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INTERNAL DIFFERENCES: SECULARISM, RELIGION, AND POETIC FORM IN  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### The Internal Differences: Secularism, Religion, and Poetic Form in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry

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Accounts of the origins of literary modernism typically point back to Walt Whitman's and Emily Dickinson's break with the received conventions of meter and rhyme. These accounts present the perceived break with tradition as authorizing a variety of practices, notably the privileging of innovation in poetic form as indicative of a work's sincerity and authenticity. The dissertation seeks to revisit the break from conventional form, not in terms of modernism, but in terms of the cultural significance of poetic form in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly given the impact of secularism on the preconceptions and critical conventions governing the role of the poet and the formation of the lyrical subject. An important vein of scholarship connecting literature with modern secularism – going back to M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* and beyond – posits post-Enlightenment literary works as emerging out of the secularization of previously religious tropes and themes. Recent studies of secularism as a historical movement, however, present a more complicated account than the oft-told tale of the inevitable triumph of humanism over religion. In reading the formal choices that Dickinson's and Whitman's works display, I reveal the authors' complex engagement with vital changes not only within contemporary accounts of inspiration, identity, and publication, but also with the modes of spirituality that secularism paradoxically made available as part of its reconfiguration of religiosity on a personal, intimate scale.

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Allons! the road is before us!  
It is safe – I have tried it – my own feet have tried it well – be not detain'd!  
Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten, and book on the shelf unopen'd!  
Let the tools remain in the workshop! let the money remain unearn'd!  
Let the school stand! mind not the cry of the teacher!  
Let the preacher preach in his pulpit! let the lawyer plead in the court, and the  
judge expound the law.

Camerado, I give you my hand!  
I give you my love more precious than money,  
I give you myself before preaching or law;  
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?  
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

Walt Whitman, from "Song of the Open Road"

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## Introduction.

### I. Modernist Poetics and Secular Attitudes

This study grew out of a number of diverse strands of interest. I have struggled to discern what the knot was that linked them, and if at this point I cannot describe their unity exhaustively, I am at least confident that the three chapters that follow describe the basic shape of the problem of history and interpretation to which these strands lead. The origin of the study can be more clearly identified. Puzzling at one point over Susan Howe's idiosyncratic and enigmatic approach to poetic form, I re-read her introduction to *The Europe of Trusts*. *The Europe of Trusts* is a collection of several book-length mid-career works that wrestle with the staging of an intimate, personal voice as working through and against powerful public and impersonal discourses that are represented in the poems as the sedimented forces of history. In the introduction, Howe claims poetry works within and against the tides of history to "bring[] similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken." Howe links the interpretation of poetic form to a certain redemptive seriousness: "I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history ... voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate" (14). For Howe, poetry, the reading and the writing of it, comes from a commitment to give shape to the voices occluded by the more audible discourses of history's victors, and particularly, given the feminist bent of her work, the hidden and forgotten voices of women. Giving these voices as poetry a shape, a form, is what enables them to become distinct and therefore audible.

The motivation – the drive – to write and to read comes for Howe out of assent to an ethical obligation, but this obligation does not, at least not completely, determine what

the shape of the poetry will be. She describes her form as arising out of an adjacent demand placed upon her work by history— a necessary form more acknowledged than assented to. “This is my historical consciousness,” she writes, “I have no choice in it. In my poetry, time and again, questions of assigning *the cause* of history dictate the sound of what is thought” (13). The history that Howe feels as defining the possibilities and the impossibilities of speech throughout the centuries is not merely history writ large – presidents and generals, class conflicts, socio-political transformations, or the like, but the very local history defining the materials and conditions of her own practice, that is, American literary history. The ethical responsibility to give voice to the voiceless across time comes inextricably as part of the literary tradition whose mantle she assumes as a poet. When we look back through that history, that onus to representation assumes its more familiar form of religion: “North Americans have tended to confuse human fate with their own salvation,” she writes, “In this I am North American” (14). The legacy Howe accepts insists upon her own purpose and significance as determined through her investment in the historical determination of the fate and role of those whose lives are within her reach. A religious consciousness cannot but permeate her work, but her recognition of the confusion infers that she finds herself freed somewhat from it, holding it off at arm’s length.

Howe’s more immediate legacy is that of a particular, though profoundly influential, vein of American modernist poetry closely identified with the figure of Ezra Pound. Although one would not want to assume that what could be said of Pound and Howe could necessarily be said of twentieth and twenty-first century poets in general, these issues of time, place, ethics, and form are issues that are strongly determinate of the



practice of poetry, such that even poets who define their legacy through competing strands of influence often find themselves articulating their own positions either through or against them. To a degree, the sense of historical inescapability may be due to the success of Pound and his associates and beneficiaries to define the recognizable features of their work in terms of their era's self-recognition – that is, as the new work produced by themselves as moderns. Pound's familiar dictate "Make it new" tied formal innovation to an imperative to eschew traditional and conventional requirements. "I believe in technique," Pound writes, "as a testament of a man's sincerity; in law when it is ascertainable; in the trampling down of very convention that impedes or obscures the determination of the law, or the precise rendering of the impulse" (Retrospect 37). A good poet, a real and sincere poet, in this light, expresses through formal technique the rejection of the outmoded and artificial. What shines through, unimpeded by the falseness of an artificial style, is attuned to the writer's time and place – and it is therefore new.

