few for an industrial press went to the small jobbers. (After the War, when Whitman's kind of printing had disappeared, he would choose to become a copyist rather than join the factory presses.) In an 1847 advertisement for his own press, Whitman stated that he did “BOOK AND JOB PRINTING” but listed his specialty as “PRINTING IN GOLD, SILVER AND FANCY COLORS,” for the expense of such materials again implied that the run would be small (Eagle 9/18/1847 1).

At the large presses, labor was increasingly organized around a modern industrial plan, with subdivided tasks, hourly wages, foremen and managers, but in the small
presses, remnants of the old guild system persisted, including the hierarchy of master, journeyman and apprentice and the expectation that apprentices would eventually – or at least hypothetically, as these shops were dying – become masters of their own (Wilentz). Consequently, a “tradesman” was expected to know all aspects of his craft. Even without this vestige of older practices, it was often a simple necessity that everyone in a shop be able to accomplish all tasks, for such shops rarely employed more than five workmen.

When Whitman approached Andrew Rome in 1855, the shop was just Rome, as his older brother had died the year before and his younger would not join him full time for another year. Much of Whitman's publishing career was likewise a solo endeavor, and as a result, the printed items he generated either had or could have been produced entirely by his own hand, and he was therefore able to identify not just with a particular kind of work, but with the physical object which that labor created. This, as we shall see, was to become a vital quality for Whitman.

Yet while the labor in these shops may have been organized on a pre-industrial plan, and while they were also continually and terminally threatened by the larger industrialized presses, it would be a mistake to view them as somehow anti-modern, for they benefited, directly and indirectly, form a host of modern developments. Along with the urbanization, rising literacy and cheaper presses that benefited printing shops of all sizes, the small shops had recently received a new lease on life by that most modern of literary forms, the newspaper. In the thirty years prior to the Civil War, newspaper publishing went through a dramatic revolution caused by the industrialization of printing,
and this revolution divided the newspaper ecosystem into three tiers. At the high end in terms of price but low end in circulation were the old guard of mercantile papers aimed at the specialized needs of the business class and priced accordingly at around five cents a copy. At the opposite extreme, and representing the revolutionary force within the genre, were the new urban “penny papers,” like Benjamin Day's *Sun*, which took advantage of the new industrialized print shops and the unprecedented urban populations to drop prices and achieve circulations in the tens of thousands. But between those two, hundreds of mid-tier newspapers sprang up to serve smaller populations or specific audiences, with prices between a penny and a half and three cents and circulation usually under a thousand. These papers thus offered a curious hybrid, linking a pre-industrial organization of labor to the most modern advances of the industrializing marketplace.

Whitman dedicated his life to these mid-tier papers when, in 1831 and at the age of twelve, he signed on as a printer's apprentice at the *Long Island Patriot*. Newspapers were the 'new media' of his day, and Whitman was not unlike a young man or woman joining a small web startup in the mid-1990s. In both cases, the technology and conventions of the genre were developing quickly, and shops watched each other carefully, swapping or outright stealing ideas and articles from each other and building up networks of alliances and antagonisms. Newspapers opened and closed in quick succession, with the extreme case being Whitman's *Weekly Freeman*, which lasted only a single issue, and newspapermen regarded their own careers in an entrepreneurial light, continually marketing their writing and themselves to other potential employers.
Whitman would ultimately hold an array of positions in almost two dozen papers across his career, and his letters to editors show that he was fluent in the language and business of selling his work. In the excitement of new media, practitioners imagined that an entire new kind of world might be emerging – one of Whitman's papers was even called *The New World* – and they took their work with the utmost seriousness, for even the smallest of papers felt they were participating in something larger and grander than themselves. With such dynamic change occurring, traditional barriers of class, training and experience were loosened, and an ambitious and talented young man could find himself editor of his own paper by his early twenties, as both Whitman and Trowbridge did, Whitman at the weekly *Long Islander* (1841) and then *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (1847), Trowbridge at the Boston *Sentinel* (1850). From there, Whitman began building a reputation as a “news-man who could also write,” and his stories started appearing in respected, large circulation periodicals like John O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review*.

For Whitman and Trowbridge, this exceptionality of the print shop within the era's class politics was what both united and divided them. For Trowbridge and his desire to regain his family's former position, the print room offered both possibility and menace: if class barriers were rendered fluid in the print room, then it both enabled him to climb, but also changed the meaning of the positions climbed to. He was caught in a paradox: if he returned to eliteness, then eliteness was no longer what it was, was forever receding away from him. Little wonder, then, that the print room was such an uncomfortable place for him – he, not Whitman, is the one who can't “get on” within it. Judging by Emerson's
policing of the scenes of class, Trowbridge's fears were no paranoia. Whitman, however, finds value where Trowbridge sees menace. Born into a working class family and uniquely unconcerned with raising himself from that status, Whitman is free to value the print room's loosening of class barriers as a harbinger of democratic connectedness.
The Cold Types and Cylinder and Wet Paper of the Print Room

Why was it so important to Whitman to be in the print room? Because he was so insistent about this issue, Whitman scholarship has come up with a few hypotheses. One answer, which is probably the most common in the literature, is rooted in class politics: by, as he advised Traubel, “reaching the workmen direct,” Whitman maintained his tie with working class America. There is some truth to this argument – working men, particularly white working men, were undoubtedly important to Whitman personally, poetically and politically – but there is also a risk of misrepresentation. To say that Whitman needed to maintain his tie to working men is to suppose that that tie was in danger, as though the moment he took up verse, some inevitable force began pushing him out of the print room and away from his fellow printers. In short, it is the liberal corollary to the assumption of compulsory authorial eliteness exhibited by Trowbridge and Emerson, where rather than view Whitman as not yet elite, it views Whitman as refusing to be elite quite yet. The real shortcoming of this argument is that, by viewing Whitman's affinity for the print room only in terms of a rejection of elite status, it renders the print room opaque, devoid of its own content, texture, and perspective.

A second argument, one pursued by recent scholars interested in the history of the book, begins to open a window into the print room by redefining our understanding of literary form: Whitman's conception of the object of literary production extended beyond just the words to include the physical qualities of the book itself; just as he claimed to be
“the poet of the body, / And ... the poet of the soul,” he viewed himself as the maker of
both the words on the page (soul) and the book that contained them (body). Just as we
read the words, we may also read the physical embodiment of the book, for it is not
neutral but is embedded in a language of physical signifiers – glossy verses rough paper,
gilded verses homely bindings, – and these signifiers give us insight into the positioning
of the book within the material publishing industry. Trowbridge engages in this kind of
criticism in his aside about “the thin, small quarto of 1855,” for from the physical
qualities of the book he deduces both Whitman's relationship to the publishing
establishment – an outsider – and the kind of labor that produced the volume – an
amateur production. Yet – and I hesitate to make this reservation, as my own work is
indebted to theirs – that window only looks onto half of the print room, the compositing
area where the material form of the book was decided, not the press where those
decisions were duplicated “en masse.”

The chapter proposes a third argument, which is that Whitman's attachment to the
print room stems from a particular kind of relationship he sees between that site and the
consumers of its products, which is to say that it stems from printing's fusion of pre-
industrial forms of labor with the integrated national market of industrial capital. This
fusion changes the market, opening up unexpected possibilities within it, and the same
goes for the commodities that circulate through it. From its first publishing, readers of
Leaves of Grass have been unsettled by the strange possibilities Whitman sees in one
commodity in particular, namely, Leaves of Grass itself. Take, for example, the opening
lines of the passage that would later come to be titled “A Song for Occupations”:

COME closer to me,

Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,

Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess. (57)

By the time we encounter this stanza, over a thousand lines of poetry have already gone by, and Whitman is here treading familiar ground: his overwhelming desire for intimacy with a plural group of “my lovers” in an erotic act which is figured through the language of economic exchange, the mutual “take” and “give” of “the best you possess.” As the poem continues, however, Whitman balks at the very familiarity of this scene, telling us that it is not enough, that it leaves “unfinished business.” He decides to take the poem in a radical direction:

This is unfinished business with me . . . . how is it with you?

I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us.

With his stunning invocation of the “cold types and cylinder and wet paper” of the print room, Whitman makes visible what is usually the most invisible part of book production and consumption, and in that moment, the materiality of the book and of Whitman burst luminously into our awareness. The book becomes a linkage, a physical object tracing from us back to the newly real Whitman, and as we follow that retrospective path we meet him coming the other way, for we belatedly realize that we are the “lovers” of the opening stanza and that our grasp on the book signals that we have already consented to his appeal even though we weren’t until now aware of it. The combined effect is uncanny, a bit like
that pursued much later by dramatists who removed the 'fourth wall' of the stage. Much like those dramatists, Whitman continues the poem by taking the next step, walking out into the audience whose surprised presence he has just acknowledged:

I pass so poorly with paper and types . . . . I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls.

Whitman's extreme earnestness here flirts with parody – one can imagine a New Yorker-style cartoon of a matron fleeing the parlor as a hirsute and randy Whitman clambers up out of her book. Reading these lines, though, we also experience a sense of being exposed. Making private things public is, of course, one of Whitman's master tropes, but usually it is his own or his subjects' privacy that is broached, so it is little wonder that we find it uncomfortable to have his gaze turn our way. Yet there is a deeper oddness in the wording of his invitation: despite the humor in such a hypothetical cartoon, it would get the direction of Whitman's entreaty wrong, for he does not ask “let me come closer to you” but “come closer to me,” inviting us, not him, to pass through the book. And it is not a private tryst in the parlor he has in mind but a plural and public sex act with all his readers at once – “my lovers” – right on the print room floor. Whitman's invitation works in two directions at the same time, a direct one towards us and a lateral one toward the founding of a community of lovers, which is to say that it is simultaneously erotic and political. Of those two axes, the more unsettling is the political, for while the erotic invitation may be denied, the political may not. We can choose between being a warm or cool lover in Whitman's community, but we're still a lover. Whitman's appeal is what
Althusser would call a form of interpellation and hailing, constituting us as subjects in Whitman's fantastical erotic polis. We are in the most fundamental sense *made public*, exposed by his appeal. Readers become lovers become citizens.

Michael Moon has written extensively on moments like this and how Whitman's conceit of being able to “pass” through the physical body of the book engages mid-century discourses of the body, of sexuality, and of literariness. Without in any way contradicting his thesis, I want to take Whitman's conceit in a different direction, noting that it is not merely a fusion of body and text, but of body and commodified text that is important to Whitman, and that his conceit thereby engages contemporary transformations of commodity and market as well. When Whitman imagines “passing” through the book, that passage is always staged in a particular way and has specific endpoints. Whitman's location is not abstracted – a free-floating author on the other side of the page – but is always, as he says above, at “the cold types and cylinder and wet paper” of the print room. Let me jump forward briefly from the 1855 edition to the 1860, in order to give the most famous of such moments, which Whitman wrote to close the 1860 edition and which remained the final stanzas in all subsequent editions:

My songs cease—I abandon them,

From behind the screen where I hid, I advance personally.

This is no book,

Who touches this, touches a man,
(Is it night? Are we here alone?)

It is I you hold, and who holds you,

I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me forth.

O how your fingers drowse me!

Your breath falls around me like dew—your pulse lulls the tympan of my ears,

I feel immerged from head to foot,

Delicious—enough.

At first blush, this passage appears to have nothing to do with the print room, nothing that compares to the bold visuals of “the cold types and cylinder and wet paper” in the earlier stanzas, and Whitman begins by reversing the direction of travel, “spring[ing] from the pages into your arms” rather than entreat ing the reader to “come closer to me.” But in the final stanza, Whitman, like a wave flowing back into the sea, sags back, taking the reader with him. He first returns to the physical book, envisioning himself as held and “drowsed” by the “fingers” of the reader, and then into the print room itself, through two covert puns which have, as far as I know, escaped notice in all the attention this passage has received. “Tympan,” used here with the apparent meaning eardrum, was, the OED tells us, already obsolete in that usage by the early eighteenth century, having been replaced by the more correct Latin form “tympanum.” In Whitman’s day, the special form “Tympan” persisted only in the specialized language of printing – recall his earlier
portrait of the print room, “the hand-press, the frisket and tympan, the compositor’s stick and rule” – where it applied to a layer of vellum or parchment used in a hand press to protect the page from the force of the press. “Immerge,” a synonym of immerse, was also archaic by Whitman's time, except, again, in printing, where it referred to the wetting of the paper before the pressing. Even in his most erotic moments, and even as he is claiming to “spring from the pages into your arms,” Whitman is covertly pulling the reader into the print room and into the manufacturing process of the book itself.
A Modern Interlude: List Affects

The democrats of Kings county faithful to the good cause.—Great mass meeting.

From all quarters of the city and county, and in imposing force, the democratic citizens of Brooklyn, and many from other sections of the county, assembled last evening, (1st. at the large room, Brooklyn garden—making a congregation such as would do credit even to the great city over the river! The immense room was filled with enthusiastic citizens, evidently impelled by the true and old fashioned spirit. The whole meeting indeed, contrasted strongly with the whig mass-meeting of a few evenings before—which was dull, tame, and a mongrel affair enough.


There comes a moment in almost all political conventions that goes like this: a party activist, not one of the candidates usually but someone in the middle or upper middle of the party, someone like Howard Dean, takes the stage with the designated job of working up the crowd. First comes the anticipatory preamble of shared convictions, then the long slow build toward the current crisis, then, finally, once the hall is ready for it, the big moment. Leaning forward from the podium, eyes flashing and finger pointing over the assembled state delegations, the hoarse speaker cries: “I see Michigan! And Minnesota! Mississippi! Missouri! New Jersey and New Mexico! There's Connecticut, Delaware! Illinois! Indiana! Kansas is here! And Louisiana!” The crowd takes to its feet, stomping and whooping as one by one all fifty delegations are named.

What makes this moment so exciting? And it is exciting, no amount of cynicism or cosmopolitanism will deny that, I hope. But for someone who pays attention to the forms and figures of political speech, there's a paradox in this scene: the most stirring
piece of political language is also the plainest. What brings the crowd to its feet is a simple unadorned list. A list is usually the least exciting of rhetorical figures, dedicated to functional uses of language like shopping or book indices. No one will quote this part of the convention or remember it as a turning point or pithy saying; it exists entirely and only in its moment, yet in that moment, it is rapturous and sweeping. What is it about a political convention and about this particular moment within it that can make a list so moving?

To start, consider how the list is staged, the particular *mise en scène* of the convention hall, with the delegates arrayed on the floor below, their attention converging radially on the speaker at the podium. It is a familiar arrangement, but in the context of a political convention, it happens to provide a convenient visual metaphor for representative politics and the nominating process. Within this narrative, however, this moment is an exception, in that it reverses the direction of attention, the podium recognizing the delegates rather than vice versa. This is the first clue to the moment's emotion: we cheer when the speaker mentions our own state because it is thrilling to be recognized from the stage. But as an explanation for the distinctive charge of the moment, recognition only goes so far. For instance, we cheer our own name more in the list than if it were singled out for distinction alone, even though the latter would presumably be a greater honor. As for the other states, we applaud when their names are mentioned in order to acknowledge their contributions to the cause, but the sentiment in this moment goes beyond mutual congratulation. In a general sense, the reversal re-establishes an organic, reciprocal
relationship between party base and leadership, people and representative, floor and
podium. But if a general endorsement is the object, why the curious rhetoric of
“see[ing]” each delegation one by one?

If the excitement of this moment doesn’t come from the list alone or from the
reversal of attention alone, then it has to come from the two in combination. There is a
kind of magic that happens at the moment when the radial arrangement of the hall meets
the serial arrangement of the list. As we all gaze individually at the speaker, he or she
gazes back at us both individually (“Minnesota! Mississippi! Missouri!”) and
collectively, above us and surveying our entirety. Out of this asymmetrical exchange of
gazes we become aware of ourselves as collectively particular and particularly collective:
the speaker’s long buildup has led us to identify with him or her, which means that when
he or she calls our state’s name, we see ourselves, if only briefly, from his or her point of
view, and this image of ourselves from the outside instills in us a sense of our personal
distinctness and presence. But at the very moment this sense reaches fruition, the speaker
moves on to the next delegate. With this shift our self-identification takes on a lateral
dimension, for we know that the other delegates, one by one, are going through their own
recognitions of selfhood and particularity. As the list of delegates grows longer, this
awareness of the shared status of our particularity, this new knowledge that we are all
particular together, grows accordingly, and we experience a distinctive and sudden surplus
of collective sentiment: all here, all unique, all together. Theorists of subjectivity from
Hegel to Lacan to Althusser have described the exchange of gazes, the dialectic drama
that occurs when one sees another seeing oneself, as constitutive of how we understand ourselves as selves. This moment at the convention is in a similar vein but pluralized and collectivized: many ones see a single one seeing the many ones one at a time. The identifications forged are not just self and other but self, others (plural) and the embracing collectivity. And like Lacan's baby, who expresses joy ("a flutter of jubilant activity") upon acknowledging the image in the mirror as his or her own, we express joy at our new, or at least newly revived, sense of self and of being part of a collective movement. It is an affect produced not prior to collective politics but out of our injection into collectivity itself.

All of this happens in a moment – and fades in a moment too, which I will get to soon enough. But before it does, it produces two characteristic effects, ancillary transformations radiating outward from our newly formed identities. The first, and most curious, is the fact that the speaker who initiated the moment suddenly disappears. The surplus of collective feeling we experience lies not between us and the speaker – though he or she plays a vital role in catalyzing it – but between us and everyone else in the hall. To return to the diagram of the hall, against the radial lines of our spectatorship, the vector of feeling is lateral and circumferential, filling the plane of the floor. What has happened is that the kind of exchange going on in the moment has undergone an additional turn of abstraction, in that the speaker is no longer the endpoint of the exchange but an increasingly transparent midpoint; the two-step exchange from us to speaker to other delegate contracts, or at least appears to contract, to a single step, from us
directly to delegate, as the mediating presence of the speaker is felt less and less. We look to the other delegate and think, the speaker looks to you the same way he or she looks to me, you and I are related. For the speaker's part, he or she shifts from being in an exchange to being an exchange, in the sense of a telephone or railroad 'central exchange,' interconnecting and multiplexing the circulation of collective sentiment among us delegates. (Incidentally, the OED dates this usage of 'an exchange' to the mid- late-19th century, a fact which will prove meaningful later in this essay.) The speaker's role is not without paradox: both necessary and necessarily invisible, the immediate mediator we all look at and yet cannot, must not see. But from the floor, the force of this necessity is obvious: were the speaker to become visible, our collectivity would become something asserted by him or her rather than felt between us and that collectivity would dissolve.