The modernists understood their project of connecting formal innovation to an ethics of sincerity as both the renewal of an original relation between language, creative force, and circumstance and as the culmination of a particular literary and cultural history that produced their own circumstance, making this original relationship possible. The literary history that modernists produced to justify their approach to formal technique is the now familiar revision of the nineteenth-century canon of taste that relegated the genteel tradition of the American schoolhouse figures of Longfellow, Lowell and others, as well as many of their transatlantic contemporaries – Tennyson, say, to the category of the inauthentic. Modernists valued instead poets perceived to hold formal traditions at arms length, poets such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and, to a lesser extent,

Edgar Allan Poe. These are the figures to which, for instance, Amy Lowell turned in her proselytizing of the *vers libre* revolution of the generation of 1912, and these remain the figures of nineteenth-century American poetry with which our modernist reading practices remain the most sympathetic. Given her gender, Dickinson's role as a founder is perhaps more problematic than Whitman's, but a poetics of original impulses is going to have some difficulties acknowledging forbearers regardless of the figure. Pound gives his assent to Whitman as his "pig-headed father," as he describes him in his "A Pact": "I am old enough now to make friends," he writes, "It was you that broke the new wood, / Now is a time for carving." In terms of American literary history from the modernist vantage, it is Whitman (or Dickinson, for Howe and many other) who severed the ties to the nineteenth century's disabling preference for inauthentic technique, thus making possible the modernist poetics of innovation and sincerity.<sup>1</sup> Whitman, in this case, as Pound writes elsewhere, was "entirely free from the renaissance ideal of the complete man or the the Greek idealism, ... content to be what he is, and he is his time and his people. He is a genius because he has a vision of what he is and of his function. He knows that he is a beginning and not a classically finished work" (What I Feel 112).

Whitman's gesture underwrites an entire mission of modernist poetics. William Carlos Williams at his most confrontational is instructive here: he opens *Spring and All*, his defining volume, with this promise and description of what will follow: "If anything of the moment results – so much the better." And then the following claim about the possibility for its reception: "And so much the more likely that no one will want to see it." Despite the examples of modernist aesthetics, the problem of an inauthentic relation to one's time and place persists. "There is a constant barrier between the reader and his

consciousness of immediate contact with the world,” Williams insists, and that is the reason, he writes, that people tell him, “I do not like your poems; you have no faith whatever” (177). In the aesthetic championed by Pound and Williams, the role of the poet is to represent sincerely one’s time and place for the benefit of one’s audience, both contemporary and as posterity, but also to claim to educate the public as a potential audience so that they can come to realize their own inauthentic relations to the world. There is, Williams and others believe, even in the modern age a misplaced fidelity to traditional inheritances that requires artistic production to conform to familiar standards. An effort to annihilate this vestige of tradition is required if there is going to be a reception of their work sufficient for their continued and successful efforts, but such an educational mission is an integral aspect of the ethical obligation to sincerity modernists felt incumbent upon any artistic practice.

That missionary impulse in the first generation of high modernist formal innovation is perhaps best exemplified by Gertrude Stein’s lectures on language, writing, and aesthetics. For Stein, the problem is also an inauthentic relationship to the world on the part of the reading public. The artist portrays the present as accurately and sincerely as possible, and that changes from generation to generation – nothing else particularly changes in terms of human nature or the nature of artistic endeavors. The artist naturally represents “the way life is conducted,” and after all, “each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition” (516). Artists are engaged in “the composing of the composition that at the time they are living [that] is the composition of the time in which they are living” (514), but others may and do exist in a different lived relationship

to the way life is conducted: “Aesthetically they are more than several generations behind themselves and it is very much too bad, it is so very much more exciting and satisfactory for everybody if one can have contemporaries, if all one’s contemporaries could be one’s contemporaries.” Those that do not accept modernist literary endeavors, or artistic endeavors of any type, “refuse” these compositions because they do not accord with the way in which they see life being conducted, which means to Stein that they do not see these productions as beautiful. Eventually, though, their time-sense catches up to the work and the time-sense conveyed through the work, and “then almost without a pause almost everybody accepts.” While previously the work was thought “irritating annoying stimulating,” when accepted it becomes classic and its salient characteristic is its beauty: “Of course it is beautiful but first all beauty in it is denied and then all the beauty of it is accepted” (515).

At issue is the equilibration of the works with the contemporary time-sense through their distribution, to use Stein’s terminology – that specific difficulty of the modern age is that “the time in the composition is now part of distribution and equilibration” (522). In a sense, what is new for Stein, Pound, and their contemporaries is a sense that their poetics of innovation expresses their commitment to convey authentically their time and place, and that part of their conviction and sincerity becomes expressed in their commitment to elucidate and dispel the inauthentic relation to the age that others suffer. Hence, composition as explanation. Stein’s lectures, “Composition as Explanation,” “What Are Masterpieces,” and *Lectures in America* – not to mention more literary works with strong didactic impulses such as *How To Write* and *The Geographical History of America*, share with Pound and Williams the impulse to assist the

dissemination of their work and the work of modernists in general through a critical prose commentary on their own poetics. Prose theoretical statements on poetics are to a certain extent an artistic professional chatter that defines the materials and boundaries for the work, enabling certain conditions and forms for production and disabling others. Yet for all that, poems and statements of poetics should not be considered as all that distinct – they are neither different genres such that prose statements are discursive and solicit replies while poems simply are, being testaments to posterity; nor do they have a neat division of labor between them that would give the prose the full explanatory power that the poems might lack. Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” features her inimitable grammatical precision studiously freed from the strictures of idiomatic usage fully as much as her more challenging literary works. This, for instance, by way of summation at the end of “Composition”: “There is at present there is distribution, by this I mean expression and time, and in this way at present composition is time that is the reason that at present the time-sense is troubling that is the reason why at present the time-sense in the composition is the composition that is making what there is in the composition” (523). Stylistic innovation has a legitimating force in Stein’s verse, and it lends that force through the use of her inimitable prose style to the explanatory power of the prose essay or lecture.

Charles Bernstein has famously written that “poetics is a continuation of poetry by other means” (160). Certainly it must work the other way, too. If prose writings on what bounds and sustains the practice of poetry engage in the same culture work as the poems do, then we must also be able to read the poems as a continuation of the cultural engagements of the prose writings, as engaged in the same kinds of discursive and

rhetorical strategies that we are perhaps more comfortable locating in declarative prose.

We need not even interpose any actual prose writings between the poems. Forrest Gander observes,

Like species, poems are not invented, but develop out of a kind of discourse, each poet tensed against another's poetics, in conversation, like casts of wormtrails in a sandstone. Our mineral attention can fill in the imprint, memorializing it. But each discovery we make only alludes to the stunning diversity, the breadth of the unrecorded, the unchampioned. (39)

The poetics may not materialize in text, but the force is felt nonetheless. Writers converse with poems on several levels, and as Gander has noted, a productive level of conversation is the writer sensing and responding to what each poem says are the possibilities and the impossibilities for all poems. The free verse revolution inaugurated by the generation of 1912 inspired and engaged in a fully and diversely manifest conversation on what was and was not now possible for poetry to be or to attempt. Yet precisely against what were Pound and others tensed against? The comments above by Stein, Pound, and Williams reflect a sense of an authentic relationship to time and place that is properly the realm of the modern artist, yet one that cannot be shared with the public at large, and that on aspect of the work of poetry is to bring one's contemporaries into this authentic relation with the modern age.