The second transformation concerns how this moment projects into the world outside the hall, specifically, how it restructures our understanding of time, history and politics. The surge of collective sentiment transforms our sense of the relationship between past, present and future in two ways: first in that the surplus marks the present moment as exceptional, standing out from the normal course of time, but second in that it presents itself as a re-cognition of selfhood, a bringing into awareness of something already present in the past. This aligning of awareness and presence in turn opens up the future as a space of new possibility, the terrain upon which our new collective awareness will operate. Past, present and future are thus linked around the concept of recognition: the past in which we were unaware of what we were, the present that clears our eyes like a
flash, the future in which we turn our newly clarified awareness to action. The steps of this future action may be indistinct, but its ultimate course is clear, for at the moment of recognition the future takes on a distinctive shape: the collectivity is the beginning, the end and the actor of the future. Its emergence into our consciousness is also its emergence into history, dividing history into an old and a new. The work of the future will be the fading of the old and the consolidation of the new, as the collectivity gradually brings the social world into alignment with itself. The collectivity is thereby historical event, historical agent and historical destiny. For our part, our participation in that collectivity becomes our avenue for effecting change. The optimism produced by this conjunction of possibility and agency forms the second wave of affect that finally brings us to our feet. Stomping, whooping, arms in the air and clapping, we – the new we, particular, collective, centrally but transparently mediated, affective, prospective – are the future of the world.

All this from a simple list. But then the list comes to an end and the moment as well. What then? As the clarity of the moment fades, the collective sentiment we feel shifts from being singular and all-encompassing to being just one possibility within the heterogeneous and often contradictory affects of contemporary democratic life. And as we re-enter this complicated world, we are struck by the complexity and fragility of the moment itself. The right staging, the right buildup, the right orator, the right crowd, the right cause – all these are necessary to produce the one transcendent overflow. And given the level of affect involved, if the moment falls apart, the results can be disastrous. They
can also be dangerous. What if we don't identify with the speaker, thereby refusing to return the gaze when he or she claims to see us? What if – even worse – we are the only one to do so? The scene of collective sentiment can also be a scene of abjection from the collectivity. If the moment is limited in time, limited in scope, fragile and potentially dangerous, why pay attention to it at all?

The answer is threefold. First, the moment demonstrates that political identity and action are not merely defined, as thinkers in the republican tradition posit, by reason and interest, but by a much richer and more compelling palette of affective registers. Passion is not always a political vice, dispassionate civic engagement not always a virtue. It is a step towards a warm, rather than cool democracy. Second, the moment achieves something slightly miraculous, which is that it renders particularity and collectivity as self-reinforcing. The more disparate the crowd, the more powerful the feeling of connection. And, finally, it establishes a distinctive rhetoric of collective political life, the list.

We do not know what clever party activist first dreamed up this piece of convention theater, but we do know what party activist-turned-journalist-turned-poet first committed it to verse. Long before he wrote his own long lists of citizens in *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman addressed his first party meeting at the age of twenty one, his last at thirty-eight. The years in between, 1841 to 1857, roughly a little after Jackson's presidency to a little before the Civil War, were the golden age for party conventions, when members gathered not just to provide a backdrop for the television cameras but to debate policy and to revitalize in each other the promise that political participation held
Meetings have been held by our people in various sections, to nominate a candidate for the next presidency. My fellow citizens: let this be an afterthought. I beseech you to entertain a noble and more elevated idea of our aim and struggles as a party than to suppose that we are striving to elevate this or that man to power. We are battling for great principles – for mighty and glorious truths. ... My firm conviction is that the next democratic candidate, whoever he may be, will be carried into power on the wings of a mighty re-action. The guardian spirit, the good genius who has attended us ever since the days of Jefferson, has not now forsaken us. I can almost fancy myself able to pierce the darkness of the future and behold her looking down upon us with those benignant smiles she wore in 1828, ’32, and ’36. Again will she hover over us, amid the smoke and din of battle, and leading us to our wonted victory. (Daily Eagle April 6, 1847)

Like the hypothetical party speaker crying “I see Michigan!,” Whitman wants to turn the gaze of the assembled party members from the nominating process to the affects and metaphysics of political collectivity. The series of transformations in his paragraph is extraordinary: from electoral politics (“to nominate a candidate”) to political philosophy (“for great principles – for mighty and glorious truths”) to a surplus of collectivity (“a
great re-action” of the people) to political metaphysics (“guardian spirit”) to visionary
historicism (“I can almost fancy myself able to pierce the darkness of the future”). What
Whitman knew was that people don't join a party solely because it represents their
interests; they join for the party's ability to register their dreams and desires for political
action and being. Political being is as much about surpluses, spirits and visions as it is
about interest, rational compromise and representation.
The Poet As Money

Of all the proto-democratic tendencies in the 1855 text, the most important for Whitman's coming transition towards “democracy” is his depiction of the nation and nationhood. In some cases, the two are so close that the shift towards democracy in the later editions entailed nothing more than a word edit: “Does it respect me? America? the soul? to-day?” becomes “Does it respect me? Democracy? the Soul? to-day?” (LG1856 193, LG1860 119). The argument put forth in this section begins with three observations about Whitman's poetic nationalism. First, Whitman's nation is always in circulation, “teeming,” “swarming,” “seething,” “tending inward ... tending outward,” “moving in magnificent masses.” Second, the affective ties that bind the nation together are represented as moments of exchange, either erotic (“Push close my lovers and take the best I possess, / Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess”) or rhetorical, in the serial exchange of subject (Whitman's famous multi-page lists) or speaking “I” (“I am the hounded slave ... I am the mashed foreman ... I am an old artillerist”). Third, Whitman is preoccupied with the question of value (“I offer no representative of value – but offer the value itself”). The point here is that these three terms, circulation, exchange and value, are strikingly economic, and taken together what they describe is a market. Today, the language and mechanisms of the market have become so common as to be transparent to us, merely dead or dying metaphors. Such was not the case in the first half of the nineteenth century, when markets were being so rapidly transformed and expanded
by advances in technology and infrastructure that they were recognizably novel, “modern.” As a journalist in the nation's mercantile capital, Whitman was organically aware that markets are made and that, as the product of human labor, they are specific both to their moment in history and verses other markets. He was also aware that they transform the objects and people that enter into them, generating new kinds of abstractions like commodity, price, wage labor, consumer and “the market” itself. His 1854 diary, famous for containing the first lines of his distinctive new verse style, also contains extensive meditations on the nature of ownership, money and contracts.

The sea change driving these many changes in the market was, of course, the rise of industrial capital that began in the early parts of the century and that was rapidly gaining steam throughout Whitman's career. His position on this shift is notoriously contradictory. On the one hand, his many portraits of laborers – “The pure contralto sings in the organ loft / The carpenter dresses his plank ... / The pilot seizes the king-pin” – almost universally celebrate individual skilled labor, the very kind of work that mechanization threatened; the emerging forms of industrialized labor, like millworkers, landlords, and managers, are not reviled in the text, they are simply absent, a telling gap in Whitman's seemingly encyclopedic lists of professions (21). On the other hand, many of his favorite settings – the swarming urban crowds, the nation-spanning open roads, the busy harbors and ferries – were either created or greatly augmented by industrialism's rise. Whitman declares himself champion of “the modern” – “And mine a word of the modern . . . a word en masse” – at a time when being “modern” was closely associated
with the products and practices of factory life (28). “Modern” would later become the other keyword, along with “America,” which Whitman often edited to “Democracy” in subsequent editions, this line gradually changing to his opening declaration “I ... utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse” (LG1872 v). He is insistent that, despite his affection for disappearing forms of work, his poetry is not reactionary, “backward-glancing,” but prospective, “place[d] where the future becomes present” (vi). The extreme productive capabilities of the industrializing economy are an important source of national “pride” for him, and even though he claims his poetry “leaves” behind “the wealth and finesse of the cities and all returns of commerce and agriculture,” that same “wealth” nonetheless underwrites its own poetic transcendence, for “the soul of the largest and wealthiest and proudest nation may well go half-way to meet that of its poets” (iii, xii). His depictions of the national poet employ a capitalized language of “profit,” “spending” and “terms,” to the point that the poet comes to resemble a capitalist entrepreneur, “Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns” (21).

Because of these contradictions in Whitman's thinking about industrialization he has at various times been claimed by both socialists and free marketeers, with each promoting one side of the contradiction while diminishing the other. Rather than take a stand on which side represents the 'true' Whitman, I choose instead to note that the contradiction is split along the two sides of capital's self-regenerative cycle, production and distribution. While the historical novelty of mechanized factories makes them the prime signifier of industrial capital, those factories arose in concert with an equally
important and necessary change in the way goods were distributed, for without a market capable of absorbing the factories' intense output, those factories would not have been feasible. The parallel story to the mills at Lowell is the gradual consolidation of nebular local markets into a single national and even trans-national integrated market. This integration required shifts not only in transportation infrastructure but in institutions and culture. Alan Trachtenberg has written how the development of the agricultural commodity market along the Mississippi gradually converted the many different varieties of corn grown in the basin into a single, standard “corn,” with its own trade and inspecting institutions and defined ranges for water content, grain size, level of contaminants, and so on (*Incorporation*). As the market expanded, it did so in ways that were specific to the contingencies of each local setting it encountered but that slowly conspired to regularize the network of exchange. While Whitman erases the industrialized forms of labor from his poetry, he celebrates the bustle, circulation and, above all, the integrative pull of the new national market, and he positions his speaker right in the channels of market flow, its streets, crowds, and harbors. Just as the market achieves broad-scale integration by engaging local inflections, Whitman's poetry incessantly leaps between “nearest” and “farthest” concerns, and one of his characteristic moves is to fixate on local, bodily sensation, then suddenly shift the frame of reference to the national, a nation constituted through pluralized intimate embodiedness. In many ways, *Leaves of Grass* is not unlike Trachtenberg's Mississippi corn inspectors, establishing a set of flexible standards and interchanges that define what it means to be
Whitman's economy is thus a historical hybrid, with pre-industrial labor yoked to the integrated, national market of industrial capital. This is where we may, at last, return to the print room. Benedict Anderson and other scholars of the early modern period have noted that printing and the circulation of printed goods played a critical role in the early stages of capital and modern nationalism. Yet as a bridging institution, printing had one foot in the old, one in the new, for while printed objects were one of the first modern commodities to circulate widely, the shops in which they were produced still bore many of the characteristics of small, guild-based trades that had existed for centuries. When the twelve-year-old Whitman signed on as an apprentice for the *Long Island Patriot* in 1831, he entered the kind of small-scale, artisanal workshop that dominated manufacturing in the early republic. This was the world so beautifully eulogized by Sean Wilentz in his Whitman-inspired history *Chants Democratic*, a world defined by skilled labor; the career cycle of apprentice, journeyman, and master; a strong tie between workers and their craft organizations; and an ethos of egalitarian republicanism. Travel and transport were still difficult, either seagoing in the great Atlantic marketplace or overland on the predominately unimproved roads of the nation, and the great fortunes of the era were made by mercantile capitalists, for whom New York City had recently emerged as the foremost commercial port in the nation. Yet as difficult as travel was, printed objects, because of their high value, natural portability and innate demand, were one of the first to see circulation on a wide scale and thereby became pathbreakers for industrial capital's
revolution of the market. The work of Whitman's “Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy
chests [who] environ the anvil” and his “jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws [who]
works at his case” may not have been that different, but the blacksmiths' goods circulated
through a single town while the printer might see his books reach from coast to coast and
beyond (20, 21).

Whitman's experience in the printing trade thus formed for him an actual, material
element of the very kind of economic hybridity displayed in his poetry. By the time
Whitman became a printer, it was two or three centuries since printing had first played a
pathbreaking role for capital, and in only a few years more, its hybrid exceptionality
would be erased, the artisanal shops replaced by centralized industrial concerns. But for
that brief, final period, which coincided almost exactly with the years of his printing
career before *Leaves of Grass*, 1831 to 1855, the small job shops held on, and in so doing,
actually benefited from industrial capital's transformation of the economic and social
landscape. Urbanization made it easier to distribute texts, rising literacy rates expanded
readership and industrialization lowered the cost of presses, generating an explosion of
the popular literary marketplace. This expansion provided a final lifeline to the small
shops, who thrived on the few remaining low- to mid-circulation niches not yet integrated
into industrial labor – local or special-purpose newspapers, pamphlets, pre-printed forms,
chapbooks and, occasionally, books like *Leaves of Grass* itself.

Yet, as Whitman was painfully aware, the integration of the national market was
ironically producing forces that threatened the nation's final dis-integration. The uneasy
political compact that had existed since the republic's founding, between northern small-scale manufacturing and southern slave-based agriculture, was being revised and challenged by the integrative pull of the emerging industrialized market. As this expanding market sought to regularize trade and social practices across the nation, it rendered untenable the divided economy that had held for two centuries, thereby producing a crisis that would express itself in innumerable cultural and economic fronts before culminating in the Civil War. In the newspapers and pamphlets issuing from Whitman's print shops, this growing crisis inspired a wide-ranging debate over the nature and substance of political life and allegiance. Issues which, in more settled times, interest only specialists – the legal constitution of personhood; the relationship between higher law, natural law and positive law; the changing extent of federal power in the face of economic modernization – were debated in columns and pages across the nation, producing a broad-based and multi-genred corpus of vernacular political theory. Of all genres, poetry was ideally positioned to take advantage of this trend and, as a result, its rise in the antebellum period was exceptional even within the already exceptional expansion of print circulation. While editorials and pamphlets debated the policy and electoral dimensions of the political crisis, poetry emerged as the favored genre for discussing the affective dimensions of political subjectivity. Since the Revolution, the U.S. had perceived itself to be as much a cultural as a political project, asking for its citizens’ belief as much as their obedience. Nowhere was this project taken up more avidly than in the nation's burgeoning class of poets, who sought to fuse poetry's
longstanding investigation of selfhood with the evolving mandates of a democratizing and modernizing nation in order to position poetry as a critical technology of democratic political subject formation. "By great bards only," wrote Whitman in the 1856 *Leaves of Grass*, "can series of peoples and States be fused into the compact organism of one nation. / To hold men together by paper and seal, or by compulsion, is no account."

Whitman's singular contribution to this political/poetic debate was to see the solution to the nation's problems in the patterns and connective practices of the very market producing the crisis. Faced with the increasingly irreconcilable differences between the economic and political life of the nation, not only over slavery but also over wage labor, Whitman proposed the nation as a kind of *counter*-market, built on the same forms as the existing market – value, circulation, money, exchange – but reparative of political life in all the ways the actual market had proven divisive. Poetry was the central catalyst in this transformation of the nation into a market, for it functioned like money in the actual market, linking the nation's citizenry into a flexible system of exchange and value. While the slave market divided north from south and slave from free, and the industrial market divided labor from the means of production and laborer from product, the poetic market conjoined all in a field of universally equal affective circulation, where “all is for you.” This national counter-market synthesized Whitman's favored parts of the existing three modes of production: like the small manufacturers, it envisioned productive activity as constitutive of both selfhood and ethics, the source of “nobler men and women”; unlike the small manufacturers but like industrial production, it sought
circulation not locally but on the broadest possible scale, national, continental or even hemispheric; and unlike industrial production but like slavery, it encouraged a market of whole selves, not merely their isolated labor power, just as slaves were sold entire in the slave markets. By borrowing its ethics from the trades, its scope and circulation from industrial capital, and its market ontology from slavery, Whitman's poetic nation expands artisanal production to a national level then plunges itself fully into the new market. This commitment to the market, to what he called the “modern,” is one of the greatest distinctions between him and other romantic-era poets, for while he participated in a long-standing poetic tradition of seeing in poetry an antidote to the failures of the market, he did not, like other poets, figure this redemptive effect in anti-modern spaces (the country, the heavens, the past, the unique, the unmarketable) but within the spaces and transactions of modernity itself (the market, the press, the crowd, the common, the future).

Nationhood abounds with analogies, with the nation variously figured as a family, as a body, as an organism, as a language, as a disease, as a patrimony, as a project, and so on, and all these analogies not only endorse certain power relations within the nation, they also provide formal patterns and rhetorics within which nationhood is thought and understood. As Whitman set about building a repertoire of figures and narratives to represent American nationhood, he faced a distinct problem, in that so many of the characteristics generally ascribed to nationhood were not available to him: no sovereign, no shared language, no common tradition, no bounded territory, no deep history. Against
these historical lacks, the market offered a model for social organization that had many compelling characteristics: a market is processual, contemporaneous and prospective ("where the future meets the present"). A market is expansive and inclusive ("A nation ... rejects none, accepts all"). A market is simultaneously heterogeneous and integrative, in that it can contain multiple diverse agents and objects yet normalizes all to a common system of exchange and value ("A nation ... rejects none, accepts all, reproduces all in my own forms"). A market conjoins the material and the abstract, physical objects with social forms ("I am the poet of the body / And I am the poet of the soul"). A market provides a mediating metaphor between self and totality, consumer and 'the market' as a whole, with little or no middle-ground in between ("O I see now that this America is only you and me").

The catalyst that allowed Whitman to envision the nation as a market was, of course, poetry. In the same sense that money makes a market, providing the common element that relates all the assorted objects and people under the market's sway, Whitman believed that the poet makes the nation, for he or she is, in his terms, the "common referee" to which and through which the citizens relate and realize their own value and national identity:

Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man. ... He bestows on every
object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land . . . . he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking. (iv)

What is striking about this passage from the 1855 Preface to *Leaves* is how closely Whitman's description of “the great poet” parallels the work of money in the market. Money is the “common referee” with which all items in a market may be exchanged and which thereby links them into a market. Money therefore functions as the one “equable” item, “the arbiter of the diverse and ... the key,” and “the equalizer of [its] age and land.” In these exchanges, money is not just the medium but the measure of value, and it “bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less.” These values are not set by the individual but by the interactions of the market as a whole, and in their fluctuations they communicate the “wants” of a society, “suppl[y]ing what wants supplying and check[ing] what wants checking.” As Whitman continues the Preface, the parallels between the poet and money grow even more explicit:

The American bards ... shall be kosmos . . without monopoly or secrecy . . glad to pass any thing to any one . . hungry for equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege . . . . they shall be riches and privilege . . . . they shall perceive who the most affluent man is. The most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself.

At the same time Whitman was composing the passage above, Marx was
developing his own theories of money and value, and the parallels between the two men's conceptions are striking. When Whitman calls the poet the “common referee” he is unconsciously paralleling the language that Marx used to describe money, the “universal equivalent.” Their positions on opposite sides of the Atlantic provides a curiously apt metaphor for the similarities and differences of their projects: both men were attempting to negotiate the ocean between economic and social forms, but in opposite directions, Whitman moving from social forms toward economic, Marx moving from economic to social. As Whitman's citizens circulate in commodity-like networks, Marx's commodities start to look like little selves, capable of acts of recognition and of strange social lives. Marx's writings on the commodity in *Capital* illustrate the mechanism: a physical object, at its moment of exchange for money, takes on a social identity (the commodity) and becomes a member of a social entity (the market), both of which are beyond itself. Analogously, Whitman proposes that an individual self, at his or her moment of exchange with the national poet, becomes an American and a member of America. Both writers impose a distinct narrative on this act of becoming, in that the new identity is not created by either money or the national poet, nor by the market or the nation, but rather emerges as a kind of self-recognition of the commodity or self, mediated by money and the poet, where qualities that appear to have been already present but unrecognized rise to the surface of awareness. For Marx, exchange “awakens” the “slumbering kernel of congealed labor” within the commodity. For Whitman, the “veins” of the nation are already “full of poetical stuff,” but it “needs poets” to access and “use” that “stuff.”
When Whitman compares poets to Presidents, he underscores that the values assigned by the poet are not just poetic but political. American political unity is to be achieved not through bonds of obedience to a political superior but through the rhetorical and affective bonds between poet and people. Whitman revised the above passage for the 1856 edition, and when he did so, he broke the already poetic prose into lines of free verse and added a three line preface which makes explicit this political function of the “bard”:

By great bards only can series of peoples and States be fused into the compact organism of one nation.

To hold men together by paper and seal, or by compulsion, is no account,

That only holds men together which is living principles, as the hold of the limbs of the body, or the fibres of plants.

Of all races and eras, These States, with veins full of poetical stuff, most need poets [etc.] (188)

Whitman's formula, that the poet “fuses” a “series of Peoples and States” into a “nation,” is a fundamental one for his poetry and politics, and one to which he returns often throughout Leaves. This fusion is superior to legal (“paper”), obligatory (“seal”) or coercive (“compulsion”) forms of union, because it exists not outside or beside the nation but participates directly in its “living principles.”
Chapter 2. Bankrupt *Leaves*: The Parton Debt and the Emergence of Democracy in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*

The Parton Debt

Saturday, December 1, 1888

... W[hitman] had several newspapers and some clipping and a letter laid aside for me [Horace Traubel]. One of the newspapers pleasantries said this: “A well known writer is responsible for the assertion that the Good Gray Poet is not scrupulous about paying his debts. After all the Good Gray Poet may be the Bad Gray Poet.” “Where did you get this from?” I asked W. He said: “it was mailed to me anonymously from Boston, by some one, I don't know who, out of a paper I don't know the name of.”¹ Then he said: “Ask me about this when you come to-morrow. I want to say something to you about it: don't let me forget it.” ... (3:215)

Sunday, December 2, 1888

... I reminded [Whitman] of what he said last evening about the Bad Gray Poet. He laughed gently – then grew serious. “Yes, I want to speak to you about that but we won't do it tonight: probably to-morrow night.” ... (3:225)

Tuesday, December 4, 1888

... I asked W.: “What about the Bad Gray Poet? You told me to remind you of it.” “O yes: so I did: I had it in mind to say something to you about it: initiate you into its history: the devilish insistent thing has gone about so far: it means so little yet it is

¹ The source of the clipping has not been located, but the “well known writer” behind the accusation was probably Boston-based Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who was then in his late career as a state senator and anti-labor militant and who had recently launched a public and private campaign vilifying Whitman for two claimed faults, his “priapism” and “want of personal honesty in business matters – as shown in the anecdote told of him by J. H. Ward in his paper on Parton in the N[ew] E[ngland] magazine.” See Nelson and Price, “Debating Manliness,” 498.
made so much: are you sure you don't know anything about it?” I was quite sure. I had seen a fling here and there but I had set it down to the general malice of his libelers. W. said: “No – no: it's not that – not that alone: there's something to this story – just enough to make it plausible to my enemies – to those who want to discredit me.” I put in: “They have said debts – debts: as if there was more than one debt: as if you made a habit of not paying your debts.” He smiled at that. “That's what you call a blanket charge: I make nothing of that: but there is one particular debt which is the basis for all these insinuations.” That was news to me. “Yes,” said W.: “one single debt: it was a matter between me and James Parton.”

Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman In Camden* (3:235)

During Whitman's lifetime, a now-forgotten event inspired a great deal of controversy and gave Whitman and his supporters considerable distress. This controversy, as he tells Horace Traubel above, arose from “one single debt: it was a matter between me and James Parton.” Sometime in the fall or winter of 1856, Whitman had borrowed two hundred dollars from Parton, expecting to pay him back from the proceeds of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which was then making its way through the press; when that edition produced almost no income for him, Whitman found that he was unable to repay the loan, and he ended up forfeiting property to cover the balance. That, he thought, would be the end of the affair, but to his unease, the fact of the loan and of his default was kept alive by a campaign of whispers and letters that lasted throughout his life, appearing in print only in “flings here and there” like the anonymous libel that triggered this conversation with Traubel. In the five years before his death and the fifteen afterwards, the battle finally broke out into the open, with dueling articles published by his supporters and detractors.

Since then, it has been almost entirely forgotten. Only two scholarly articles have
been dedicated to it, one in 1942 in a fairly small venue, the *Rutgers University Library Journal*, and the other a mere three pages in *American Literature* in 1957 (Coad, McDermott). Neither article offered an analysis of the affair but merely presented new documentary evidence about it – letters to and from Parton's former secretary in the 1942 article, diary entries from Thomas Butler Gunn, a Whitman associate during the event, in the 1957 one. In biographies of Whitman, the Parton debt held on for awhile before steadily declining in significance and coverage. When Bliss Perry published his 1906 biography, *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work*, the Parton debt was both everywhere and nowhere in the volume: never mentioned by name, but clearly such a formative part of his conception of Whitman that after the book's release, a public war of letters arose between Perry and Traubel over what had or had not occurred between Whitman and Parton. At Traubel's insistence, Perry reluctantly issued a clarification and partial retraction in a long footnote to the biography's second edition (123-4 n.5). Fifty years later, when Gay Wilson Allen wrote *The Solitary Singer*, the Parton debt was no longer formative, but Allen still dedicated a substantial three pages of the book to the loan and the controversy around it (113-5). About the same time, Roger Asselineau was troubled over how to incorporate the affair into his magisterial 1962 *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, relegating the “rather confused story” to a footnote, but a very lengthy footnote, including the most thorough list of primary sources on the matter of any criticism before or since (1.295). Yet in the most recent round of biographies, the Parton debt has descended to a mere historical detail. Both David Reynolds' 1995 *Walt Whitman: A Cultural Biography* and
Jerome Loving’s 1999 *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet* devote only a passing two sentences to the affair, and Perlman, Folsom and Campion’s 1989 *Walt Whitman: The Measure of his Song* does not mention the debt at all. At present, the Parton debt has almost entirely disappeared from literary history.

That is unfortunate, because, as Whitman says to Traubel, “there's something to this story.” In forgetting the Parton Debt, literary history tacitly endorses Whitman's claim that the controversy “means so little” because its importance was limited to “one single debt.” What this misses is that the original debt was only the departure point for a debate that grew to address far wider concerns, as fundamental as whether Whitman as a whole was “Good” or “Bad.” The accusation at its heart – “The Good Gray Poet is unscrupulous about paying his debts” – proved to be, as Whitman says, “devilish insistent,” to have legs far beyond the scope of what did or did not transpire between him and James Parton. Furthermore, Whitman himself seems to feel there is more at stake, for even as he tells Traubel that “it means so little,” his dramatic caution about “initiating [Traubel] into its history” speaks to an awareness that his strategies for containing the controversy, both within his own mind and within public debate, are not as successful as he claims.

The goal of this chapter is to recover some of the lost significance of the Parton Debt, to understand why it meant so much to his contemporaries, why it quickly spun beyond the original affair into a global indictment of Whitman and his poetry and politics, and why Whitman himself had trouble accommodating it. Or, I hasten to qualify,
to recover some of the loan's significance and in forms of value quite likely different from those of its origination, for recovery, like Parton's recovery of his loan from Whitman, is frequently partial and incongruous, swapping values of one kind for values of another in ways that do not match up neatly. So much of the controversy occurred away from the printed page, and consequently the evidence available to us today consists of only a handful of letters, a few written testimonies from many years afterwards, and the kind of “flings here and there” that Traubel mentioned. For that matter, all the evidence in the world might not make much of a difference, for the affair has a stubborn way of resisting representation. Whitman's statement that “there's something to this story” is symptomatic, for that word, “something,” buzzes around and through what documents we have: everyone is certain that there is “something” about the affair, but they find themselves unable to pin down exactly what that something is. A sense runs through the evidence that there is a deeper matter troubling the record, as if the historical interpretive frame, the world within which a fact might be registered, were itself in question. When Whitman reneged on the loan, it was not just a contract that defaulted but an entire worldview, one within which that contract made sense and which had underwritten his acceptance of the loan, but one which his failure to pay the loan made untenable. Before he defaulted, his inability to pay the loan was unthinkable; after he defaulted, the world therefore needed to be rethought. As a result, negotiating that temporal divide, either in language or thought, involves a translation of non-equivalent terms.

A close examination of the Parton Debt and the ensuing controversy reveals that
there is more at stake than merely an interesting period of Whitman's life. The Parton
debt formed, I believe – and why not “go in for my chances,” as Whitman says – the third
most important event in the development of *Leaves of Grass*. The first would be whatever
event, influence, or cluster of such inspired Whitman to write the original 1855 edition,
about which much has been written, with all of it partly and none of it entirely true. The
second would be the time Whitman spent in Washington tending to wounded soldiers
during the War. The third would be this loan. Whitman eventually published seven
editions of his book, in 1855, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871, 1881, and 1891, but these editions
can be grouped into three phases, three different conceptions by Whitman of the project
behind the work. Using his own names for these phases, they are the “experimental”
*Leaves* (1855 and '56), the “completed” *Leaves* (1860), and the “epic” *Leaves* (1867 and
thereafter).² As these dates indicate, these transitions were indexed to the grand
historical event of the period, the Civil War, whose preamble, imminence and aftermath
produced corresponding stages within Whitman's work of national poetry and poiesis.
Yet this grand movement manifested itself in specific instances for Whitman, and the
particularities of those instances are important to him. The argument here is that the
Parton debt was the covert event that spurred the transition to the 1860 *Leaves*.

The second assertion is that the Parton Debt played a critical role in Whitman's
reframing of *Leaves of Grass* around the concept of democracy. As I mentioned in the

² Whitman scholars may note that while the “experimental” and “epic” tags are now
canonical within Whitman scholarship, the 1860 edition is most commonly referred to
as the “New Bible” edition. I prefer “completed” for several reasons, some of which
will become clear in this chapter, but for a synopsis, see Appendix A, “Concerning the
Naming of the 1860 Edition.”
last chapter, *Leaves* is now known as the “epic of democracy,” a name Whitman himself coined in 1872, but the first edition barely mentioned the word. 1860 was the edition that changed that, as democracy jumped from two mentions in 1855 to twenty-three in 1860 and assumed the role of the book's dominant political language, a position it would hold until the very end. This chapter views that transition as something of a mixed blessing. Whitman did not use the term democracy in the editions of 1855 and '56 because in them the name for democracy was simply the future. In the same way that Europe was the world until there was something else out there, democracy was the future until its arrival could no longer be assumed. The breaking of that projected future from the only future to merely a potential future required that democracy, like Europe, be named. Whitman was in a bit of a tough spot as the years ticked on from the first edition: having declared the imminence of a new political, spiritual and sexual order in 1855, what do you say in 1856? 1857? The idea needs to either catch fire or die, and in 1857, it was not catching fire. The Parton debt became the marker of this crisis, the signifier around which its forces concentrated. Whitman, however, was resourceful. His response to the perfidy of history was to move *Leaves* out of time by, in his words, “completing” the book, where completion is better understood, as he would come to realize over the course of three exceptionally agonizing and revision-laden years, not as a spatial metaphor (the filling of gaps) but as a far more complicated temporal one (the finishing of, termination of, removal of temporal contingencies from). The political side of this shift was the

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3 For reference, a chart of the relative popularity of key political terms in the different editions of *Leaves*, not just “democracy” but “republic,” “liberty,” “freedom” and others can be found in Appendix B.
abstracting of the book's referent from his immediate social world – the bustling, slang-filled of-the-moment America in the 1855 and '56 editions – to a transhistorical and transnational political philosophy, democracy. Where the beauty of the 1855 edition had been in its hot-blooded gluttony for the details of American life – the poet must “flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides … [must] plunge his semitic muscle into its merits and demerits” – the 1860 edition strove for the clean, transportable beauty of the aphorism. Whitman truly believed during the 1855 and '56 editions that the future would be democratic, but the actual future proved otherwise; in response, he moved his political/poetic project to an island outside of time (a “complete” thing), placing upon that island the flag “democracy.”

But if this explains why the Parton debt was important to the development of *Leaves*, it does not explain why it became such an infectious slander long afterwards. A clue can be found in the wording of the accusation that Whitman showed Traubel: “The Good Gray Poet is not scrupulous about paying his debts.” The use of that particular name for Whitman – “The Good Gray Poet,” a coinage his friend William O'Connor devised while defending Whitman from attacks of obscenity – is more than just a bit of clever indirection from a gossip column. As we'll see, it is an example of a formula which recurs throughout the controversy, where a piece of Whitman's or his associates' own nomenclature is put up against the debt and purportedly debunked thereof. The claim is that the debt makes it all hogwash. More precisely, there is a shallow and a deep charge at work. The shallow charge is that Whitman is self-consciously a charlatan,
snowing us with inspirational metaphysics while he pockets our generosity. This charge can, I hope, be dismissed out of hand, although it was believed by quite a few of his antagonists, including Parton himself. But there is a deeper accusation which is harder to negotiate. Strip the claim down to its least polemical: *the poet of democracy is bad with his debts*. This is, in fact, quite a profound statement. It begins to get at why Whitman was still troubled by the rumor as he and Traubel sat together in 1888.

To understand what makes this statement so troubling, this chapter expands upon the last chapter's exploration of circulation by moving that discussion in two directions. In that chapter, I looked at how Whitman figures the nation as a zone of affective circulation, and that his inspiration for that model was the rapidly expanding mid-century industrial market. The two main scenes of circulation which I described were Whitman reaching forth from the print room to touch his readers and the calling of the list of delegates in a convention hall. Both of these figure circulation spatially – the floor of the hall, his distributed community of readers – but in the tellings I presented there, the circulation existed only for a moment, what I called the moment of surplus collective affect. But both nations and markets exist not just for instants but through time. The key point here is that Whitman figures that continuity as *also* a form of circulation, a circulation across time that is interdependent with circulation across space. And if circulation across space defines our identity – we learn we are American in our contact with the national poet – our circulation across time defines our life and vitality – the perpetual churn of generation, the casting of death into new life, as in the eponymous
metaphor of the *Leaves of Grass*: “the smallest sprout [of grass] shows that there really is no death.” Both are required, and are therefore interlinked, for the nation to be not only affectively binding but also productively enduring. Taking the last step, this generative cycle of life is defined by Whitman as a form of debt, “the perpetual payment of the perpetual loan” (LG1855 34). Consequently, the question of whether we can trust that debt cycle, whether democracy and its poet are “scrupulous about paying [their] debts,” turns out to be a far reaching one. If it is not, then the entire enterprise breaks down.

The second direction in which this chapter expands circulation is into political discourse, for as Whitman abstracts his proto-democratic nationalism into democracy, we need to follow that movement, to understand how his newly named political entity fits in among the reigning discourses of the era. Just as Whitman's circulatory nation is a hybrid of pre-industrial labor with the industrial market, the political philosophy it manifests is also a hybrid, this time between republicanism's principle of “equal terms” and investment capital's vision of tremendous future profitability. “The messages of great poets to each man and women are, Come to us on equal terms” he writes in a famous and typical passage from the 1855 Preface, where “equal terms” is a core principle of contracts but not investments, which have no “terms” because the reward is not fixed, and in which we seek undervalued investments not “equal” ones; but then he shifts to the reward scheme of an investment: “the American bards ... shall be riches and privilege . . . . they shall perceive ... [that] the most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself” (iv). Whitman's
language of, as he elsewhere says, “vast returns,” is appropriate only to an investment, for in a contract the returns are fixed. Whitman's version of democratic exchange across time thus crosses two regimes – “Come to us on equal terms” (a contract), and you shall have “riches and privilege” and be “the most affluent man” (an investment). At the root of this political hybrid lies Whitman's intervention into both republicanism's and investment's model of exchange. The exchange of physical contact – or, in the case of his readership, metaphorically physical contact – was the key atomic act of Whitman's circulatory nation, and exchange is also a key act within the two political discourses he draws upon, republicanism with its foundation in contractual exchange, and investment capital, with its own in the cross-time exchange of the investment. Contact is such a powerful foundational metaphor for Whitman because it combines the two sides of his political philosophy: we touch equally, you and me one to the other, and yet the return is tremendous. If republicanism extrapolated contractual relations into an entire ideology of society and government, call it a polity of contract, then Whitman does the same starting with his scenes of contact – call it a polity of contact.

Where Whitman runs into a stumbling block, however, is in what kind of guarantor stands behind the exchange of contact. For republicanism, the guarantor of contracts is the state. For investments, there is none, or put differently, it is ourselves, for we must rely on our own abilities to evaluate each opportunity and pick ones that are unlikely to fail. Neither of these options work for Whitman: not the state, for to be a guarantor it would have to be a third and greater party, and Whitman wants no greater
parties in his polity of equals. Not the self, either, for while he is generally supportive of the idea that we must pull from our own resources, the core act of the investor, the division of opportunities into the worthy and the unworthy, works against his paratactic synthesis of all in all. Instead, the guarantors in Whitman's polity of contact are "spirits," who ask us for "faith": "I am the credulous man of qualities, ages, races, / I advance from the people en-masse in their own spirit, / Here is what sings unrestricted faith" (LG1860 12). The guarantor comes from outside the polity, above it. Yet as the Parton debt shows that Whitman cannot, in fact, honor his debts, that spirit ascends, leaving the earth and taking his project with it, out of time as "democracy."
The Story of the Loan

Sometime in the fall or winter of 1856-7, Walt Whitman borrowed two hundred dollars from James Parton on a short-term loan. The two men had met just a few months before through James' new wife, Sara Payson Willis Parton. James was just beginning his career as a writer, having recently finished the second of what would ultimately become fourteen biographies, but Sara was already a leading figure; under the pen name Fanny Fern, she was the nation's best-selling and highest-paid newspaper columnist. When Whitman published the first edition of Leaves of Grass a year earlier, he did not yet know Sara, but he certainly knew of her work, and the physical design of his book and even its title bore a striking resemblance to Sara's very successful collection of articles, Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio, published in 1853. Sara repaid the implied compliment by giving Whitman's new book an exceedingly positive review in her column, rivaling in its enthusiasm those which Whitman anonymously penned himself (“Walt Whitman, the world needed a 'Native American' of thorough, out-and-out breed!”). When James and Sara happened to choose Whitman's own Brooklyn as the site of their new home together, it was inevitable that the three writers would meet. A close friendship quickly ensued, and Whitman became a fixture in the couple's drawing room from the spring to the winter of 1856-7. Thomas Butler Gunn, another member of their circle, kept a colorful diary during this time, and the portrait that emerges in it of Walt sounds much like what we would expect from the poet of the early verse, confident and extravagantly loquacious:
[Entering the room] I find [Whitman] lounging on the sofa beside Fanny Fern, ... Parton seated in an arm chair, ... listens, leaning forwards to Walt's talk. ... Walt talks well – but occasionally too much, being led by the interest with which his remarks are received into monopolizing the converse. I, as a rule, would prefer to play listener, yet it is a violation of good taste to find yourself constrained to become one. And nobody wishes to become a bucket to be pumped into, let the stream be ever so nutritious. (McDermott 317-8)

How different from the “simple, well-mannered, ... very quiet” Whitman that Trowbridge would meet in Boston four years later. If Gunn's picturesque and slightly arch account is to be believed, Whitman was not just a member of the Partons' circle, he was its commanding presence.