This is not a long-standing vision of the work of poems. One of the commonplaces of the poetics of the generations past against which the modernists defined their own was that poetry was a refuge against modernity and its cold-hearted realism of science and a descriptive matter-of-factness. Poe's sonnet "To Science" is a fine example, where he apostrophizes Science, "true daughter of Old Time," as a force that "preyest ... upon the poet's heart" by preventing that poet from "wandering / To seek

for treasure in the jewelled skies.” He accuses science of drying up the world’s myths:

Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?  
And dragged the Hamadryad from the wood  
To seek a shelter in some happier star? (9-11)

Yet one must not take Poe’s literary pose as literal social commentary – science has not robbed anyone of their beliefs in Diana or dryads. Nor has it taken from Poe “the summer dream beneath the tamarind tree” of which he accuses it as well (14), though his concern to protect the tamarind and whatever spirit of poesy it may shelter is instructive. Poe responds in this poem and in many others to a perceived disenchantment of the world, to use Weber’s phrase, and not unlike many others of the time, he attempts to relocate the germ or spark of poetry somewhere temporally or geographically distant, whether into the classical era or in the shade of a tamarind in the Orient. We can see this in his brief Pindaric to the Islamic angel Israfael, a traditional muse of music, which Poe closes with the following strophe:

If I could dwell  
Where Israfael  
Hath dwelt, and he where I,  
He might not sing so wildly well  
A mortal melody,  
While a bolder note than this might swell  
From my lyre within the sky. (44-50)

Israfael’s realm, exotic and unearthly, permits a passion and wildness in musical invention not available in a mortal world divested of its spiritual dimension by a clear-sighted rationality.

The modernism of Stein and Williams comes out of a different tradition than the attitude Poe represents in these poems.<sup>2</sup> They give us the far point of a brief history of a competing version of disenchantment that privileges the new as a sign of the authentic

and immediate access to the world, a world now available as a consequence of secularization. We can see it originating in Romanticism as a competing or complementary tendency to the nostalgia for myth. On the one hand, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers can claim for the celebration of myth a faux medieval organicism against the dehumanization of rationalization and industrial capitalism in addition to the Orientalism of Poe and others; and on the other, they can champion freedom from myth's darkness and the ensuing possibilities for self-fashioning thanks to the embrace of the secular. In American literature of the nineteenth century, the latter tendency is particularly evident, as it found resonances in both the revolutionary and post-revolutionary enthusiasm for republicanism and in efforts to produce a national imaginary that capitalized on what was felt to be the nation's distinctive trait, its freedom from the accumulated darkness of European history.<sup>3</sup> A crucial component of this attitude is the perception that organized religion – church religion – is on the wane, and that this event allows for the liberation of true human potential, not only spiritually but also morally, aesthetically, politically, socially, and even sexually.

A signal moment in American literary history for the expression of secularism may be Emerson's 1838 Divinity School Address. Early in his career, having just severed his ties from formal pastoral duties, he spoke before the assembled senior class of the Divinity College, and denied Jesus' miraculous nature. The remarks were controversial, and Emerson was subsequently banned from speaking at Harvard, but Emerson was by no means the first intellectual figure to proclaim that Jesus was no more divine than any other person. The denial of any particular spiritual importance to the historical person of Jesus was a familiar argument in Continental post-Enlightenment thought, and although



American's were aware of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* (1793-1794) chiefly through its reputation rather than any actual acquaintance, the Comte de Volney's *The Ruins: Or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires: And the Law of Nature* (1791) was widely available throughout nineteenth-century America in a variety of translations, the most authoritative being made with the assistance of Joel Barlow, the Connecticut poet and author of the *Columbiad* who had also secured the publication of Paine's *Age of Reason* during Paine's imprisonment in France. Both works deny, as does Emerson's speech, the authority of revealed religion, and all three refer instead to the natural laws of the universe as sifted through the sovereign intellect of the free individual being the ultimate authority for the determination of spiritual truths.

What all these secularist works do not do is to deny the validity of religion altogether, simply the authority of a revealed Christian doctrine, and therefore revealed doctrine of any other of the world's religions. The demystification of priestly authority and the "many religions of error and delusion" permits the emergence of the one true "religion of evidence and truth" (Volney 237), which in Volney's formulation comes under the heading of "The Laws of Nature," "the constant and regular order of events, by which God governs the universe; an order which his wisdom presents to the senses and reason of men, as an equal and common rule for their actions, to guide them, without distinction of country or sect, towards perfection and happiness" (239). Emerson's talk does not make extended reference to the American situation, as he does in other early addresses and lectures, such as "The American Scholar," nor to the American political experiment in disestablishment courtesy of the Bill of Rights, but he does acknowledge the sense of a transition to a new age the loss of myth and church institutions heralds:

Certainly there have been periods when, from the inactivity of the intellect on certain truths, a greater faith was possible in names and persons. The Puritans in England and America, found in the Christ of the Catholic Church, and in the dogmas inherited from Rome, scope for their austere piety, and their longings for civil freedom. But their creed is passing away, and none arises in its room. I think no man can go with his thoughts about him, into one of our churches, without feeling, that what hold the public worship had on men is gone, or going. (87)

Emerson's mission, however, in giving the address is to give encouragement to those about to pursue a pastoral vocation and take up residence to preach in one of these churches from which religion is withdrawing. The falling away from religious creed is in Emerson's view here an opportunity finally for true religious vocation. He recommends therefore the sanctity of the Sabbath as "the jubilee of the whole world ... [that] suggests, even to the vile, the dignity of spiritual being" and applauds "the institution of preaching – the speech of man to men, - essentially the most flexible of all organs, of all forms" (91). He claims that the falling away of public religion is an opportunity to "dare to love God without mediator or veil" and reclaim the Sabbath and the forms of religion for the true religion,<sup>4</sup> the original spirit of "that supreme Beauty, which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly those Hebrews" (89, 91).