Whitman was at this point awaiting the release of the second edition of *Leaves*, and it was apparently in that context that he took the loan from James. His letters and his mother's letters from this period announce his intention to write poetry full-time, and he had therefore quit all journalistic and carpentry work. Until the second edition began to produce revenue, this left him temporarily short of money, and the loan may have been intended to bridge that gap. According to an account from James' secretary, Whitman told James he had “a literary project” to be completed imminently, and that he would cover the loan from the proceeds (Coad 3). The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* had produced no income for its author, but Whitman had reasons to anticipate a better
commercial reception for the second. When the first edition came out, he was almost entirely unknown outside the local circles of newspapermen and party politicians. Had he not sent a copy of his self-published work to Emerson, had Emerson not chosen to read it, or had Emerson not subsequently praised it thoroughly both to its author and to his many friends, Whitman might have been in a similar position as the second edition emerged, if there even were a second edition. But all those things had happened – annus mirabilis! – and over the previous eighteen months, Whitman had seen a steady stream of literary dons come to his door, not the least of which were James and Sara. And if Emerson's praise had brought Whitman renown, Sara's could quite possibly bring him profit. In style, influence and circulation, Sara was somewhat of an antebellum predecessor of Oprah Winfrey, in that she was an underrepresented voice in the media of her day yet by virtue of an engaging and confessional manner and the business savvy to own her own product from an early period, she had built up one of the largest media enterprises of the period. A positive review from Sara, much like one from Oprah now, could and often did give a struggling author his or her commercial break. With both Sara's and Emerson's recommendations in his pocket – literally in the case of Emerson's, as he carried the letter with him to review at his pleasure – Whitman had reason to believe that his life had just gone through a categorical leap, that the hard-scrabble days of being an itinerant printer, editor and carpenter were behind him and that his new life as a more well-padded member of the nation's literary establishment was about to begin. It would be foolish to jeopardize that new life by ceasing his writing temporarily as he awaited the returns from
his second issue. And with such endorsements, how could they not? The loan from
James made perfect sense.

From the other side of the transaction, we have no record of James' thoughts, but
Sara continued to praise Whitman in her column, and from her writings we can imagine
what kind of thinking went into their part of the deal. In the spring and summer of 1856,
Sara was writing a column for the New York Ledger entitled “Peeps from under a
Parasol,” in which she offered commentary on the New York social scene and profiles of
its most notable members. Her column for April 19th featured none other than Walt
Whitman:

And speaking of books, here comes Walt Whitman, author of Leaves of
Grass, which, by the way, I have not yet read. His shirt collar is turned off
from his muscular throat, and his shoulders are thrown back as if even in
that fine, ample chest of his, his lungs had not sufficient play-room. Mark
his voice! high – deep – and clear, as a clarion note. In the most crowded
thoroughfare, one would turn instinctively on hearing it, to seek out its
owner. Such a voice is a gift as rare as it is priceless. A fig for
phrenology! Let me hear the voice of a man or a woman and I will tell you
the stuff its owners are made of. (New York Ledger, quoted in Warren 162)

Sara's enthusiasm for “voice” is hardly surprising, given how brightly her own leaps from
the page more than a century and a half later – truly “a gift as rare as it is priceless.”

While she may not have read Leaves yet – she did shortly thereafter, giving the
aforementioned positive review on May 10th – she had likely glanced inside its front cover, for her opening depiction of Walt, with “his shirt collar ... turned off from his muscular throat, and his shoulders ... thrown back,” mirrors the eye-catching engraving in the book's frontispiece. Now that she has met him, she finds her impression of that engraving not only supported but surpassed by that of “his voice! high – deep – and clear.” Like Walt, Sara believed that the author, the self, and the body were an inseparable unity, and that one could therefore read physical markers to determine “the stuff [their] owners are made of.” Walt's “voice” stands at the center of this unity, and its “clarion” note announces that he is a person and an author of “rare” and “priceless” value.4

At this point, Sara's description takes an interesting turn: so thoroughly does Walt embody the qualities she values that his example inspires her to shift from description to theory, from his particular virtues to the strategies and signifiers of evaluating a person's “gifts” in general. As we learn from her aside about a competing theory – “A fig for phrenology!” – these strategies were evolving in the late antebellum period and were the subject of much debate. As we also learn from her language of “price,” “owner” and “crowd,” this debate was articulated within a lexicon shared, in complicated and reciprocal ways, with the emerging practices and ideology of investment capital. At the same time that Sara was launching the modern popular social advice column, other authors, often in columns parallel to her own, were developing the genre of popular

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4 From the only extant recording believed to be of Walt Whitman, “high – deep – and clear” is a quite apt description. See Folsom, “The Whitman Recording.”
investment advice. With the rapid transformations going on within and between the social and economic worlds in this period, the boundary between these two kinds of columns was often porous, and a shared set of narrative conventions emerged for representing the terrain and interactions of the modern social world. Key to this consensus was an imaginary drama that looked much like the streetscape implied in Sara's title, “Peeps from under a Parasol.” Both Sara and the economic writers imagined that in the turbulent and anonymous modern world, their readers were presented with a steady and dizzying stream of people and/or companies – here comes another stock advertisement, “here ... comes Walt Whitman” – about which they had to make a decision whether to invest or not. The currency of that investment might be actual money or any of the affective qualities which were now figured as pseudo-capital (to invest confidence, invest love, invest desire, invest respect). For social writers as well as economic ones, evaluation and investment thus became the central metaphors of social life.

Participants in this emerging investment discourse were divided, however, in their responses to a central question, one which remains with us today: can the self be trusted to make evaluations? On one side stood those who argued that the self was too easily fooled by its own hopes and desires, and who therefore sought to derive evaluations as much as possible from supposedly non-subjective means. In financial investing, this was the origin of what has since become a vast and arcane array of “metrics,” from “P-and-L statements” to “sigma” to “3A.” In the world of evaluating people, the foremost proponents of this model in Sara’s day were the phrenologists she scorns, who used charts
and calipers to give purported numerical measurements to an equally arcane range of
cracter traits, like “amativeness” and “philoprogenitiveness.” In the other camp were
those who felt that evaluation was an inescapably subjective process, and that we should
embrace our intuitions and personal expertise to guide our investments. Among financial
advisers, this camp held that potential investors should meet the managers of a company
in person, get to know the business, and trust their instincts about whether to invest. This,
clearly, was Sara's position in the debate. “Let me hear the voice,” she says, not any
caliper or instrument. In fact, she took the argument one step further: not only was
evaluation subjective, but it was gloriously so, an affirmation of selfhood and confidence.
At the head of every one of her “Parasol” columns, Sara including the following two
sentences:

> People describe me, without saying “by your leave;” a little thought has
> just occurred to me that two can play at that game! I don't go about with
> my eyes shut—no tailor can “take a measure” quicker than I, as I pass
> along. (*Fresh Leaves* 252).

To “take a measure” of “people” was to declare that she had the self confidence to
proclaim her equality in “that game.” For Sara, the gender dimensions of this reversal of
the gaze were front and center. If we had any question about what kind of “people” she
had in mind, the fact that virtually all of her profiles were of men would dispel it. After
having been so frequently “described” by male editors and journalists in ways that she
found disrespectful or dismissive, she relished the opportunity to return the favor, to peep

91
Sara was a passionate participant in the debates over evaluative strategies, and in Walt she saw a persuasive piece of evidence for her own theories. Her excitement over his “voice” stems from the fact that she believes his excellence to be so manifestly clear that it reflects back upon and ratifies her own confidence in herself as a social analyst. Not only that, but he represents that her own values are in tune with those of the broader social world, that what she values will be reflected by the “instinct” of the “crowd.” A reciprocal process forms: to believe that Walt possesses great value is to believe that both she and the world do as well. An investment in Walt would therefore also be an investment in herself, in her confidence to adjudge value. For a host of reasons, then, James's loan appeared not just a sound idea but an ennobling action, a token of his and Sara's belief in Walt, in themselves, and in the kind of world they wanted to live in.

The attention of such people as Emerson, James and Sara pleased Whitman, of course, but it also partly astounded him, for he had been thrown into a world of class knowledge and socialization which was not his own. In the months of his transition from a local political journalist to a much-buzzed poet of the nation's literary set, he made a few missteps, the most famous of which was his publication of Emerson's private letter. Amid the accusations of crass self-promotion that greeted this publication – and which still, sadly, mark much of the contemporary scholarship on the affair – a point was and has been missed, one which John Townsend Trowbridge, with his persistently insightful analysis of both literary class behavior and the psychology of the class migrant, was sure
“Talking of it [the publication of Emerson's letter] once,” Trowbridge records, “he [Whitman] said, in his grand way: 'I supposed the letter was meant to be blazoned; I regarded it as the chart of an emperor.'” For Whitman, the class distinction between himself and Emerson was so vast that the only metaphor applicable was the absolute distinction between emperor and commoner. He considered himself far too insignificant to receive privileged information from Emerson, much less to be able to violate it.

Anything that came into his hands must therefore have been meant to be public. The nuances of Boston class life, where one sort of letter was circulated between friends – which is to say, between members of one's own class – while an entirely different kind was issued to the public at large, were and remained foreign ideas to Whitman.

The Parton debt proved to be another of Whitman's missteps. Whitman's projection that his life had just taken a categorical leap turned out to be premature for a host of reasons. Partly, he had underestimated the resistance that his frank accounts of sexuality and morality would receive. Partly, he simply had bad luck. If all careers are a mix of talent and chance, and if Whitman had experienced some felicitous luck with the first edition (what if Emerson had happened to be abroad at the time and never read it?), he now received a bit of the opposite. The summer of 1856 brought a general financial downturn, one that hit Fowler & Wells, the publishers he had chosen for the second edition, particularly hard. Whitman's contact at the firm had always been Lorenzo Fowler, the creative spirit in the partnership and also – ironically, given Sara's opinions – a prominent phrenologist, whose reading of Whitman's skull in 1854 had been one of the
things that encouraged Whitman to engage in the *Leaves of Grass* project in the first place. But Fowler's interests were moving away from publishing, giving the upper hand to Samuel Wells, the business manager and more practical of the two. Wells tried to jettison *Leaves of Grass*, writing Whitman on June 6th, 1856 that, given the state of the firm's finances, “We are not in a position, at present, to experiment.” He advised Whitman to leverage his friendship with James and Sara and “try the Masons, Partons' publishers,” a larger, more established, and more aggressive firm than Fowler & Wells. “They are rich, and enterprising,” he counseled, “and I guess would publish Leaves of Grass, on fair terms.” In the end, Fowler & Wells did publish the second edition, but only reluctantly, and after it came out, Whitman complained to friends that they were doing far too little to promote it: “Fowler & Wells are bad persons for me. They retard my book very much” (Letter to Sarah Tyndale, June 20, 1857).

Whitman's frustrations were more than the result of bad luck or the public's prudishness, however; he was simply naïve about how difficult and tenuous the class transition from printer to professional author would be. Trowbridge, by comparison, spent years courting publishers and working his way from small houses to medium houses to large houses before he could earn a living from his novels. Whitman's expectation that a few distinguished recommendations would open the door to a life earned by poetry was almost delusionally optimistic. Some of this naïveté was from his inexperience, but a fair portion was by choice. Trowbridge would have known that Wells' advice to seek out the Partons' publisher was actually very smart and likely offered in
kindness. Whitman, however, wanted to have it both ways: to become commercially successful and also keep publication within his circle of printer associates. It was the same impulse that would lead him to the compositing room at Rand, Avery in Boston, where he and Trowbridge first met in 1860. In 1856, however, it nearly terminated his career. The second edition of *Leaves and Grass* sold even fewer copies than the first.

Consequently, when the loan came due in February 1857, Whitman found that he was unable to repay it. After a few months of negotiation – including, apparently, the involvement of the Kings County courts – he instead forfeited property, including some valuable books and a large painting by his friend, the well known landscape painter Jesse Talbot. With a receipt in hand from Parton's lawyer, Oliver Dyer, he thought that the unfortunate matter was closed.
Controversy

If Whitman had known what was going on at the Parton house, he might have had an inkling that the affair would see further chapters. According to Parton family lore, James and Sara ceremonially burned their copy of *Leaves of Grass* in their fireplace (Warren 173). The evidentiary chain on that claim is suspect – it was told by James to his niece and literary secretary, Ethel Parton, who told it to her son James Parton II who told it to Sara's biographer Ruth Warren one hundred and forty years after the ashes were cold (345 n.52). That is, however, exactly the kind of spoken circuits within which the rumor circulated. The loan began as a verbal agreement between James and Whitman, and the ensuing controversy spread by word of mouth as well, and so there is very little archival evidence, few indisputable 'facts' to shed a clear light on the matter.

The first actual written piece of evidence we have comes from Thomas Butler Gunn's diaries, whose earlier comment about Whitman's command of the Parton social circle I have already given. If that quote did not make it clear, Gunn was a bit of a misanthrope – his most lasting contribution to literature proved to be a dyspeptic ethnography of New York City boardinghouses published in 1857 – and he had long since wearied of being “a bucket to be pumped into,” so his account must be considered suspect. Nonetheless, it is the best source we have, and telling in its way, for Gunn was at the very forefront of the affair, and so he had the privilege of being one of Whitman's original antagonists. Gunn's first mention of the debt comes from February 15th, 1857,
when he recorded the following:

In the afternoon crossed to Brooklyn, and, after a muddy walk, to the Parton's, meeting the folks on their threshold. All as usual, Parton enthusiastic about human nature and interested in his book, Fanny chatty and the girls handsome. Was told how Walt Whitman has borrowed $300 [sic] of Parton and failed to meet his note for it. The money was lent with special understanding that it was to be refunded at a certain date – since which something like twelve days has elapsed. Walt has been written to sans response. It would appear there's reason for suspecting the great “Kosmos” to be a great scoundrel. (McDermott 318-9)

By Gunn's dates, the loan would have been due “somewhere about” the 3rd of February, which means that depending on the duration of the note – Whitman later said it was a “short-time Note,” so probably between three and six months – it was likely contracted between August and December the previous year, or just about exactly when the second edition of Leaves was emerging from the presses at Fowler & Wells. And here, in the earliest known document of the affair, we see the aboriginal instance of the formula that would chase Whitman for the next forty years, “there’s reason for suspecting the great 'kosmos' to be a great scoundrel,” remarkably parallel to the anonymous newspaper “fling” that spurred Whitman and Traubel's conversation in 1888, “The Good Gray Poet may be the Bad Gray Poet after all.” Whether this expression arose spontaneously in several places or whether it spread from a single source is not clear. Most of the known
uses of it come from people, like Gunn, who had some personal connection with James Parton, so it may have been he who coined the original witticism. James never committed himself to paper on this issue, or on any part of the affair for that matter, and so we can only speculate. Either way, whether it arose from one source or many, its wide circulation showed that it held a potent grasp on the minds of Whitman's antagonists.

Gunn's next mention of the debt comes a week later, on February 22nd, after both he and Parton had had a little while to reflect:

I returned to my chamber with Parton. ... We talked an hour away. ... Walt Whitman has called on Parton, and appears *shuffling*. Parton is going to sue for his $200 [sic]. ... I was carried away by his [Parton's] judgment of Walt Whitman, despite my own thoughts. When Walt told him, “on his honor,” that he – the Author of “Leaves of Grass” – had lived a perfectly *chaste* life, *that* staggered my faith. I had doubts before. Now I *know* that I should have held to my own judgment. (McDermott 319)

The debt is already spinning beyond its domain, into issues which seem only tangentially connected or even not connected at all – if Whitman did not repay a loan, then he must have had sex. Most interestingly in this passage, it has now spun out to Gunn himself, for both he and Parton are starting to realize that they are both implicated in the affair in more ways than just the two hundred dollars. If Whitman was such a “scoundrel,” why did they entrust him in the first place? Whitman's default threatens them as well, for it impugns their abilities to read value in others. Gunn's reaction, which again was typical
of the affair, was to throw everyone else under the bus, Parton first, by claiming that he in fact had not been deceived, that he had silently known the truth in “[his] own thoughts” all along, but had let himself be “carried away by” the opinions of others.
The Polity Of Contact

We need to back up a little bit and explore the relationship between debt and politics, both Whitman's politics and politics at large. As it happens, our present moment, when the words “debt” and “bubble” – another keyword for this chapter – are being widely aired, is an opportune one for recovering the deeper significance of the loan. As Whitman learned during the controversy and as we have learned since 2008, a debt, particularly a debt which goes unpaid, has a way of spilling beyond its borders. Nominally a limited financial transaction, debts exist within a complicated network of cultural, social and political linkages, the full extent of which is often unknown until the debts start to go bad and produce effects far away. Culturally, we develop narratives for what kind of person contracts a debt and why, for what it feels like to assume, endure, pay or not pay a debt, and for what our current debt practice means for holistic entities like the nation or modern life. Debts are also profoundly social, in that the meaning of any particular debt depends upon its relationship to other debts throughout society; it means one thing if one person defaults on a loan, quite another if ten million do. Flipping that relationship around, the social is also profoundly debtful, in that we imagine modern social life as an interpellation into a network of metaphorical debt relationships: our debt to the future, to the past, to our children, to our parents, to the state, to the citizens, and so on. As that string of relationships makes clear, debts are also inescapably ethical, conjoining the original currency of the debt, whether it was in money, patronage, or
anything else, with ethical categories like virtue, honor and trust.

Debts are also historical, in both the little-h and the Big-H sense of the word. As with all things, the cultural, social and ethical dimensions of debts change over time. More interestingly, the consistency of time itself is often understood as a progression of interwoven debt relationships. But debt is not the only metaphor by which social life is understood, and over time, its relationship to those other forms changes. The long eighteenth century, for instance, saw a transformation within debt, from one in which debts were considered unidirectional, trickling upward through various institutions towards a terminus with God, to one in which debts were understood as mutual, the interindebtedness of the contract, such as the verbal agreement between Whitman and Parton. In economics, the contract was the regulatory form of artisanal and mercantile capital, while in politics, it expressed itself through the rise of liberal and republican governance. Yet as the nineteenth century progressed through the consolidation of industrial capital and into the early phases of financial capital, contractual debt's position as the central metaphor of social life was challenged by a new way of understanding human relations: the investment. The investment proved and continues to prove to be an equally powerful cognitive map for modern social life, yet the visions that the two models offer of what that life looks like and of what it values are decidedly different. In a contract, the terms of the exchange must be carefully and deliberately set such that the debt it places on each party is approximately equal, or else the contract is considered unjust and may be invalidated. The amount of gain either party may see is proscribed by the contract's
terms, as too, hopefully, is the amount of loss, for the non-fulfillment of one's obligation is regarded as a serious aberration. To guard against such lapses, contracts require that a third and greater party serve as guarantor to the deal, so that in the event of disputes, that third party, which is most often the state, may adjudicate claims and provide relief. The ideal contractual self is defined by honesty, virtue, dispassion, and an awareness of mutual benefit, and the contractual future looks much like the present only – if we are virtuous enough – slightly better, a steady and sound climb upward. In an investment, on the contrary, inequality in relations is the entire point, the discovery of what market ideologists call undervalued investment opportunities. The possibilities for gain are explosive, but so too are the chances of loss, and risk is not an aberration but an inescapable fact of life that must be accepted from the outset. There is no outward guarantor of an investment's profitability, and so the ideal investment self must rely on him or herself, becoming a suspicious but passionate analyst, ever watchful of being taken advantage of by others, equally watchful for opportunities to do the same to them, and supremely confident in his or her abilities to make such predictions. The future looks tumultuous but considerably climbing, though many will fall off the ascent.