Emerson's emphasis in this talk is this insistent sense of the newness of the age and the relation of that sense of new birth or rebirth with formalism – not literary formalism, per se, but the inherited outward forms and appearances of our social practices, what we might now call "culture." The form of Christianity as practiced in his contemporary moment, Emerson believes, mistakes the forms of Jesus' language for spiritual truth: "The idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes. Christianity has become a Mythus" (80). And, in a similar fashion, the church has

obsessed on the person of Christ rather than the message he conveyed. Thus, “historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion” (80-81): rather than seek truth first-hand, Christians are told to subjugate their innate and sovereign sense of spiritual truth to what others that have come to the faith before have said, and “even the dogmas of our church, are like the zodiac of Denderah, and the astronomical monuments of the Hindoos, wholly insulated from anything now extant in the life and business of the people” (85). Yet the passing of myth from the modern world offers religion new hope that the old can be rejected as unsuitable and form be recognized as vehicle rather than the truth signified.

What Emerson recommends to his audience, though, is not for all that the development of new forms, new religious practices. He does recommend that those who profess to speak on spiritual matters to “go alone” (88), in language that comes very close to literary critique: “Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it, because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man’s” (89). Yet innovation for Emerson in this instance consists of reinvesting existing forms with new spirit. “The old is for slaves,” he says, but “when a man comes,” meaning a strong spiritual figure who invents rather than imitates, “all books are legible, all things transparent, all religions are forms” (88). The history of Christian practice – of all the world’s religions, actually, in what he is saying, but his implications are drawn tightly about the specific Christian practice of Sunday sermonizing – is but the raw material for a new spirituality and relation to the world without the accumulated crust of history once infused with new spirit. Perhaps the nature

of the audience renders Emerson into a more conservative vein as he draws to a close, as he concludes with the observation that Christianity as a religious doctrine remains necessary. “I confess,” he says, “all attempts to project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms, seem to me vain. Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms ... Rather let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For, if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become plastic and new” (91). Jesus becomes no longer the object of worship, but a demonstration of living faith to contemplate; doctrines become recognized as stiffened metaphors that must be surmounted to convey the believer directly to the spiritual truth of the contemporary moment, “one with the blowing clover and the falling rain” (80).

The basic contours of Emerson’s thought describe the secularism that emerges as the post-Enlightenment transatlantic discourse over the competing claims of religion and the world on public and social life, though that discourse would not wear the term “secularism” until the latter part of the nineteenth century. These features include a suspicion that organized revealed religion preserves and disseminates superstition and error, an insistence on a universal true religion that will be seen by all once the veils of delusion have been pierced, the sovereign authority of an individual’s interior rationality and intellect in determining the eternal laws of nature, and finally the conviction that the moral and social imperatives of these eternal laws would be fully compatible with the rational and empirical worldview of science – the realization that, as Emerson puts it in the last words of his address, “Duty, is one thing Science, with Beauty, and with Joy” (92). Emerson’s address, given its interest in rhetorical and literary tropes, innovation and imitation, and forms, signifieds, and interpretation, also conveys a particular complex of

attitudes toward a particular literary genre, the sermon, that we find conveyed, albeit in a secular form, in the poetics of high modernist American poetry. Those features are the emphasis on innovation and a revolutionary attitude toward one's era, the need to discredit inherited tropes and forms as being valuable in themselves, the need for a direct relation with one's time and place that these forms prevent, and the need to re-inhabit originary formal practices with the spirit of the modern to enable that authentic relation on the part of others.

Williams's remarks at the start of *Spring and All* reflect some kind of literary memory of the emergence of the dominant attitudes of poetic modernism out of nineteenth-century secular attitudes. He has his imaginary interlocutor use religiously inflected language in an ostentatiously habitual manner when interrogating the work's assault on convention: "What in God's name do you mean?" he asks Williams, "Are you a pagan? Have you no tolerance for human frailty? Rhyme you may perhaps take away but rhythm!" Williams reinterprets the assault in the terms of a plea that incorporates a specific and conscious appeal to the divine: "You have robbed me. God, I am naked What shall I do?" (175). Williams responds to the plea/assault by insisting that his stripping away of the reader's protections and comforts – that to which he would appeal, whether we are going to understand it as God or not – only exposes the reader directly to the imagination. Williams's response adopts alike the habitual reference to the religious, only now defiant in its deliberateness: "I love my fellow creature. Jesus, how I love him." His purpose? "To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we live alone there is but a single force – the imagination." The stripping away the conventional to which the reader might appeal – God, meter, literary decorum – not only delivers the

reader to a direct apprehension of the imagination, the imagination becomes the medium through the writer and reader may now be “henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace” (176). Stein and Pound may not reveal this same secularist undercurrent in their literary unconventionality, yet it is there nonetheless, I argue, in the manner they describe their relationship to an audience, to authorities literary and otherwise, and to their insistence on innovation being the signal guarantor of a poet’s sincerity and authenticity no differently than in Emerson and Williams. In their work, though, secularism has in effect completed its efforts toward the effacement of the entire dilemma that produces it, the competing demands between the material world and its immaterial twin on social and public life.

## II. Worldly Origins

The competition, its nature, and in truth the nature of the competitors, is far from settled. Any observer of the contemporary geopolitical scene is aware that any claim for the victory of secularism over the forces of religion has been shown to be hasty (at best) or blind, as religious movements have erupted in the twenty-first century with sudden force and considerable physical violence in the East and the West, the global South and the North. While in the latter half of the twentieth century it might have been still possible to believe from the vantage of Euro-American economic and political dominance in the eventual and inevitable ascendancy of not only liberal democracy but also the consequent secularization of the public and political spheres and the historical necessity of a secular hegemony has increasingly seemed in need of some serious reconsideration if not to be discarded entirely.<sup>5</sup> The confidence in the desirability and

necessity of an eventual secularization of the world does remain, though, despite these setbacks, as an indelible feature of Western modernity. This secularization thesis sees the access to an authentic relation to the world and one's era as on one hand the consequence of a historical process operating upon European culture and the other as perpetually available to any who will make the deliberate act to see the world for him or herself as it is and not as others have described it. Secularization in this fashion is inextricable from Enlightenment as both a historical period and description of the resultant condition, as in Kant's formulation in response to the question, "What is enlightenment?"