These two portraits are drawn with broad strokes for clarity and to demonstrate three points. The first is that these economic terms slightly scramble the usual categories within which U.S. political development is discussed – liberalism, republicanism, contractualism, communitarianism and so on. The second is to illustrate how rarely they exist in such isolation, for most historically articulated political philosophies, like those I
have listed, and certainly all political regimes have tried to strike some kind of balance between their respective visions and values. The third is to make evident how Whitman's own political thinking is just such a fusion, yet a fusion which is distinctively and characteristically his own. On the one hand, the contractual principle that relations between people should follow the rule of “equal terms” was a fundamental one to him: “The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms,” he writes in a famous and typical passage from the 1855 preface. Equality is everywhere in his poetry – “what I assume you shall assume,” “out of the dimness opposite equals advance,” “the perfect equality of the female with the male” – and its endless examples spring quickly to the mind (and inspire the political passions) of anyone who has spent real time with his verse. More generally, Whitman's copious and loving portraits of skilled laborers eulogize the world of artisanal republicanism, a world where the contract was king in both economics and politics. Yet on the other hand, it is no less essential to his poetry to imagine that this world of equal selves and honest labor will produce a future of fantastic profit beyond our wildest dreams. “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems” – not, say, the origin of a contractually-stipulated poem and a tenth, or even a generous poem and a half. This vision of incalculable profit can only pertain to an investment, where the gains are unlimited, not to a contract where they are constrained ahead of time by the terms. At times Whitman explicitly references the new forms of labor emerging from investment capital – “me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns” – but more often he imagines that the
old forms of contractual labor produce, along with whatever modest material gains, immeasurable gains on a higher order:

Little or big, learned or unlearned, white or black, legal or illegal, sick or well, from the first inspiration down the windpipe to the last expiration out of it, all that a male or female does that is vigorous and benevolent and clean is so much sure profit to him or her in the unshakable order of the universe and through the whole scope of it forever.

Whitman's sentence puts the two sides of his contract/investment hybrid together neatly: in the subject is the world of republican equality, where all manner of people, “little or big, learned or unlearned, [etc.]” are united by and through their pursuit of “vigorous and benevolent and clean” labor. Then comes the verb, “is,” – Whitman was never one to maximize his verbs – and suddenly we are in the world of investment capital, achieving the speculator's highest dreams, “so much sure profit ... forever.”

If Whitman borrowed from both investment and contractual discourse to construct his political vision, there were also parts of those discourses that he needed to shed. Whitman's disagreement with investment ideology is easy to surmise, for the central task of the investor is division, the separation of the world into the valuable and the valueless, while Whitman's poetry consistently works to dissolve and abridge such distinctions: “Showing the best and dividing it from the worst, age vexes age, / Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself” (LG1855 14). Beyond the political disagreement, the parallel syntax of
Whitman's line subtly and succinctly refutes the investor's world view: while they see what “shows” he “knows,” while they “divide” he “bathes,” while they “vex” he “admires.” The investor's awareness is limited to the current “age,” and so he or she can only assess the relative superlative, “the best and ... worst” of the options available, while Whitman sees beyond all time to the absolute superlative, “the perfect.” And while the investor understands value as autonomous, so that one “thing” may be determined “the best,” Whitman understands value as relational, so that there is no “perfect” thing, only the “perfect fitness and equanimity” that exists between things.

Compared to his disagreements with investment, Whitman's differences with contractual thinking are more subtle and complex, given how indebted he is to the republican politics from which he emerged, but a clue can be found in his dismissal above – “while they discuss I am silent.” While Whitman copiously praises “equal terms” in his poetry, he also displays a thorough and consistent impatience with the kinds of discussions that might determine that equality. As an example, take one of his central verses about equality, one which I have already looked at briefly but which I here include in greater context. Whitman often intended his poetry to engage an imagined interlocutor, and to make that drama explicit, I have inserted questions below to draw out the imaginary Socratic dialogue:

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance . . . . Always substance and increase,

Always a knit of identity . . . . always distinction . . . . always a breed of
[How do we know they are equals?]

To elaborate is no avail . . . learned and unlearned feel that it is so.

[Are you sure?]

Sure as the most certain sure . . . plumb in the uprights, well entretied,

braced in the beams,

Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,

I and this mystery here we stand.

The bluffness of Whitman's refusal to deliberate the question of equality is total. For Whitman, equality simply is – “to elaborate is no avail.” His denial is a bit perplexing, for as central as valuation and division are to investment, the ascertainment of terms is to the contract. Equality does not merely happen in a contract, it is made. Where the different schools of contractual politics disagree, it is usually over what master discourse determines those terms, with republicanism turning to Reason, liberalism to Nature and neo-liberalism to the Market. Whitman had his reasons for disagreeing with each of those discourses. Long before contemporary scholars unearthed republicanism's origins in and indebtedness to the racial imperialisms of the seventeenth century, Whitman intuited that Reason was an exclusive affair, against which he celebrated his inclusive irrationality and “mystery”, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . . I contain multitudes” (LG1855 56).⁵ And while Whitman

⁵ See Jonathan Elmer's introduction to On Linger ing and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World for an excellent summary of recent scholarship on race and republicanism. Briefly, while Reason claimed to be a discourse of universalism,
frequently and passionately appeals to Nature – equality in the above lines has something to do with his similarity to a horse – the historical discourse of liberal ideology, in which equality was restricted to a small set of natural rights and political participation to the least state that could enforce them, is at odds with Whitman's maximalist vision of political community, an entire nation awakened to its political life and possibilities. Neo-liberals have seen Whitman's use of market and economic figures to represent human interaction as an antecedent to their own free market ideology, but they miss the fact that, for Whitman, the market only assumes such powers when it trips into metaphor, when it carries more than mere cash values, of which he is sardonically dismissive: “Shall I ... forthwith cipher and show me to a cent, / Exactly the contents of one, and exactly the contents of two, and which is ahead?” (LG1855 16).

Whitman's greatest dispute with these political theories is one which their proponents would likely consider the least significant, at best a mere matter of 'tone,' at worst a mistake. Put most succinctly, all three theories, particularly the republicanism that was still dominant in his day, imagined a cool polity, where political interactions were characterized by prudence, rationality, dispassion and deliberation. Whitman, on the
contrary, was dedicated to the idea of a warm polity, even a hot one, a polity where passions and affects were not the obstacles to effective governance but its source and purpose. Beyond liberals’ sclerotic anger at having their natural rights violated, the affective palette of social contract theories is intentionally constrained. In his 1855 preface, Whitman dedicated the longest of his monolithic double-column fine-print paragraphs to a confrontation with this limited understanding of political affect. After summarizing the republican model of virtue – “It has been thought that the prudent citizen was the citizen who applied himself to solid gains and did well for himself and his family and completed a lawful life without debt or crime” – Whitman engages the model’s central term, “prudence,” in order to re-appropriate it to his own affective democratic project:

The greatest poet sees and admits these economies as he sees the economies of food and sleep, but has higher notions of prudence. ... The melancholy prudence of the abandonment of such a great being as a man is to the toss and pallor of years of moneymaking ... and all the loss of the bloom and odor of the earth ... and of the true taste of the women and men you pass ... is the great fraud upon modern civilization and forethought. (x) Whitman sees republicanism's restriction of affective engagement to a narrowly defined “prudence” as the “melancholy” sacrifice of everything that motivates him to write political poetry in the first place: the “great being” of a man or woman, the “bloom and odor of the earth,” and the erotic possibilities of “tast[ing]” the “women and men you
pass” in the street.

Whitman's political fusion combines the social world of republican equality and labor with the explosive and dynamic prospects of investment capital with a commitment to affect and embodiedness which is all his own. The equation in this hybrid politics – that being “equal” produces “riches ... out of the strong wealth of ourselves” – is the fundamental assertion of democratic belief, not just for Whitman but for anyone. But to support that belief, Whitman needs to do more than just link its two sides together with “is,” as he did in the long sentence earlier, he needs to provide a political imaginary and affective lexicon in which that fusion makes sense. The juncture point between these branches of his political thinking, and therefore the base of the entire structure, is that same scene which was discussed in the last chapter, the moment of physical contact. To refresh the earlier discussion, I elaborated on how the circulation of people and commodities within the rapidly modernizing mid-century economic market inspired Whitman's model for the affective circulation of proto-democratic nationalism, and how his unique position within capital development – the print room, with one foot in guild-based labor and the other in the modern market – allowed him to imagine that the readers of his book related not just to the book but through the book, to him as its producer, and even, one step further, through him as well, to other readers, thereby transforming his marketplace of readers into a zone of affective circulation. The key traces of this market-to-nation genealogy are, first, the persistent economism of Whitman's language for the nation and poet and, second, the curious significance of the print room within both his
poetry and his literary productive practice. The key moment in the transition from economic to national significance occurs when Whitman imagines commodities as vehicles for “touch.” In Whitman's erotic scenes, “touch” and “contact” carry so powerful an affective charge that they exceed all expectations and limits and precipitate an ontological drama in which the self is annihilated, illuminated and reconstituted (“You villain touch! what are you doing? . . . . my breath is tight in its throat; / Unclench your floodgates! you are too much for me.” LG1855 33). When Whitman tells his readers, “This is no book, / Who touches this, touches a man,” he is setting fire to the commodity market, sending the same kind of transformative affective “touch” through its distributive economic circuity. Thus, economic activity isn't defined by the narrowness of the 'cash nexus'; rather, that nexus functions primarily as a metaphor for a much wider affective exchange, and market “touch” inherits from one-on-one erotic “touch” the ability to convey and reconstitute all of selfhood. When Whitman and his readers “touch” through the book, there are no limits to the exchange, and they each commit their everything, their “all” and “best,” to the encounter: “Come closer to me, / Push close my lovers and take the best I possess, / Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess” (LG1855 57).

Whitman's affective market is not always on fire; sometimes it only smolders. In the same way that sex is related to romance, Whitman's acute moments of market “touch” engender his chronic passages of market romance. In these scenes, “contact” is abstracted into the gaze, and we get Whitman's loving and beautiful visual depictions of
market circulation (“the delight ... in the rush of the streets”) as well as the deep affective bond he feels when he gazes upon the “faces” within that circulation: “Sauntering the pavement or crossing the ceaseless ferry, here then are faces! / I see them, and complain not, and am content with all” (LG1855 13, LG1856 303). As the endpoints of that line show, sending “touch” out through the market subtly changes it from an act that occurs between an “I” and a “you” to one that also occurs between an “I” and an “all.” The market thus becomes a space and model for expressing the “content” (substance) and “content” (affect) of the social totality. In effect, the market socializes contact and contact affectivizes the market.
Snapshots and History

When, in 1860, Whitman met John Townsend Trowbridge at the Boston stereotype foundry, he was there to publish the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Though only five years had passed since its inaugural edition, the book had seen extensive changes. Whitman had added so many poems that the volume had doubled in bulk, and he had thoroughly revised many of the original pieces. His ambitions for the book had grown as well. While the 1855 edition had made some astoundingly bold claims for itself, it was, as Whitman acknowledged, decidedly fragmentary, an “experiment” whose goal was to see if new avenues could be opened, not to follow them all. The second edition, published in 1856, was little better, a hasty expansion of the original volume inspired by his enthusiasm over Emerson's letter. For the third edition, Whitman had greater plans. He hoped to finish the project, rounding out and polishing the work until it stood on its own, “complete” and seamless (*NUPM* 1:353). On the professional side, this meant finding an established book publisher for the volume rather than relying on his network of printer associates to self-publish the work. For reasons we have seen, that search took much longer than he anticipated, and it was not until four years after the second edition that he received the unsolicited offer from Thayer and Eldridge that led him to the print shop on Washington Street. In the meantime, he worked on the manuscript, with the result that the 1860 edition is the most thoroughly and consistently edited of any edition. Before it, his aim was more exploratory than complete; after it, he despaired of
homogeneity. But in 1860, Whitman made several attempts to integrate the work, performing volume-wide edits that cut across all poems and introducing several organizational structures. Some of those changes, such as his Quaker-inspired numbering of all days and months (“it is the Fourth of Seventh Month” for the 4th of July) lasted for only the one edition. Others, such as his clustering of poems into titled sub-sections, most notably “Calamus,” which debuted in 1860, became a staple of the book through all subsequent editions.

“Completing” his “experiment” involved more than just editing and filling in gaps, however. It also endowed the book with a fundamentally different relationship to history. More precisely, it placed the book within a fundamentally different kind of history, in the process attributing to it a different order of temporal existence and effects. As this chapter makes the turn from an investigation of spatial circulation to one of temporal circulation, the question, then, is what kind of entity, what vision of history, is entailed by Whitman's circulatory time. A preliminary point to this investigation is that history is not a transparent category. In Benedict Anderson's influential work on the rise of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, he notes that history has itself a history, in that our modern conception of history, “history as an endless chain of cause and effect,” would have been “unimaginable [to] the mediaeval Christian mind” (23). Quoting from Auerbach, he notes that in mediaeval “consciousness,” historical causality existed not “horizontally,” in the “temporal and causal ... connections ... established by reason,” but “vertically,” in the “link to Divine Providence” (24). Through this vertical link, events
like “the sacrifice of Isaac” and “the sacrifice of Christ,” which we would consider historically unrelated because they occur neither at the same time nor within a chain of causality, may be regarded as causally inter-linked, the one “prefiguring” the other “so that in the former the latter is as it were announced and promised and the latter ‘fulfills’ ... the former.” Such millenia-spanning causal links bind up all of time into “something close to what Benjamin calls Messianic time, a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present.” Yet with the collapse of sacredness brought on by modernity, this simultaneity decays into secular “homogeneous, empty time,” and Anderson's term for modern time is “serial time,” the steady ticking “measured by clock and calendar” down the “chain of cause and effect” through homogeneous, empty time.

In a critical move for Anderson, he notes that simultaneity has not disappeared, it has merely shifted from “simultaneity-along-time” to “across time,” such that the companion concept to serial time is “meanwhile,” the idea that there is a “horizontal” spatial world marked by some kind of cognitive “boundary” such that several unrelated events can be said to occur within it “simultaneously.” Mediaeval simultaneity extended through both time and space – no matter when you are or where you are, you are at the same time “in the eyes of God”; modern simultaneity fractures the simultaneity of time into serial time, but preserves the simultaneity of space – no matter where you are, but no longer when you are, you are at the same time in the eyes of modernity. These two axes, of time and of space, are linked in modern nationalism, and “the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue
of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily
down (or up) history” (26).

Anderson's general points, that temporal form is historically contingent and that it
is inter-articulated with social form, are both brilliant and vital to reading Whitman, but
Whitman also demonstrates that Anderson's particular models for time and collectivity
are conditioned by the genre he uses to exemplify them, the anti-colonial novel. For the
indigenous novelists of Anderson's study, the existence of such a “bounded” “solid
community” and its “steady” continuation on the barest of historical stages, the
“homogenous, empty” stage of modern time, is precisely their point, and they enact their
anti-colonial project by creating a world in which such may be tacitly assumed. For
Whitman, whose ultimate political project, peaking in the 1860 edition, is to convert
America into a global democratic empire, the nation must be expansive and fluid rather
than “bounded” and “solid.” Anderson is perhaps a little too specific in calling the
modern nation an “organism,” for an organism is just one of the possible models available
to nationhood. For Whitman, the nation is composed serially, as a list, and yet in his
telling this series, unlike Benjamin's “homogenous, empty” series of modern time, proves
to be quite full, endowed with tremendous, even ontological affective power. For that
matter, the fullness of the national series in turn transforms the series of time, for the
moment we realize the fullness of our national collectivity is also the moment that time
transforms from an empty and homogeneous progression to a teleology, the reconciling of
our new collective identity with social reality. The constitution of history proves to be
both just as complicated as, and also deeply interlinked with, the constitution of the social.

In the last chapter, I argued how Whitman's characteristic trope, the list, translated into rhetorical form the kind of affective exchange, circulation and collectivity that he saw possible, in economic form, in the modernizing commodity market in general and the (truly) self-published literary market in particular. In my analogy of a party political speaker calling out the list of delegates in a convention hall, I described how these affective properties are felt as a *moment*, a sudden – and possibly transitory – recognition of selfhood and collectivity produced out of the performance of the list. In the 1855 *Leaves*, the list had a symbiotic relationship with another master narrative device, one which had an even stronger relationship to the moment and which is most easily understood in the visual form it took on the book's frontispiece: the snapshot. From the very first, Whitman's portrait at the start of the 1855 *Leaves* has drawn commentary. Adapted and engraved by Samuel Hollyer and James McRae from an 1854 daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison, readers have noted the many ways in which the engraving contests antebellum understandings of both authorship and readership: the workingman's clothing rather than the elite's, the studied casualness rather than refined composure, the interposition of an anonymous virile body where we expect an authorial signature, the direct gaze that mixes invitation and defiance. Because its content was both evocative and elusive, Whitman was asked many times during his life to endorse one or another reading of the picture, and he steadfastly resisted. Speaking to Horace Traubel in 1888,
Whitman said that his close friend “William O’Connor fancies [the 1855 portrait] because of its portrayal of the proletarian – the carpenter, builder, mason, mechanic: but I do not share his view” (WWC 3:13). The most Whitman was willing to offer petitioners was that the portrait was “open to such a suspicion,” but he was in turn suspicious of their motives in limiting it to a single understanding (3:22). When asked by an anthologist, Arthur Stedman Jr., for permission to reproduce a portrait, Whitman was briefly confused whether Stedman was requesting “the Linton cut [a later, more traditional author portrait] or the [1855] steel” before realizing it was the steel: “I wonder anyhow why he chose this picture: I wonder: I wonder.’ He looked at the postmark: ‘Richfield Springs: ah! I know: the name is familiar: it suggests tone – it is the place for the eight and ten dollars a day fellows: not the ten cents a meal fellows like us: no, not us’” (1:8). Aware of the constitutive ironies of American class life, Whitman understood what kind of investments the “eight and ten dollars a day fellows” might have in the figure of a working-class poet, and his strategy for avoiding such traps was to keep the meaning of the portrait “open” – “missing me one place search another” (LG1855 56).