Enlightenment is mankind's exit from its self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another. Self-incurred is this inability if its cause lies not in the lack of understanding but rather in the lack of the resolution and the courage to use it without the guidance of another. (58)

Enlightenment, according to the attitude Kant here represents, is a social and historical process because a person must be free to exercise his or her own reason and therefore must be fortunate enough to be a modern European (or American), but modernity remains nonetheless everywhere present as the authentic nature of humanity even if blindered by the arbitrary imposition of the will of another upon the social order.

Modernity's self-understanding as a historical moment poised upon these eruptions of non-historical time – the eternal now moment of the authentic present – is a crucial component of the transition from a classical to a modern *epistème* as described by Foucault. That transition moves the idea of origin from an initial position followed by a sequence of more-or-less equivalent moments in an historical ascendancy to an inconceivable point that "is at the same time outside real time and inside it: it is the first fold that enables all historical events to take shape" (329). No longer restricted to

creation's initial moment, the time of the origin seems to the modern mind to be making itself felt as the underlying logic to

the way in which man in general, any man, articulates himself upon the already-begun of labour, life, and language; it must be sought for in that fold where man in all simplicity applies his labour to the world that has been worked for thousands of years, lives in the freshness of his unique, recent, and precarious existence a life that has its roots in the first organic formulations, and composes into sentences which have never been spoken (even though generation after generation has repeated them) words that are older than all memory. (330)

The constant presence on historical time of the origin as the eternal now moment makes for "a problematic of the origin at once extremely complicated and extremely tangled" (333), as this sense of the origin as an inaccessible and yet constantly present first fold to the modern person "introduces into his experience contents and forms older than him, which he cannot master; it is that which, by binding him to multiple, intersecting, often mutually irreducible chronologies, scatters him through time and pinions him at the centre of the duration of things" (331).

The complexity of this original time that defines modern attitudes and experience can be seen in the contradictory nature of its manifestation through the secularization that claims to reveal it, as the direct and authentic apprehension of time uninflected by accumulated history is experienced as both the freedom from religion and as religion's source. In his famous anthropology of primitive religion, Mircea Eliade apotheosizes the modern's complex relation to origin time into an ahistorical condition of religiosity. In Eliade's *Sacred and the Profane*, he distinguishes between profane or secular time and sacred time, which, as primordial time "is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable." Eliade's notion of religion is largely constituted by the ritual attempt to recover and reintegrate this time of origins into secular time, and though this experience



is transitory, it is always potentially available as sacred time “always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is it exhausted” (69). The desire for this transcendence is what marks the religious point of view for Eliade: *homo religio* possesses an existential sense of the insufficiency of secular time as that from which the sacred time of the beginning has receded into an irretrievable past. Ritual offers *homo religioso* a momentary solace from this feeling of loss. Eliade distinguishes the modern from the primitive in that the modern’s version of sacred time has become diminished, offering only marginal transcendence from secular, linear time instead of the full communion with the forces out of which the human dimensions of experience initially arose. “This transhuman quality of liturgical time is inaccessible to a nonreligious man,” he writes. “This is as much to say that, for him, time can present neither break nor mystery” (71). Eliade’s concept of secularity recapitulates his account of religiosity. As religion is that sense of the gulf that separates sacred time from secular time and the ritual nostalgia for it, Eliade’s secularity is distinguished by the nostalgia for the revolutionary meaningfulness of ritual or liturgical time, and the ability to evoke a certain secular longing for mythic resonance accounts for, I believe, much the initial popularity of Eliade’s work and that of the comparative religionists that followed him. These works often portray the secular attitudes toward time and existence as defined by their lack of a dimension of originary myth-making which can and must be recovered through an original rethinking and largely aesthetic reconstruction of one’s primitive relationship to the material world.

I am not trying to address the question, though, of whether Eliade’s characterization of the existential contours of religiosity is useful for an understanding of

primitive religion, but point out that modern secularity projects its own account of religiosity out of its narrative of demystification. The noumenal quality of secularism's authentic relationship to the phenomenal world, as I have said, offers both freedom from myth and its embrace. Critiques of secularism are no less complex and contradictory than their subject. Two major figures in the second wave of secularization theory – the critical re-examination of the earlier post-war triumphant narrative of modernity's inevitability – for my study are Talal Asad and Charles Taylor, whose positions while not mutually reinforcing do provide a sound basis for investigating both secularism's ideological self-mystification and the nature of its worldview, including probing the soundness of its liberatory promises. To begin a brief review of their positions as they pertain to this dissertation, I should review Asad's important distinctions between the terms all too easily blurred: secularism, secularization, and the secular. Secularism is the Euro-American political doctrine that speaking simply "requir[es] the separation of religious from secular institutions in government," but that also "presupposes new concepts of 'religion,' 'ethics,' and 'politics,' and new imperatives associated with them" (Formations 1-2). Asad distinguishes this particular self-understanding from the projects of modern that "aim[] at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, sometimes evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market – and secularism" (Formations 13). It is to this project and process of modern governmentality insofar that it promotes secularism as an irreducible component of its realization that I will apply the term "secularization."