Yet despite his coyness about author-izing any one reading of the 1855 portrait, Whitman did see specific values embodied in the work, but these values derived not from its content but from the process and scene of its “execution.” After dismissing O’Connell’s “proletarian” reading, Whitman continued, “I take real pleasure in [the 1855 portrait] for its execution as a specimen piece of rare engraving.” Much like the many ways, overt and subtle, that he foregrounds the print shop as the scene of the “execution”
of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman draws our gaze to the productive process behind the engraving. And again like the print shop, he deduces values from that process. “Then,” he continues, “I like it because it is natural, honest, easy; as spontaneous as you are, as I am, this instant, as we talk together.” Whitman’s appreciation of the engraving stems from it being “natural,” “easy,” and “this instant” – in other words, what we would now call a snapshot. Here is how Whitman described the origin of the engraving:

“There the steel [engraving] came from a photo – the photo from what would be called a chance.” How was that? “I was sauntering along the street: the day was hot: I was dressed just as you see me there. A friend of mine – Gabriel Harrison (you know him? ah! yes! – he has always been a good friend!) – stood at the door of his place looking at the passers-by. He cried out to me at once: ‘Old man! – old man! – come here: come right up stairs with me this minute’ – and when he noticed that I hesitated cried still more emphatically: ‘Do come: come: I’m dying for something to do.’ This picture was the result.” (WWC 2:506)

Historians of photography date the beginning of the snapshot as a photographic form to 1888, when George Eastman introduced the Kodak, a camera that was small, simple and fast enough to escape the professional studio and capture moments from uncomposed life, but in Whitman’s account above, he presents the 1854 daguerreotype as the nearest thing the technology of the time could afford, a “chance” image that first caught Harrison’s eye out of the passing flow of street life – Whitman called the photo “the street figure” – and was then quickly captured in his studio in all its raw and unpolished immediacy (Marien...
167, WWIC 2:412).
Chapter 3. *Leaves of Grass* 1867: Phantoms, Democratic Melancholy, The Overproduction of Death, and Zombies

I will make a song for These States, that no one State may under any circumstances be subjected to another State,

And I will make a song that there shall be comity by day and by night between all The States, and between any two of them,

And I will make a song of the organic bargains of These States—And a shrill song of curses on him who would dissever the Union;

And I will make a song for the ears of the President, full of weapons with menacing points,

And behind the weapons countless dissatisfied faces. ("Proto-Leaf" 11)

Walt Whitman wrote the above lines in 1860 as he was preparing *Leaves of Grass* for its third edition. Forty years old at the time and with over two decades of experience as a speaker, intellectual and journalist for the Democratic and Free Soil parties, Whitman rehearses the political language of the mid-nineteenth century republic with familiarity and fluidity: the social compact ("organic bargain") underlying the "Union," the normative "comity" presumed to exist between states and, by extension, citizens, and the anti-aristocratic principle that "no one ... may .. be subjected to another.” Even in his
style, his quasi-legalistic diction of “there shall be” and “under any circumstances” mirrors the self-consciously unaffected prose of the constitutional framers. Only at the end of the stanza does he break out into a little color and imagery, as he hits upon his favorite of republican themes, the right of revolution embodied by the “countless dissatisfied faces” bearing “menacing points” to prick the “ears of the President.” Any gap that might be perceived between this political vision and historical reality will be abridged, Whitman avows, by “song,” for in a characteristic Whitman ambiguity, his repeated invocation, “I will make a song that ...,” can be read as both describing a nation that already exists or as bringing that nation into being, “I will make a song [to express] that” or “I will make a song [to create] that ...,” just as the stanza itself is both “song” and plan for a song.

Seven years later, Whitman brought out a fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and in it he made the following changes to the passage. To highlight his edits, I present them below as though in revision, with deletions struck through and intralineal insertions placed above the line; when Whitman inserted entire lines of verse, I surround them with a box:

I will make a song for These States, that no one State may under any circumstances be subjected to another State,

And I will make a song that there shall be comity by day and by night between all The States, and between any two of them,

And I will make a song of the organic bargains of These States—And a
shrill song of curses on him who would dissever the Union;

And I will make a song for the ears of the President, full of weapons with menacing points,

And behind the weapons countless dissatisfied faces.

| And a song make I, of the One form'd out of all;  |
| The fang'd and glittering One whose head is over all; |
| Resolute, warlike One, including and over all; |

(However high the head of any else, that head is over all.)

Much had happened in the nation between 1860 and 1867, and Whitman feels pressed by events to revise his portrayal of the nation's political constitution. Faced with the secession of the southern states and the bloody war it took to bring them back, he erases his former claim that "bargains," even ones protected by a "shrill song of curses," are the basis of Union. That alone is a substantial revision to his political thinking, but Whitman went on to add an anomalous and fantastical four-line coda. Where the pre-war sentence ended with the right of revolution, betokening a republican ideology where the people are the ultimate source of power and sovereignty, the closing period now becomes a colon, and the "weapons" of the people are counterpoised by an ominous and implacable "Resolute, warlike One, including and over all." The relation of the people to this "One"

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1 Whitman's phrase, "the One form'd out of all," is one of the most commonly quoted from the poem and also one of the most commonly misread. Scholars wishing to make an argument about Whitman's 'holism' have seen in it a fortuitous phrase and have excised it from the critical context of the preceding lines to which it is a
is ambivalent, for the “One” is both “form’d out of all” but also “over all,” causing the
people to oscillate between ultimate and intermediate positions. Most curious of all is
how this political shift brings with it an array of rhetorical and tonal changes in the poem.
Compared to the relative clarity of the previous political actors – the people, the
president, the states – this “One” is phantasmal, unplaceable, unreadable: spirit of
America? Demon of federal power? Return of some unknown repressed? Whitman
himself is unsettled, declaring the “One” not just “over all,” but “over all ... over all ... ( ...
over all),” the repetition marking a resistance on his part, vexing and partly undoing the
relation it claims. And even without knowing the seven year gap between the text before
and after the colon, the stylistic break is striking: syntax becomes inverted (“I will make a
song ... : ... a song make I”), past participles are contracted (“subjected ... : ... form’d”),
and the deliberately unadorned language of the earlier passage now spouts “fang[s]” and
“glitter[s].” The surety with which Whitman spoke before the war, surety in politics, in
person and in poetry, has been gravely compromised.

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response. See, as an example, J. R. Master, “Oratory,” A Companion to Walt Whitman
97. As far as I am aware, Michael Moon was the first to notice that the coda was
introduced in the 1867 edition and also the first to deliver a useful reading, seeing the
“One” as an “aegis of the maternal phallus” (Disseminating 213). In general and
throughout, I agree with Moon’s readings but approach them from what could be
called an opposite but, I believe, complementary direction, he being interested in the
politics of bodies, myself in the bodies of politics. Luke Mancuso is the first to
address the coda’s explicit political context, correctly seeing the “One” as a figure for
“the subsumption of state sovereignty under the codification of federal hegemony,” but
leaving the importance of the many differences between the earlier and later sections
unaddressed (Strange Sad War Revolving 27).
At base, everything this chapter will cover is expressed, or at least touched upon in the transition between the 1860 and 1867 versions of these few lines. Which is not to say that the chapter's subject, nor its scope, nor, certainly, its evidence, is confined to this passage. Much is at play here. To provide a reading of these lines requires an explanation of how the strange miscellany of symptoms they present – the poetic shift, the bifurcated political theory, the speaker's unease – coheres, and that, in turn, requires the context of Whitman's thinking about poetic democracy and the collision, not to mention collusion, between that thinking and the Civil War. We as a post-Romantic culture, but even more so as literary scholars, have a bevy of metaphors for this kind of relationship between small things and large things, between less than a dozen lines of poetry and the 'Civil War Violence' of my title: a window into, a lens upon, the lived experience of, the world in a grain of sand of, and so on. I mean – or hope I mean – nothing so mystical or holistic here. At the same time, I do mean something more concrete than the merely general claim that language is fundamental to social reality and that careful attention to its forms, in any text, is instructive. There are historical reasons that the Civil War period and, more specifically, Whitman, and, even more specifically, Whitman's political poetry lend themselves to a kind of micro/macro reading, where close rhetorical analysis speaks to political and historical structures on a grand scale and vice versa.

Politics and rhetoric have been seen as genetically inseparable since the days of Aristotle, but the nature and intensity of that link is historically conditioned. During times of intense political change, the link can become not just the framework but the
subject of political speech. In the decades around the Civil War, it was not merely the balance of power between recognized political actors that was at stake but the very definitions of politics and political life. Political speech of the era therefore confronted an issue that is always latent within any speech act but that becomes particularly acute in times of epistemic transition, which is that to speak entails both the composing of words and the positing of a world in which such a composition is intelligible and achieves effects worthy of the effort. In more settled times, political debates may be intense, but they operate within recognized norms for the methods, modalities, agents and aims of political speech. Those norms may be rife with contradictions and unsettled issues, may constitute what Althusser calls a problematic, but they are stable enough to be considered hegemonic, part of the given of political speech. When those norms are in crisis or transition, however, political speech becomes a far more free-ranging and complicated affair, burdening its speaker with the need both to make an argument and to imagine and propose the world within which that argument operates.

The following four sections present four successive approaches to the reading of war-era rhetoric in general and Whitman's war poetry in specific. Their progression is meant to be both circular and linear, in that each begins and ends with a discussion of the above passages of poetry, but also builds upon the last and leads into the next. The first begins with a question of reading, of how we read the frequently staggering confidence of war-era verse in its own abilities to shape the world. Whether claiming to immortalize the name of a fallen calvary officer, or rekindle the patriotic fervor of a flagging country, or –
as in Whitman's opening – to remake the world in the image of its “song,” war-era poets had vaunted beliefs about the power of their lyrics. And yet, the source of that belief is often baffling to us today, particularly given how most of their poems – though unfortunately this is not true of Whitman – fall far from the mark of our current aesthetic tastes. The first section takes up the question of how to read such verse by summarizing the variety of ways in which Whitman's world-making claim has been read within Whitman scholarship. Yet the conclusion of this section is that these methods, even those which claim to be most charitable to him, inevitably end up rewriting his claim to a lesser one, conceding its impossibility as the grounds of their reading. To answer this dilemma, the second section takes a different tack: rather than changing his verse's claim about the world, change our understanding of the world against which it was made. This section therefore explores the world-historical model Whitman confronted – crisis – in order to develop a framework within which his original claim may be both read and honored. The third section then begins that work of reading, by examining the emergence of the “Resolute, warlike One” in the 1867 version above, comparing Whitman's treatment to similar passages from Melville in order to develop a grammar of the war's bloody cognitive landscape. The final section then turns that grammar back to Whitman's political project, by noting how such figures as the “One” mark the emergence in his poetry of a new and fearsome prospect, a political entity not defined by the reciprocal circuits of his earlier democratic theories but by a one way process of subjection and awe. It marks the point where democratic possibility had descended into sovereign authority.
and political abjection, a situation which I term democratic melancholy.
Poetic Confidence

One of the most consistent and curious attributes of Civil War poetry is the befuddling, almost confounding confidence expressed by war-period verse in its own capability as verse to re-found political life. The characteristic textual expression of this confidence involves two distinctive moves: first, a reflexive turn, where the poem calls attention to its own existence as poetry, and second, a deduction of great political powers from that existence. I will be spending a fair amount of time discussing this trope, because I believe it is a fundamental one to war-era verse and because it has, I also believe, been generally misunderstood, leading to a mis-reading of the poems or, at the very least, not giving them their due credit. For example, quite a lot of the war-era poetry that was written for the popular press is dismissed by modern readers on account of its use of overt poeticisms, like “mine eyes” or inverted syntax. One of the most direct expressions of the trope within the entire corpus of war-era poems happens, or perhaps doesn't just happen, to be Whitman's repeated invocation above, “I will make a song that ....”

As mentioned earlier, there is an ambiguity, consistent with the rest of *Leaves of Grass*, between whether the conjunction “that” signals that the “song” is mimetic or poietic, reflecting or making the republican political order Whitman outlines in the invocation's many endings, “I will make a song [to express] that ...” or “I will make a song [to create] that ....” The first of these options, the mimetic interpretation, centers the
passage around a fairly conventional question of literary form: what kind of “song” can represent the nation's presumed-to-be-extant republican political constitution? The second, poietic interpretation generates a far more startling question about literary power: how can Whitman claim that his “song” will not only engage the political world (“I will make a song [to urge] that ...”) but guarantee it will take a certain shape (“I will make a song [so] that there shall be ...”)? Whitman's invocation lies at the extreme end of the war-era trope, where verse's claim to power has become total. His claim is so outright as to be a bit of a puzzle, something that demands a reaction from us – what do we do with that? It is, for comparison, far more radical than even the supposedly language-centric claims of our recent critical past. At first glance, it is reminiscent of the so-called “linguistic turn” of the previous generation in that it places primacy in language, “song,” but this comparison quickly falls apart, first because Whitman is not claiming to trouble the binary between language and the political world – the political world does not collapse into language but maintains its own distinct presence, even if it is language's product – and second, and more fundamentally, because his claim is diametrically opposed to the idea that the linguistic creation of the political world puts that world into “play,” arguing instead, rather curiously, that it moves the political world out of play, ensuring its form. His claim is also distinct from what amounts to our current doxa on these issues, namely, that language and politics are linked dialectically, a churn of mimesis and poiesis regulated by the universal law of force and resistance. Whitman's claim is categorical, and therefore admits of no balance of force and resistance. Has he,
we might ask, assessed the historical situation, weighed the persuasive capabilities of his own verse and deemed it sufficient to mold the existing world into his republican model? No, there is no weighing, no evaluation involved. Song can do it because it says it can, because it is song.

So, again, what do we do with Whitman's claim? It is not a small question, for the politically poietic capabilities of song are one of the central themes of *Leaves of Grass*, and this six word invocation synechdochically compresses that master discourse into its starkest form. A first observation, then, is that our reaction to the invocation indexes much of our reaction to the volume as a whole, and that just as his readership has been divided into camps *vis a vis* his entire project, so too are the potential reactions available to us here. To his detractors, Whitman's claim to be able to make a world with his song is manifestly impossible, *prima facie* evidence of his hyperbolic and delusional arrogance, and they see a Whitman so intoxicated by his own enshrouding tautologies that he believes he can mold the world in his poetic hands. His supporters concede the point that his claim is impossible but hold that even if Whitman's “song” does not possess constitutive power – the power to found an actual political order – it nonetheless retains a great deal of persuasive power and that his poetry is best understood within the tradition of utopian thinking, the envisioning of alternative political worlds, which they defend as a legitimate form of political engagement and analysis. What the detractors see as arrogance the supporters see as inspiring brio and optimism for the political task at hand. A subset of Whitman's most ardent supporters – call them disciples – holds out hope that
Whitman's claim is not wrong, it is merely not yet right, and that for all we know, and if we are fortunate, the future will come around his way; to this school, Whitman figures as a kind of patron saint of democracy, of a different order from us and always-and-forever guiding us towards the right side (whichever that may be) of political debates. His arrogance appears to his disciples as quasi-divine wisdom. These three camps – detractors, supporters and disciples – define not only a progression of opinion on Whitman but also an elliptical path through history: the detractors hold that Whitman's claim to be able to make a world with his song is ahistorical and wrong, the product of a solipsistic egotism projected outward until all of history and the world are obliterated and look like him; the supporters hold that it is deeply historical, a trope of utopian historical analysis, and that this realization opens the door to a reading of what we call the historical and nuanced – i.e. part right, part wrong – Whitman; the disciples hold that his claim is transhistorical and right, although its moment of justification may be quite trans-, in a far distant and possibly theoretical future. In complicated ways, the reactions of the three camps to Whitman's invocation thus start from outside history, dive into it, and then pull up above it.

As a field, Whitman studies is largely occupied by what I have termed supporters, with a strong strain of disciples and a few bracing examples of detractors. There is a general point about this three-part schema which I'm sure is obvious, namely, that the categories are more heuristic than actual, that they can and often do overlap, that all are present to some degree in Whitman, and that detractors and disciples have more in
common than they may acknowledge. The other obvious point is that no camp is fully satisfying. The detractors hold such an obeisance to 'realistic' history and art that Whitman's imaginative relationship to history immediately discredits him, and does so in a way that is, ironically, ahistorical. At the other extreme, the disciples hold so tightly to democratic principles that both Whitman and democracy get pushed out to the horizon of history until they become mere points, ironically without content or historical application. The detractors refuse to read Whitman, calling him “opaque,” while the disciples are all too sure of their readings, calling him “transparent.” This would seem to position the camp of his supporters at the ideal middle, the meeting point of a commitment to history, a commitment to principle and a commitment to reading, and there is a good deal of truth to this, as evidenced by the camp's popularity within Whitman studies. The key move of the supporters is to classify Whitman's writings as a form of utopianism but then redefine utopianism as historical engagement rather than disengagement, thereby opening up a tremendously productive field of historicized Whitman studies, where we seek out his multiple discursive and political contexts and analyze how they shaped and, in turn, were shaped by his verse. This redefinition of utopianism – an argument which Whitman scholars inherit from Frederick Jameson, and which allows them to fulfill his ironically transhistorical mandate to “always historicize!” – figures utopianism as not only a form of political engagement but of political ethics: the realists' argument against utopianism, as formulated in 1867 by Otto Von Bismark, is that “politics is the art of the possible,” and that utopianism, by disregarding the entire question of whether the political world it
envisions is or is not possible, is therefore a turning away from politics, apolitical at its core. The new defenders of utopianism, however, point out that politics is not constrained by the possible but by what we imagine the possible to be, and that by temporarily freeing political imagination from the constraint that it need respect the possible, utopianism may uncover heretofore unimagined domains of political possibility. Utopianism's relationship to politics is therefore described within a certain arc, from politics to outside it and back to a reconceived, expanded politics.

What is remarkable about these three schools, however, is how they all agree on two things: that Whitman's claim is impossible (although, the disciples remind us, perhaps only temporarily) and that it is bold, whether in arrogance, optimism or wisdom. What would it mean to read Whitman's text as meaning to do what it says it means to do, which is remake the political world? How could we achieve such a reading? And recall also Trowbridge's revelation in the print room: having gone in search of a man “almost superhuman” he found instead a “simple, well-mannered man who stood and talked with us.” In this divide between the bold and the quiet Whitman, how can his invocation be understood as quiet? Rather than change the claim about the world, we need to change our understanding of the world against which the claim is made. Given that so many other war-era poets felt so much power of the word, ascribing Whitman's claim to character, a matter of boldness, hints of a confusion between historical and personal characteristics. Were all the poets bold, or was there something different about the world that made bold claims tenable.
The Order of Figures in Times of Political Crisis

While the Civil War is the *primum mobile* behind the transitions that this dissertation discusses, I want in this section to back away from that name, to employ instead a less historically specific variant, *crisis*. Some qualifications are in order, the foremost of which is that I have no right to invoke such a broad theorization. I cannot claim knowledge of the breadth of historical referents that would justify such a general term. But I use it here as a hermeneutic tool: the Civil War has so long been at the center of U.S. national and political identity that the density of narrative around it has become nearly impenetrable. As is also clear by now, this dissertation tries to decenter some of that narrative, by re-examining Whitman's nationalism on the one hand and by exploring both its and the war's relation to transformations in capital on the other. I use crisis here to try to break some of the exceptionality of the Civil War, to dissolve a bit of its enshrouding national ideology and open it to a broader range of historical referents. But, as I say, I can only make half of that connection, reaching outward in hopes that there are connections to be made.

What I can claim, however, is an extensive experience with the poetry of the Civil War, by which I mean the poetry written immediately before, during and after the war, not, as is usually the case when Civil War poetry is discussed, the poetry written from ten to forty years afterward. The work of the later Reconstruction-era poetry was to re-integrate the disastrous experience of the war into narratives of national identity, to
enclose the war with the very enshrouding myths I mentioned above. On the contrary, I
have found the direct war-era poetry to be much more open-ended, for its authors were
addressing a situation whose outcome was still undetermined. Their work often explores
the edges and contradictions of the very discourses which the later poetry sought to
enforce. Consequently, I have, ironically, found crisis to be a better framing narrative for
Civil War-era poetry than the Civil War itself. As one final caveat, crisis has also been a
term of some academic currency in the last ten years, though perhaps now on the wane.
What follows can be regarded as a summary of the currents within that school which I
have found most relevant to my own work. To keep the pace moving, I will not mention
other critics by name in much of what follows, but my own thinking is indebted primarily
to the school's central texts by Roitman and Mbembe – to whose seminal essay the title of
this section pays homage – and to the very specific contexts of my wife's, Heather Settle's,
work on the permanent crisis in post-socialist Cuba.

Crisis texts in general, and Civil War texts in particular, display a remarkable
autodeictic awareness of their own status and effects as political speech acts. The fact
that the central document of the War took that most self-consciously performative of
modes, a Proclamation, and that it ultimately changed the lives of millions of people is
the extreme but by no means the only example of this phenomenon. Not even the
Declaration of Independence reaches the performative power of the Emancipation
Proclamation, for a declaration, by its etymology, 'makes clear' a fact already established
by history (“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary ...”), while a
proclamation 'calls forth,' making its fact. The Proclamation also demonstrates just how mutually constitutive the act and context of speech were during the War: on the one hand, the context of the crisis allowed the Proclamation to achieve what Allen Grossman calls the promise of its form, to unite speech and history in one singular act, and in comparison to it all other proclamations are merely ceremonial incantations of its name (*Schoolroom* 61). On the other hand, the Proclamation also allowed the crisis to achieve the promise of *its* form, to become a period of reckoning and an inflection in history rather than, say, a mere 'time of troubles.' Each does not so much name the other as convert the status of the other's name. In effect, they mutually capitalize each other. The form of each therefore entails and is entailed by the form of the other, and we cannot think of one, cannot hold it in our minds as an object of thought and hence a formed object, without also considering the other.

Crisis, then, presents a particular expression of an old linguistic truism: to speak a word is to speak a world. The inexhaustible ways in which this quandary complicates any text's efforts to speak have, of course, been pursued to exhaustion, and it is not my intent to add to that catalog. The point here is that under certain conditions of political crisis, the dilemma manifested by this aporia can turn inside out, from something which a text is presumed to suppress (and which must therefore be 'teased out' to reveal how the text un/grounds the very world about which it claims to speak) to something which a text openly embraces, even celebrates: the world-making capability of speech as counterpoint to the indeterminacy of the apparent political order. At base, this inter-entailment
between the forms of speech and history determines this chapter's methodological decision to link rhetorical analysis with political analysis, but there is more to be said. On the one hand, the principle is merely general – speech and history are always formally interlinked, and so that link has, as of yet, no special import for the particular kind of history represented by crisis or for the reading of crisis texts. On the other hand, the existing presentation of the link is too particular – the Proclamation may profoundly conjoin the forms of history and speech, but it is so extreme and idiosyncratic that its exemplary relevance to other texts, such as Whitman's poetry, is suspect. The link requires further elaboration, beginning with the vision of history it claims, crisis.

The classic definition of a crisis, coming from medicine, is an acute period where the patient either dies or gets better. By analogy, then, a political crisis is a period where the hegemony of the current political order, its ability to persist from our recent past through our present and into our proximate future, is in question. It may perish or perdure, and nobody knows which – or if they do know, then it isn't a crisis. Properly understood, then, crisis is essentially an epistemic rather than a historical condition, more about our knowledge of history than about history per se. We know history will go on, but not what form it will take, just as the patient knows that tomorrow will come, but not whether he or she will be in it. Crisis therefore represents a failure of proximate historical understanding, our ability to predict what comes next. And since the future emerges from the present, if the future is unknown then there must be something within our present that we do not know either, and so on, weaving a trace of the unknown back into at least our
recent past and possibly all the way down. Paradoxically, this trace of the unknown is like
the finger of Midas, endowing all that it touches with luminous significance, for we are
never more aware of having a history, a future and a current order than at the moment we
no longer know what they mean. In this sense, crisis must name the world before it can
kill it.

But – and this is important – a crisis is not just an epistemic condition. To be a
crisis, it must matter to us, which is to say that our subjectivity must be somehow invested
in the crisis's possible outcomes. If nobody knows whether the patient will live or die,
but nobody cares either, not even the patient, then it isn't a crisis. Crisis is thus an
affective condition, but one whose content is elusive. Traditional affective theory says
that the affect corresponding to crisis is anxiety, the fear of the unknown, but literature,
art, and anthropology tell us that there is a broader palette: thrill, terror, eros, gravitas,
faith, apathy, humility, arrogance, elevation and so on may all be part of a response to
crisis, and often at the same time. The absence left by the failure of proximate historical
understanding can signify many ways within the self; more precisely, it, like all absences,
signifies everything it is not, the absence that tells the rest, and its meaning is therefore as
varied as its possible contexts. Taking another step, the subjective tactics and strategies
by which the self negotiates crisis, i.e. the conjuncture of arts and practices by which the
self, in the absence of historical predictability, first discovers a reproducible internal
affective economy and then goes about that reproduction, are even more varied, a
heterogeneity of strategies built on top of a heterogeneity of affective responses.
At this point, we run the risk of seeing our topic disappear before our very eyes, a heterogeneity of strategies built on top of a heterogeneity of affects. To reign that in, I want to conclude with four observations on the situation faced by political speech during crisis. First, crisis presents political speech with a conundrum: politics is inseparable from praxis, which means political speech must not just mean but do, must seek to have effects in the world, but during crisis, that world has by definition become unpredictable, and so the effects of speech are as well. Crisis texts respond to this conundrum by becoming reflective about themselves and the world in which they claim to operate, and so the distinctive rhetorical symptom of these texts is that they must name themselves and their encompassing frame of reference, thereby creating within themselves a recursive mise en abîme of their function in the wider but indeterminate world. These names do not solve the dilemma of unpredictability – it remains unclear what form the world will take, and hence which name or names will prove accurate – so much as mark the entry of that unpredictability into the text and the text's attempt to manage it. In the opening passage of this chapter, Whitman draws the scene immediately and succinctly in his first line, “I will make a song for These States,” thereby naming his verse (“song”) and its frame of action (“These States”). His notebook from 1856-7, in which he worked on the poetic/political theories that would shape the last pre-crisis edition of *Leaves of Grass* and in which he also composed the first lines of the above passage, demonstrates both his belief in his verse as an “act” and his extreme self-awareness of what he named it. Starting a page with the title “Motto for all political philos,” Whitman stopped and
crossed out “philos,” writing instead “action,” as though performing a lexicographic re-
enactment of Marx’s 1845 aphorism, “philosophers have only interpreted the world, in
various ways; the point is to change it” (Feinberg 38.3.68, “Feuerback” 11). Several
pages show him developing a taxonomy of names for his poems, classifying them as
“poems,” “hymns,” or “songs” depending on what kind of “action” each sought.

Second, crisis presents political speech with great imagination: the very fact that
no name for the world may claim historical authority frees political thinking from the
constraints of historical realism or possibility. Thus, the second distinctive symptom of
crisis texts is the wide range of models and names they develop for the political world.
Whitman, for instance, looks to the intimacy of bodily contact and to the radically open-
ended circulation of the market to develop his visionary take on democratic nationalism.
Yet the fact that these texts are not realistic does not mean that they automatically become
any of realism's usual foils, either romanticism or utopianism. With the departure of
realist history, there is no hegemonic constitution of the present, no topos, from which
utopianism may depart, and so to retrospectively label the political imaginings of crisis
texts as utopian is to project the stability of our present political world back upon them.
They do not present an alternative, for there is no non-alternative from which to diverge.
They are their own genre, intensely imaginative but not, therefore, utopian.

Third, crisis presents political speech with great opportunity: it really might be
making the future world. The foremost symptom of this possibility is the great
enthusiasm such texts present about their own powers, about which I have already spoken.
A subsidiary symptom is their attempt to connect their present to their desired future by reconstructing the imagined continuity of time. They do this by returning to time's origins, to a moment before the crisis; from there they propose a new engine of history and work forward from the pre-crisis past to rederive an arc of history that spans the present dilemmas and sees them land in their desired future. Within their respective frames of references, Lincoln goes back to the origins of civic time, “four score and seven years ago,” and employs a minimalist ethics of logical historical progression, what Marianne Moore called his “Euclid of the heart”: “both cannot be right; one must be, and both may be, wrong.” Whitman goes back to the beginning of natural time, “this great earth revolving,” and proposes the poetically-mediated reciprocal cycle of generation to restore “the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is.” Melville goes back to the beginning of time itself, “the waste of time,” to propose that there is no engine and that history does not move at all, “Age after age shall be, / As age after age has been.”

Fourth, crisis texts are ultimately not about the world, but about the self. Despite their imaginative and hyperbolic statements about the future, their truth claim is better understood as contained within the self, its goal that of creating a working subjective economy in the face of a difficult historical situation. The mutual consistency which Whitman proposes between the self and the totality, “Produce great persons – the rest follows,” is a frank reflection of this premise.

However, the onward march of history puts that self at risk: what if history does not, in fact, play out along the proposed arc? What happens when time does indeed begin
to tick forward and we start to learn what it is that will actually come next? What
happens when that onward march produces a few phenomena – like corpses – which
cannot be ignored? What then happens to the self then?
Two thirds of a million soldiers died in the Civil War, about as many as in all other U.S. wars combined. Nearly two thirds of eligible southerners served and over a third of northerners, and of both, about a quarter were killed. Grant's rise to the head of the Union Army came from his particular ability to preside over unprecedented slaughter; he was, and McClellan was not, willing to be what we might call today a necropolitician, viewing battles as math problems of the dead: if it would take 30,000 casualties to defeat the enemy's 20,000, then, so be it, send them in. When historians argue that the North's victory stemmed from its industrial power, they mean not just supplies – railroads, uniforms, rations – but the industrialization of killing itself – machine guns, anti-personnel mines, chemical and biological weapons, ballistics. The War witnessed the birth of the modern age's two great killing enterprises: the organized, industrialized army (the word 'logistics' was a War coinage) and disorganized irregular violence ('guerrilla,' in its modern usage, was also an invention of the War). One effect of the military efficiency was that its casualties were tabulated and reported to the single digits – 618,222, officially – but for the victims of disorganized violence, there are only guesses and the memories of singular atrocities. On August 21st, 1863, two hundred Missouri “raiders” crossed into Kansas at night, reached the town of Lawrence at dawn, pulled all men and boys from

their homes and killed them, slaughtering almost two hundred before riding out at nine o'clock. In retaliation, the Union commander in the region authorized Kansans to depopulate four entire Missouri counties; buildings were razed, livestock slaughtered, crops and stores burned and any stragglers killed. Historians guess that between one and ten thousand died either during the Missouri expulsion or among the refugees. The border conflict ended only because there was no one left to kill. Whether violence came from soldiers or irregulars, its toll was multiplied by the disease and malnutrition that followed. Total civilian deaths are hard to define or count, but estimates range from 50,000 all the way up to two and a half million. If the top end of that range is believed, then the devastation of the Civil War equals or exceeds many of the bloodiest civil wars of our past bloody century: higher than Rwanda, higher than Cambodia, equal to Vietnam.

Other than John Brown, who first took a life only twenty-five miles from Lawrence, almost no one predicted how violent the war would be, least of all Whitman. It is hard to overstate the national surprise and shock at the scale of death. In the war's early stages, the deaths questioned the purpose and utility of the war, but as the reports became ever more grim, the questions grew deeper and broader, into epistemological, ontological and theological matters: if the savagery was unforeseen, then either antebellum ways of understanding the world were wrong, or ways of reasoning about it, or both; and if Americans could be so wrong about such horror, then what were they really, and what kind of world did they live in? Even for those like Lincoln who faced the
tragedy with reinforced resolve, the violence produced an erosion of certainty in their own ability to understand the war's, and the world's, reasons and development. In Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, he appealed to “universal law” and “reason,” in his Second, to that which lay beyond both, “The Almighty has His own purposes.”

In Herman Melville's poem “The Apparition (A Retrospect),” he describes his reaction to the war's “convulsions” as the sensation that “Solidity's a crust,” that the apparently “solid” order of the world, both political and cognitive, proved to be just a “crust” which gives way to reveal a “core of fire below.” Melville's poem comes from his volume of war poetry, *Battle-pieces and aspects of the war*, and in it, he develops this metaphor into an extended allegory which is worth quoting in full, both for its own intrinsic interest and as a comparison to Whitman's earlier passage:

**CONVULSIONS** came; and, where the field

Long slept in pastoral green,

A goblin-mountain was upheaved

(Sure the scared sense was all deceived),

Marl-glen and slag-ravine.

The unreserve of Ill was there,

The clinkers in her last retreat;

But, ere the eye could take it in,

Or mind could comprehension win,

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It sunk!—and at our feet.

So, then, Solidity’s a crust—

The core of fire below;

All may go well for many a year,

But who can think without a fear

Of horrors that happen so?

Melville's opening, “Convulsions came,” looks back to the key line and turning point in Lincoln's Second Inaugural, “and the war came.” In fact, the two texts share many similarities: both are, as Melville says, “Retrospects,” looking back on the war, Lincoln from its eve, Melville from its aftermath; both try to emboss upon the war's many layers and conflicting impulses an organizing plot and allegory; both view the war itself as a kind of autonomous entity, something that may have been summoned by human actors but whose presence, once it “came,” was beyond them and their control; and both are preoccupied with the same fundamental concern: how to understand the war's extreme and unforeseen destruction. For Melville, the “horror” of the war is so deep as to be unplumbable, an “unreserve of Ill,” and the emergence of such incalculable devastation forces him into cosmological speculations, which he pursues in a complicated allegory of tectonic and occult metaphors. Before the war, the world was not only believed but subconsciously assumed to be “solid” and beneficent, like a “field [which] / Long slept in pastoral green.” The violence of the war proved this “sense” of the world to be
“deceived,” and the field now appears to Melville a thin and unpredictable “crust” over a “core of fire below” whose malevolence is “goblin”-like, infinite and inhuman.\footnote{In Melville's day, the geologic understanding that the Earth was composed of a cool solid crust over a hot molten core was dominant but not yet exclusive. In particular, the debate was re-opened by American scholars right before and during the war who advocated an entirely cool, solid, sedimentary Earth. See Agassiz's essay “Methods of Study in Natural History” from the June 1862 \textit{Atlantic Monthly} for an outline of the debate. In the same issue, an article entitled “The Horrors of San Domingo” makes frequent mention of “life ... falling through to the chaotic and molten forces beneath,” thereby demonstrating the political and racial dimensions of the geologic debate.}

“The Apparition” is worthy of an essay of its own, but for the present, I want to make five general observations about Melville’s poem. First, note the contrasting direction of Lincoln’s and Melville’s gaze: while Lincoln looks upward for answers, to “the Almighty” and his unknowable “purposes,” Melville looks downward, to the stability and predictability of the earth beneath his feet; “solidity,” not divinity, thus becomes Melville’s organizing desire. Second, the war performs a kind of negative enlightenment for him, in which something which was sub-consciously assumed – the “sleeping” knowledge that the “field” was “solid” – turns out to be “deceived,” yet is not replaced with a new knowledge but by an awareness of not-knowing: the “goblin-mountain” “sinks” “ere the eye could take it in, / Or mind could comprehension win,” and in the poem’s conclusion, Melville can’t “think without a fear” of the “crust[’s]” next rupture, i.e., can’t think without acknowledging the unpredictability of the crust, the limit to thinking. To put it into a Rumsfeldian formula, before the war, we don’t know we know; after the war, we know we don’t know. Third, the violence of the war so exceeds in Melville’s eyes the domain of natural causes that he reaches toward the supernatural, the
war as the work of “goblins.” Fourth, there is a complicated transfer that goes on at the level of the poem's rhetoric between the “mind[']s ... comprehension” and aesthetic apprehension; the least-understood thing in the poem, the “goblin-mountain,” also becomes the most adorned, with its “Marl-glen and slag-ravine” and “clinkers in her last retreat,” as though the retreat of comprehension opens a space for aesthesis. Fifth, as the poem develops, it subtly shifts from cosmology to subjectivity, from a poem about a “field” to a poem about “who can think,” and his core statement, “Solidity's a crust,” thus arrives not merely as an observation but as an epiphany, “So, then, Solidity's a crust.”

Melville's ultimate topic is what kind of selves can successfully live, and what kind of life is available to them, in the post-war world.

It would be hard to imagine a less Whitmanian poem than “The Apparition.” For Melville, the “field ... [of] pastoral green” proves insufficient as a metaphor for the cognitive world, but for Whitman, it is the metaphor, the “Leaves of Grass” that become his polyvalent “uniform hieroglyphic,” standing in for “the flag of my disposition,” “the handkerchief of the Lord,” “the produced babe of the vegetation” and “the uncut hair of graves.” Whitman's impulse to span contradiction – “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself” – is in polar opposition to Melville's proclivity to see every contradiction, like that between “solidity” and “crust,” as a wedge with which to open a deeper philosophical investigation. While there are many philosophical allegories in Whitman, they tend, by design and, indeed, philosophy, to be deliberately thin, a close affiliation between the immanent world and the divine, while for Melville, they are, as
“The Apparition” makes clear, deep and geologic, requiring lengthy explorations that uncover fault lines, occlusions and contrasting strata. Where Melville's supernaturalism leans toward the gothic, Whitman's is mystical. Perhaps most fundamentally, if Lincoln looks upward and Melville downward, Whitman looks laterally, to the social and human world of Americans spreading horizontally across the continent and world. His watchword is not solidity or divinity but fluidity and “increase,” the “procreant urge of the world” manifest in a democratic people growing, fucking and making.