Asad further points out that the concept of the "secular" has an earlier formation

than the political doctrine of “secularism,” “that over time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come together to form ‘the secular’ (Formations 16). And while notions of the secular and secularism are clearly interdependent, they do not necessarily map onto one another. Part of the topography of the secular realm has been the distinction in social behavior – and its political implications – between the private and the public realms. One famous expression of that distinction in the development of Enlightenment thought is found in Kant’s statement discussed above, whereby he sets out the responsibility for ushering humanity into its disillusioned relation with reality on the part of a social aggregate, a public, rather than the individual. Ultimately, though, the responsibility rests not a self-directed populace, on a republic, but on his sovereign Frederick of Prussia, who, in deciding to make no rule regarding his subjects’ religious observances fosters the cause of freedom by permitting freedom of conscious if not full civil or political liberties. In Kant’s mind, Frederick as a secure enlightened power is able to do what a republic would not be able to do, convey to the population the dictate of enlightened governance: “*argue as much as you want about whatever you want, only obey!*” (Kant 63) Kant advocates a full public freedom of rational discourse: “the *public* use of reason must at all times be free,” he writes earlier in the essay, “and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men” (59). But that must be distinguished from “the *private* use of reason [that] may often be narrowly restricted without the progress of enlightenment being particularly hindered” (59-60). Kant’s example of the public use of reason is that of “*a scholar [Gelehrter] before the entire public of the reading world,*” and the necessary restrictions of private uses of one’s reason being best demonstrated by a clergyman’s requirement that his reason in service of the exposition of faith to his

congregants would be necessarily restricted by the teachings of his church (Kant 60). So in public one is free to hold whatever opinion one may in disputation with any other person, but in private life one must subject one's behavior to claims made upon whatever private space or position one occupies.

The passage has attracted a number of commentators on the development of Western liberal democratic culture, notably Jürgen Habermas, who sees Kant's description of a realm of public life in which reason must be unrestricted in its criticism of social institutions as descriptive of the ideological constitution of a bourgeois public sphere. The separation of a public sphere out of one's social life then relegated a substantial remainder into a private sphere where one was subject to the authority of others, and, significantly, a domestic sphere within one's private life where in thrall to the tender obligations of familiar and intimate connections one cultivated one's subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> Asad notes, furthermore, that in establishing the divisions between public and private spheres and the appropriate freedoms for those spheres, Kant's essay reflects a distinction emerging in liberal enlightenment thought "between two quite separate conceptual realms: one in which unquestioned obedience to authority prevails (the juridical definitions upheld by the state); the other consisting of rational argument and exchange, in which authority has no place (the omnicompetence of criticism)" (Genealogy 204) We can then see these distinctions as establishing certain sociological limits defining who may speak – scholars writing as individual with a print audience, for instance – and political limits on what may be challenged.

Asad draws our attention in particular to limits placed about religious behavior as a consequence of these developments, and in particular, "how the constitution of the

modern state required the forcible redefinition of religion as belief, and of religious belief, sentiment, and identity as personal matters that belong to the newly emerging space of private (as opposed to public) life” (Genealogy 205). In histories of the development in the early modern period of European state power, it is commonplace to suggest that in the public realm religion becomes forced to cede power to constitutional authorities and truth to science, but Asad asks us to consider that religion is at this time being constituted as a new historical object through these transformations. Religion is at this point no longer matter of public and passionate conviction, but that which is “anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time. This construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is *inessential* to our common politics, economy, science, and morality” (207). Religion emerges out of the secularism of bourgeois liberalism as a universal category of human experience, its appearance on the public stage is highly constrained by its construction as a purely individual and private matter. Furthermore, the secular construction of religion allows for any communal or ethical pressure on the public sphere from a traditionally religious folkway to be labeled as not truly religious.

Secularism is more than simply religion's other – rather than being its lack, secularism as a large-scale cultural movement works to manage and even produce religion's claims for attention and authority. Secularism not only produces a unifying and universalizing construction of religion as an interior psychological phenomenon, it also asserts the authority to determine what is and is not authentic religious experience, hence Asad's critique of secularism as a mode of governmentality that is not ultimately about competing metaphysical claims but issues of sovereignty and legitimacy. Asad takes on,

for instance, the paradigmatic case of state secularism versus cultural religious expression, that of the Islamic headscarf, as a demonstration of the contradictions and inconsistencies in secularisms account of itself and its political investments. Asad acknowledges that secularisms can be various in their instantions and permutations, but describes as symptomatic to contemporary secular liberalism the asymmetrical power relations between the French republic and modes of religious expression. The religious subject can make no claims or pressure on how the republic engages religious identities or behaviors, and yet the republic reserves the right to determine the matrix of symbols through which the subject articulates his or her right to present him or herself as a subject of that republic (525). Asad describes the vocabulary of symbols through which the state and its subjects attempt to articulate competing legitimacies as a political theology, with specific reference to the work of Carl Schmitt. In Schmitt's formulation, "Sovereign is he who decides the exception" (5) – i.e., in moments when the integrity of the state is at risk, the state as sovereign power dismisses any concerns over its legitimacy through its assumption of unquestionable authority. Schmitt describes the exercise of sovereignty as a political theology as it reveals notions of state power to be secularized versions of theological concepts, in this case, the decisive power of divine fiat.

In the case of the head scarf, the state finds it necessary to assert its sovereignty over the issue of whether or not Islamic women may be permitted wear head scarves in state buildings because the controversy introduces incoherence into the state's economy of symbols, specifically in the relative positioning of key legitimating concepts such as universal human nature, authentic freedom, and bounded cultural expression (Asad, *Trying to Understand French Secularism* 522). The rhetoric of a secular state appeals to

an authentic and universal subject whose bounded particularities may be freed through the operations of transcendent state power, the legitimacy of which is based in no small part on the secularized notion of religion as a universal human phenomenon that is nonetheless necessarily occluded from public view. The state's removal of religious particularity, such as wearing the head scarf, from the public sphere is considered both enabling of that freedom and its ritual confirmation, hence the French government's obdurate insistence on the removal of the scarves, and yet the wearers of the scarves have available a rhetoric of personal freedom as subjects of that state as well as the rhetoric of obligation to a transpersonal religious and cultural identity. The sovereign decision of the state to enforce bans on the scarves transmutes a rhetoric of authentic freedom into a spectacle of state power.