It is, then, somewhat surprising how closely Melville's allegory fits the transition between the 1860 and 1867 versions of Whitman's passage which opened this chapter. A “field ... pastoral green” is not a bad metaphor for Whitman's pre-war political treatise: like a “field,” the political organization Whitman describes is level, with no one lower, “subjected to another,” and no one unquestionably higher, for even the “President's” position is marginal and held under duress. Like pastoral art, Whitman's political landscape appears, as always, markedly idyllic, submerging the difficult political questions of his day beneath the nostrum of “comity” – would the Fugitive Slave Act count as an “organic bargain of These States”? In a deeper sense, the social compact theory upon which he draws depends upon a certain political pastoralism, the originary 'state of nature' that founds its political imagination and that, as a heuristic, endows it with both its power and its tendency to simplify and stylize politics. Finally, there is no doubting that Whitman saw this political entity as “green”: fertile, productive, natural and beneficent. Then came the war, and like Melville's “goblin-mountain” “upheaved” from
the “pastoral green,” Whitman’s text is ruptured by the demonic “One” rising unforeseen and unbidden “out of” and “over” his democratic “all.” From there, the parallels continue: as its lack of name indicates, Whitman has not “comprehension won” over the “One,” and like Melville’s “goblin-mountain” with its “marl-glen and slag-ravine,” the “fang’d and glittering One” is the most decorated element in his stanza.

If this similarity were happenstance, a one-time proximity between two otherwise very disparate authors’ poetry, then its significance would be limited, but in fact, the drama enacted here becomes part of each author’s symbology of the war, something they return to repetitively in their post-war poems. At its core, the drama figures the event of the war visually: a level pre-war world disrupted by a menacing, autonomous entity that rises forth from the plain and overawes the citizen-spectator-poet. Whitman devises a keyword for this narrative, “Phantom,” which becomes his name for the “resolute, warlike One” of the passage above. A representative example comes in the opening three lines of his 1867 poem “As I Sat Alone by Blue Ontario's Shore,” where the levelness of the inland sea takes the place of Melville's “field”:

As I sat alone, by blue Ontario's shore,

As I mused of these mighty days, and of peace return'd, and the dead that return no more,

A Phantom, gigantic, superb, with stern visage, accost'd me. (“Blue Ontario” 1-3)

These three lines present the narrative in précis: one line for the level setting, one for the
memory of violence, one for the Phantom overhead. At other times, Whitman develops
the scene more, such as the following two stanzas that open another 1867 poem, “Dirge
for Two Veterans,” where Whitman folds the narrative into a dusk setting, the sun setting
and the “phantom moon” rising:

THE last sunbeam

Lightly falls from the finish'd Sabbath,

On the pavement here—and there beyond, it is looking,

Down a new-made double grave.

Lo! the moon ascending!

Up from the east, the silvery round moon;

Beautiful over the house-tops, ghastly, phantom moon;

Immense and silent moon.

Again, the same movement is evident: the level setting (“pavement”), followed by the
memory of violence (“a new-made double grave”) which spurs the “phantom moon”
rising, the moon that is adorned (“Beautiful”), menacing (“ghastly”) and unreadable
(“silent”).

Melville has his own keyword for the narrative as well, the “Dome” of the Capitol
Building in Washington, D.C., thereby explicitly tying the violence to the restoration of
Union. Typical of the two writers, his deployment of the narrative is more varied than
Whitman's. Whitman is a beautiful crafter of metaphors, but once crafted, he tends to
treat them as mementos, something carried largely intact from poem to poem to represent a particular point or mood. Melville, on the other hand, is an analyst of metaphors, turning them inside out, reversing them, colliding them. Melville’s “The Scout Toward Aldie” demonstrates the flexibility he achieves with the figure, how it can be entered from different positions to different effects. Unlike the other examples quoted so far, the poem is set before battle, and Melville heightens the idyllic sense of the pre-war world until it rises to the level of an “Eerie Land”; the poem is also set in far northern Virginia, so that the “Capitol Dome” may appear, “hazy – sublime,” on the horizon:

They [the soldiers] lived as in the Eerie Land –

The fire-flies showed with fairy gleam;

And yet from pine-tops one might ken

The Capitol Dome – hazy – sublime –

A vision breaking on a dream.

Melville's pre-war world is proleptically “Eerie”: the “vision” of the “Dome” foretells the violence soon to come, which in turn foretells the “break” of the ensuing cognitive crisis, which in turn makes the present order appear becharmed, “a dream,” “Eerie.” The past tense of the entire passage is necessary, for such a complicated time structure could only occur in the mind of a speaker situated well afterwards: he speaks after the battle of the soldiers before battle looking forward to the battle's harbingers. In fact, he apparently speaks from so far afterwards as to have digested the import of the battle, and this construction of the speaker – Melville – as fully possessed of the war's negative
enlightenment is, arguably, the goal of the poem. A secondary goal is to construct the right kind of reader, for, in a twist, the familiar relationship exists between the level “Land” and the imposing “Dome,” but to “ken” it, one must climb to the “pine-tops,” i.e. be such a person as to be possessed of the intimation that there is a knowledge beyond the “fairy gleam” of the “fire-flies” down in the forest and to take action to try and reach it by climbing toward the sun. For such readers, such seekers of en-light-enment, Melville waits in the future, answering their intimations with his full-formed knowledge. The ultimate move of the verse's complicated temporal reflections is to create a space outside of time, where Melville and his sympathetic readers, what he elsewhere calls “feeling hearts” to whom “no utter surprise can come,” may separate themselves from social life, from all those down in the forest, and form a sodality of knowledge seekers in exile (“The Coming Storm,” 1, 13).

These passages speak to the variability Whitman and Melville find within the common narrative. It provided them with a kind of political and historic shorthand for understanding the war's effect on the constitution of both nation and selfhood. It is, however, a fundamentally partial rendition, framing the limits of its own comprehensive capabilities. It is worth noting, as a sign of their differences, that the separation Melville enacts in “The Scout Toward Aldie” is, for him, a position of mastery – the enlightened from the non – whereas for Whitman, the separation at the beginning of “Blue Ontario” – “As I sat alone, by blue Ontario's shore” – is a position of melancholy, isolating the poet from the social life without which he is unintelligible.
Democratic Melancholy

After dedicating the opening paragraph of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* to America's relationship to the past – “America does not repel the past” – Whitman turned in the second to a description of all that was new in the nation. It is one of the shorter paragraphs of the preface, but also one of its most stirring, chocked full with famous and quotable sentences: “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. ... Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. ... Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves” (iv). Tucked in amidst all these gems, however, is one line which rarely draws mention:

Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. (iii)

It is a heavy freight train of a sentence, trundling its unrelenting load of adverbs, past participles, and prepositional clauses forward until we are ready to gasp by the period. We can believe it has “mass” but the “mov[ement]” is not so “magnificent.” Little wonder, then, that it has attracted so little commentary. This final section, however, is going to look only at this line. Or rather, only at how this line traveled through the next dozen years. For it just so happens that this line would become a remarkably telling indicator for the shifts that occurred in the following editions, like a needle and thread pushed through them and from which they hang. Perhaps Whitman was not happy with the sentence either, for he revised it twice, first in 1856 and again in 1867. And in both
cases, the shift was profound. In 1856, it left all its weight behind and flew, becoming one of the most beautiful lines of the entire volume, and also one of Whitman's most stirring images for the dynamic and integrative circulation of the nation. Then, in 1867, with only the subtlest of shifts, a mere ten letters removed, it came to encapsulate Whitman's fears about the fate of that nation in the war.

Whitman chose to remove the prose preface from the 1856 edition, and so he recut its paragraphs into his characteristic free verse, dividing them between several new poems but one major piece in particular, which he entitled “Poem of Many in One.” In the new version of the line, Whitman redeployed the same lexicon of the “mass” and “particular” in a totally different image, smoothing in the process the heavy scansion of the prose into a visionary lilt:

Here is what moves in magnificent masses, carelessly faithful of particulars. (183)

This line is beautiful, and one only a Manhattanite could write. The figure is of a busy and crowded metropolitan street as seen from above, perhaps from the steeple of Trinity Church, which has sat on the corner of Broadway and Wall since 1846 and which was in Whitman's day the highest point in New York. From such a vantage, two levels of movement distinguish themselves: on the one hand are the singular trajectories of each “particular” pedestrian as he or she goes about his or her business; on the other, these individual movements coalesce in the poet's eye into a discernible and “magnificent” “move[ment]” of the collective “mass” as a whole. In this telescopic vision are fused the
macroscopic and microscopic, the “One” of the democratic state with the “Many” of its citizens, and the crowd viewed from above becomes Whitman's emblem for the metropolitan democratic sublime. It is as though the print room, the old center point of circulation, had been hoisted up into the air, so that now, instead of reaching through the book, he gazes down upon us. It is to him what the Brooklyn Bridge is to Hart Crane, a marker of both the ideality and the materiality of his way of understanding democracy, both out of all time and decidedly in his specific moment and place.

Whitman describes the tenor of this ideal democratic union with an unusual but very deliberate choice of words: in its collective action, the democratic totality is “carelessly faithful” of the particular. All crowds, like all states, bear an element of menace. A pedestrian entering the throngs on Broadway could be impeded, pushed off track, perhaps even trampled. To commit oneself to the crowd requires an act of “faith,” faith that one's sanctity, identity and desires will not be submersed in or violated by the overwhelming totality. Whitman not only declares the democratic state capable of receiving and reciprocating this faith, he says it will do so “carelessly.” Careless is not a synonym for capricious here. Rather, it means without the need to take additional care. No person or entity plans the collective action of the crowd; it emerges spontaneously from the individual movements of the pedestrians. There is no autonomous deliberative agency in the radical democratic state, no governmental mentality distinct from the people and enjoined with the responsibility of taking “care” of their interests. Rather, the state and the people are rendered as indistinguishable, simply two different perspectives.
on the same telescopic social totality. The state is immanent in the people and they are executive in it.

Yet in this drama of immersion in totality one subject position remains distinct: Whitman's own, the poet. As the state fades into the people, the poet rises out. “These States,” says Whitman, “with veins full of poetical stuff, most need poets, and are to have the greatest, and use them the greatest, / Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall” (189). High in his window above the crowd, the harmony of metropolitan democratic order is witnessed by himself alone. The “poetic stuff” of “these states” remains in their “veins” and they “need poets” to get at it. Yet his privileged epistemic position also bestows upon him a responsibility, for he is charged with the task of bringing this democratic faith down from the Church steeple. He must speak forth the commonality of the people and their cause and thereby not merely represent the nation but bring it into presence: “By great bards only can series of peoples and States be fused into the compact organism of one nation,” he declares, “To hold men together by paper and seal, or by compulsion, is no account” (189).

After 1856, Whitman makes only incidental changes to the poem for the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass, but for the fourth printing, in 1867, he revisits the poem for another round of severe revisions. His method this time is different, however, for rather than a wholesale revision of the text, he leaves the 1856 lines largely untouched, though with a few targeted edits I will discuss in a moment. Instead, he adds an extensive framing narrative before and after the 1856 text and inserts a series of parenthetical
interjections – “(...)” – throughout its body. By preserving the 1856 text he encapsulates its historicity, its contextual reference to the world of 1856, which in turn enables him to perform a historical confrontation on the page of his own poem. The curves of his parentheses mark historical fault lines, abutting the pre- and post-Civil War epochs, and across these lines the Whitman of 1867 and the Whitman of 1856 confront and accost each other.

From the outset of the 1867 poem, it is clear just how momentous the historical shift has been. The poem opens with Whitman's new framing narrative, which now precedes the declarative opening of 1856 – “A NATION announcing itself” – with an archetypal figure of melancholia, the poet at the seashore ruminating on the dead:

As I sat alone, by blue Ontario's shore,
As I mused of these mighty days, and of peace return'd, and the dead that return no more,
A Phantom, gigantic, superb, with stern visage, accost'd me;

_Chant me a poem_, it said, _of the range of the high Soul of Poets_,
_And chant of the welcome bards that breathe but my native air—invoke those bards;_

_And chant me, before you go, the Song of the throes of Democracy_. (1-6)

We have already seen the first three of these lines briefly, but now it is time to look at them in more depth. This “stern” “Phantom” who arises from the lake is the ghost of Whitman past, for the opening is a re-enactment of a central passage from the 1856 text.
That passage is divided into two mirroring sections, in the first of which a stern interrogator quizzes a poetic aspirant – i.e., Whitman – if he meets the multiple and “august” criteria of a democratic poet – “Have you studied out my land, its idioms and men? / ... / Have you possess’d yourself of the Federal Constitution?” etc. – and in the second of which that aspirant declares himself adequate to the task – “I have loved the earth, sun, animals—I have despised riches, / I have given alms to every one that ask’d” and so on (14c, 17c). Here, that arrogant inquisitor of 1856 returns to demand a poetic performance from the Whitman of 1867. Only now, the injunction inspires in the post-war Whitman not the requested poem of democratic comprehension but an investigation into the ethics, poetics, and politics of his former democratic enthusiasm.

For Whitman has a fear, a fear which reveals itself in a small but devastating edit he makes to that key line, the democratic sublime of the metropolitan crowd. Recall the line from 1856:

Here is what moves in magnificent masses, carelessly faithful of particulars.

Now witness the shift in 1867:

Here is what moves in magnificent masses, careless of particulars.

The “faith” is gone, the “faith” that in immersing themselves in the crowd the “particulars” would not come to harm. Rather than the telescopic, democratic harmony between the macro and the micro, the new line asserts the violence of the macro over the micro, and the “mass” is less a spontaneous product of free-flowing pedestrians than a
tremendous solidity, which in its motion shears off and “carelessly” wounds any “particulars” in its way. And yet – yet! – it is still a democracy, still “careless,” still without any executive agency autonomous from the people. Whitman’s ideal democratic order has become a blind Goliath, unpredictable and lethal, lumbering over some of its own unfortunate citizens. Democracy has become a death machine.

These unfortunate citizens are, quite clearly, the recent dead of the Civil War, individuals from all over the nation who joined the great democratic movement only to be buried by the side of the road. Whitman is now **doubly** haunted, by the phantom of his former poetic/democratic arrogance and by the dead of the Civil War. Most sinister of all is his awareness that by so wholeheartedly embracing the cause of democracy before the war, he was a central cog in the mechanism that produced those soldiers’ deaths. This last fear launches Whitman on a brutal process of introspection. He interrogates his 1856 text and leaves it in tatters, torn through with a series of bitter parentheticals, all referring to the War and systematically dismantling his earlier enthusiasm. The effect is jarring and brutal: after two lines triumphantly declaring the nation's autonomy – “Nothing is sinful to us outside of ourselves, / ... we are beautiful or sinful in ourselves only” – Whitman inserts the darker side of that autonomy as read after the War – “(O Mother – O Sisters dear! / If we are lost, no victor else has destroy’d us, / It is by ourselves we go down to eternal night.)” He moves through repression – “(that war so bloody and grim, the war I will henceforth forget)” – to self-mockery – “(the same monotonous old song)” – to desperation – “(O my rapt verse, my call, mock me not!).” And, finally and touchingly,
he concludes the poem darkly chastened: after yet another set of bold declaratives from the pre-war text – “I will confront ... / I will know ... / I will see” – he speaks humbly –
“(I know not what these plots and wars and deferments are for, / I know not fruition's success, but I know that through war and crime your work goes on, and must yet go on.)”

And yet, resignation is not resolution. Whitman now finds himself in a nation where, by his own example, the poets have gone silent, no longer able to respond to the injunction to sing the song of nation and democracy. And for him, a democracy where the poets have gone silent is something other than a democracy. At best, the silence marks the decomposition of time, the disjointing of the “consistence” of “past and present and future” that had marked the 1855 preface, as post-crisis realistic history reasserts itself in the renewed schism between the ideal and the possible, true democracy deferred into the future, someday, somehow to emerge from the husk of the post-war state. At worst, it is the emergence of a zombie democracy, living on after its poetic soul has died and serving unknown masters. And at this crossroad in the democratic project stands Whitman, no longer a “One” in a “Many” but simply, irremediably “alone.”
Appendices

Appendix A: Concerning the Naming of the 1860 Edition

Whitman scholars may note that while the “experimental” and “epic” tags are now fairly accepted within Whitman scholarship, the 1860 edition is most commonly referred to as the “New Bible” edition, a name that comes from a scrap of paper found within Whitman's papers: “(June, 1857) The Great Construction of the New Bible. / Not to be diverted from the principle object – the main life work – the Three Hundred and Sixty-Five” (NUPM 1:353). I prefer the name “completed” for several reasons. First, it is debatable that the “Bible” fragment refers to the upcoming edition of Leaves, as Whitman was planning several projects during this time. In fact, an earlier generation of Whitman scholars argued this very issue before the “New Bible” term became canonical (see the headnote to the fragment in NUPM). Even the date, “(June 1857),” is suspect, as Whitman applied these parenthetical dates to his papers late in life, and in many cases his memory appears to be inaccurate, as his markings conflict with verifiably dated historical materials. In comparison, “completed” has a much more solid documentary trail, even if it is not quite as evocative a term as “Bible.” While in Boston for the printing of the 1860 edition, his letters to his friends and family back in Brooklyn repeatedly state that he is “very, very much satisfied” to have Leaves of Grass “finished,” “completed” and “permanent,” by which he meant not just the third edition but the entire project: “I am so satisfied at the certainty of having ’Leaves of Grass,’ in a far more complete and favorable
form than before, printed and really published” (Letter to Thomas Jefferson Whitman, 1 April 1860). Beyond the question of historical evidence, I don’t object to the “New Bible” appellation but consider it, along with the many other invocations of religion in the 1860 edition, to be one of the avenues that Whitman pursued to endow the work with “complete”-ness. I do, however, object to the trend by some Whitman scholars to amend his note and call the 1860 edition the “New American Bible,” a phrase Whitman never used, as it was precisely the containment within an “American” frame which he was hoping to counter in casting the book as a supra-national and supra-historical “New Bible.” The fact that “America” itself often bears supra-national and -historical qualities in his poems may make this distinction subtle, but it is still an important one, as I hope this chapter bears out.
Appendix B: Political Terminology Across the Editions of *Leaves of Grass*

The above chart shows the sudden spike in the prevalence of “democracy” and the related term “freedom” which occurred in the 1860 edition. Having started as the least common of the listed terms, democracy rose in 1860 to be almost at the top, just under liberty.

Note as well the steady decline of republican political keywords: republic (most common in 1855), citizen (second most) and federal (next to bottom) had all fallen to the very bottom by 1867. Only liberty (most common in 1855) survived the shift, though even it faded as the years wore on. Also note the general suppression of political terminology in the 1867 and 1871 editions. As Whitman digested the war, his interest in political discussion was diminished, not to return until late in his life, when his growing fame as
“the poet of democracy” inspired him to write numerous pieces that included the term, many of which were in response to invitations to speak at ceremonial or promotional events.

Numerical citation numbers like these undoubtedly strip away a tremendous amount of meaning and context, but with a writer like Whitman, who consciously deployed a consistent collection of keywords in his verse, they nonetheless serve as a telling index into the dialectic shifts occurring within the text.

To adjust for the expansion of the volume, frequency is normalized to occurrences per 100,000 words. Counts include variants (plurals, adjectival forms) and look at only the verse. Reference texts were those served by the on-line Whitman Archive (www.whitmanarchive.org).
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Biography

Adam Haile was born in Santa Clara, California on September 17th, 1974. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree *cum laude* in English and American Literature and Language from Harvard University in 1997. He received his Doctor of Philosophy in English from Duke University in 2010. His research focuses on mid-nineteenth century to early-twentieth century US literature with a focus on lyric poetry. His theoretical interests include affective political theory, modernity, democratic political subject formation and rhetoric.