As the internal inconsistencies of the rhetoric of secularism might suggest, the manifestations of secularism differ considerably from nation to nation, and the particular importance placed upon the freedom of religious expression in the history of American secularism might suggest a very different outcome were a version of the head scarf controversy to appear in American institutions.<sup>7</sup> Yet Asad reminds us of the source of secularism's exclusion of religious particularity from the public sphere in the efforts of

early modern Europe neo-stoic thinkers who supported the emergence of the strong, secular state – the state that became the foundation of modern nationalism – ... because they saw passion as a destructive force that threatened the state. Since for them passion was identified with religious belief, this meant in effect a detachment from the latter—a skepticism in matters of faith. This virtue seems to have been absorbed into the style of liberalism, so that religious passion has tended to be represented—especially in a modern political context—as irrational and divisive. (515)

Putting aside differences between French and American notions of the importance of a strong central government and freedom of religious affiliation and expression, what

American secularism shares with the French version is the effort to manage forces driving personal affiliations and orientations that are not derived from liberalism's rational, universal subject. In particular I want to call attention to secularism's close association between strong passion and religious sentiment and confession. Although it would be overreaching to claim that secularism projects a strong equivalency between passion and religion, it nonetheless displays a strong suspicion that one may easily harbor or instigate the other. Both are challenges to the transparent rationality of the sovereign self that secularism champions as they both subject the individual to forces that would disturb its constitution as self-contained and empirical. One of secularism's constitutive weaknesses is its relegation of both forces to a private realm of which it absolves itself of responsibility other than to police the border between private and public. It thereby denies itself authority to parse potential distinctions in the relation of either passion or religion to the public sphere. And yet, for all that, there are some contiguities between religious sentiment and irrational passion that prove important for the chapters that follow.

Although attempts to regulate passions sound very much like efforts limited to the concerns of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the larger concern of secularism is not the passions themselves, but their ability to enable or constrain individual actions while bypassing the appeal to rational volition that underwrites the legitimacy of a liberal subjectivity. This gives rise to critiques of secularism generally, but the American example in particular, such as William Connolly's *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. Connolly takes issue not with what is popularly understood as secularism's core concept, the freedom to act and think in a nontheistic fashion, but the coercive power of secularism as it has come to be manifested in a liberal, secular state. He sees that coercive power come



into play in the dimensions of human experience that lie outside conscious deliberation, what he calls the visceral (3). The visceral register of experience drives our emotional life, our attachments and our aversions, hence secularism's attempt to de-legitimize its role in public discourse. Connolly describes the visceral as "at once part of thinking, indispensable to more conceptually refined thinking, a periodic spur to creative thinking, and a potential impediment to rethinking" (3). Its potential value for political life, and therefore secularism's loss, is its potential to "thicken an intersubjective ethos of generous engagements" through its ability to call upon diverse layers of personal commitment and experience and thereby permit a real and vital pluralism rather than the attenuated engagements Connolly finds offered by liberal political variants of secularism such as the French and American:

[They] kill two birds with one stone: as they try to seal public life from religious doctrines they also cast out a set of nontheistic orientations to reverence, ethics, and public life that deserve to be heard. These two effects follow from the secular conceit to provide a singular, authoritative base of public reason and/or public ethics that governs all reasonable citizens regardless of "personal" or "private" faith. (5)

The resulting lack of a thickened engagement actually undermines the ability to sustain profound emotional commitments in public discourse to liberal secularism's ostensible objectives of fostering a pluralistic society and limiting arbitrary constraints placed on human freedom.

If secularism as a cultural phenomenon seems relatively impenetrable to critiques that have been made of other ideological currents, it is perhaps because the institutional sites of critique – intellectuals, the world of art, the academy, cliques and countercultures, organized political resistance, etc. – are themselves largely secular institutions whose histories if articulated would all place their respective origins in the spaces left open by

retreat of ecclesiastical authority, those spaces where the modern age begins. The value of Asad's work is evident: although secularism presents itself as the effort to free humanity from the bondage of myth and superstition, secularism as a cultural movement or political position is itself ideological. Secularism is a worldview situated within a particular socio-historical context of Western modernity, and as such is both driven by and productive of ideological orientations. So while the appearance of the socio-historical project of modernity in Christian cultures presents a narrative of an inevitable and revolutionary freedom from disabling illusion and superstition into a true and universalizing understanding based on human liberation, this modernity also involves the institutionalization of certain moral perspectives of sincerity and moral autonomy and the proliferation of certain technologies of experience and knowledge such as capitalism and democracy with often cruel and violent results and with implicit and largely invisible and impersonal structures of authority. And yet while secularism may itself be at points subject to – and constitutive of – the forces it claims to ameliorate, no one would want to suggest that the transition to modernity is entirely illusory and that secularism is merely the process that blinds us to the persistence of a traditional worldview. A defining characteristic of the modern age is the sense that human experience no longer need orient itself in relation to traditional modes of authority. This is what Charles Taylor refers to as the “shift in background” that enables our secular age: a transition in the implicit worldview that gives our ideas and experiences context out of an unquestioned theistic outlook into one in which unbelief is a live possibility (Secular Age 14). The possibility for unbelief is a felt experience of the modern age that enables the institutional critique of traditional modes of authority and often endows the critiques with particular sense of

mission and drive.

Taylor describes the modes of self-understanding and social relation that fall out from this felt possibility for unbelief as involving a number of processes, significantly a disembedding of the individual from interlocking if inconsistent structures of social, ritual, and cosmological life. The result is the transformation from what Taylor calls a mediated-access society to a direct access society. The mediated access society would be one in which a person's role and value would be determined by their relative placement in a society ordered hierarchically about an top-down structure of political authority and a religious orientation toward a transcendent sacred. The direct access society would be one in which that transcendent sacred and hierarchies of political authority no longer had convincing roles in describing one's place and function. Instead the members of modern society imagine their social existence as something "radically different." Taylor describes the modern sensibility of political affiliation thus: "Each of us is equidistant from the center; we are immediate to the whole ... We have moved from a hierarchical order of personalized links to an impersonal egalitarian one" (Modern Social Imaginaries 158). The background experience of the disembedded self can then potentially allow persons to disavow any authority that they cannot see as participating in an egalitarian social imaginary in which the those persons would have a defining role. Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance" is a paradigmatic expression of the experience of Taylor's disembedded self. In that essay, Emerson rails against conformity as a false virtue preferred by a society that would define its members.

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its

aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. (261)

Emerson identifies “names and customs” as the virtues of a limiting and established traditional worldview, against which he proposes the “aversion” to conformity that is self-reliance. This he describes as the rejection of an established point of view that would presume to contain one’s perspective in favor of establishing an independent and innovative perspective. Truth and creativity, the consequences of “realities and creators” promoted by the new virtue of self-reliance, are the new virtues of the secular age. “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind,” Emerson writes, “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?” (261-262)

It is easy to see how objections to Taylor’s relatively benignant view of a liberal secular imaginary could claim that he justifies a historically bound rationality’s pretensions to universal validity that masks the continued existence in and under secularism of a variety of mediations with determining effects on the manifestation of social relations and power. Taylor responds to potential ideological criticisms by admitting that secular imaginaries are in fact largely self-serving fictions, but he insists that they also have “a constitutive function, that of making possible the practices that they make sense of and thus enable. In this sense, their falsity cannot be total; *some* people are engaging in a form of democratic self-rule, even if not everyone, as our comfortable self-legitimations imagine” (Modern Social Imaginaries 183). In Taylor’s construal, secularism and modernism are lived sensibilities – moral orientations that may obscure the rapacious self-interest of certain groups or the blindly cruel consequences of the production of certain social structures, but at the same time are strong motivators of social transformation and endlessly productive of large social formations in their own

image.

A even more radical defense of secular self-legitimation can be found in Greg Urban's notion of metaculture. Metaculture Urban defines as the evaluative processes which define and distribute cultural products, processes that Urban finds account for both the propensity for culture to conserve and transmit traditional folkways and culture's "inherent dynamism, its built-in propensity for change." A crucial function of metaculture, or the evaluation and transmission of cultural products, is "its ability to generate self-interpretations or self-understandings that help to define what change or sameness is" (3). Working through the notion of metaculture, Urban distinguishes between cultures whose self-understandings promote cultural products that reproduce traditional folkways, or "inertial cultures," and those whose self-understandings promote cultural products that are novel, or "accelerative cultures" (15-18). Without quite identifying them as such, Urban's "inertial" and "accelerative" cultures correspond quite well to a distinction between traditional and modern, or secular, culture. Inertial cultures tend to value the cultural reproduction of tradition, and traditional modes of authority are embedded in the metacultural self-understandings that produce these evaluations. Accelerative cultures, on the other hand, tend to devalue the reproduction of authority and instead emphasize the immediate relevance of cultural products and value their novelty.

Urban finds that the two different vectors of metaculture do more than provide a conceptual schema for describing cultural movement and change, they also represent an identifiable drift in cultural movement on a global scale: inertial cultures are giving way to accelerative ones, largely through Western culture's "incorporation of acceleration into

the very mechanism of cultural reproduction” (260). While the relative success of traditional, inertial cultures accounts for their persistence throughout the globe, ultimately they cannot compete with “the amazing flexibility of culture under a metaculture of newness – a culture that is constantly prodded to embody itself in new things” (261-262). While inertial culture reproduces itself with reference to its own past, Western modern culture does not require quite the same sense of continuity: it produces its self-understandings with reference to its active self-constitution. Urban identifies a significant consequence of an accelerative metaculture with particular reference to American modernity: the self-constitutive nature of an accelerative culture leads to “specific, concrete individuals com[ing] to seem to be controllers or ‘authors’ of their own narratives” – and Urban here uses narratives in distinction to myths, which would have culture controlling individuals (108). This manifests at the level of grammar in the increasing use of the first person plural pronoun, paradigmatically in the “We the People” of the Declaration of Independence, a document that prospectively constituted the nation as a political collective through the act of an inclusive utterance. Urban notes, though, that Declaration is hardly an anomaly but representative of a larger cultural reliance on the use of the pronoun. The Declaration is “a discourse image, written in miniature, of the broader historical flow of discourse patterns through the people who occupy the east coast of North America” (104), and more than just the reflection, as a significant political document it is also a cultural product and an instrument in the circulation and reproduction of the culture it reflects (105).

The literature of a secular modernity presents a fictive speaking self as constituted in a particular grammar of style that emphasizes the character’s control over his or her

environment and destiny through the use of the first person pronoun. With specific reference to Bakhtin's notion of the hero of the novel as a new secular type of character that is that arises in distinction from the supernatural hero of myth (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 10), Urban describes the characters of modern narrative as remarkable for their ordinariness. Rather than grounded in a traditional utterance that would mark its legitimacy through its inertial retention of conventional elements and sacral attitudes, the ordinariness of the hero of a narrative emphasizes the novelty of the creation, its having been generated out the immediate experience of a person who asserts a legitimate claim on our attention through being a person who is like you or me. Characters in a novel are fictive,

but they are fictive in a way that makes them suspiciously human, the kind of beings any ordinary individual might imagine. They are, in other words, adapted to a metaculture of newness, which focuses attention on the act of creation of the linguistic form by an individual rather than on the passage of a linguistic form over time through that individual. (110)

Each individual manifestation of that style in a metaculture of newness is legitimate insofar as it is novel and to the degree that it can present itself as grounded not in previous narratives so much as “a product of the here-and-now body of the author. There is an individual, material, biological agent behind the ‘I,’ even if one step removed from it” (108). The further consequence for a style of novelty is the metadiscursive appeal in literary performances to intention and truthfulness. “When the cultural object appears to be new – that is, when there is an imaginable homunculus responsible for its surface characteristics – intention comes to the fore” (213). And because the author must be in at least some sense a person just like you or me, the cultural object must appeal not just to the person of the author but also its ability to be circulated through a cultural economy

constituted by like persons – that is, the object must be true. Truth may not be a new concern, but there are new issues that arise when newness is a critical feature of the cultural object: “where the production of new objects is required for the replication of culture, the truth of those objects are in question. Since the objects might carry new claims about the world, such claims need to be assessed” (216). While the truthfulness of an object produced within a traditional culture is comprised in its fidelity to accepted and immutable standards, a modern secular product settles its more volatile relationship to truthfulness as a matter of style.

An important component of the lived sensibility of secularity is the disarticulation of previously interrelated spheres of activity, an important instance being the overlapping spheres of divine, legal, and domestic authorities. The emergence of a secular public sphere meant the ostensible disentangling of a number of private realms from this overlap, the consequence being that while appeals to rationality and claims of a self-evident universality came to dominate the public realm, appeals to other modes of persuasion – proper ethical alignment, emotional attachment, etc. – came to be associated with discrete private realms of church, family, and so forth. What Taylor finds disturbing about this disarticulation is that the appeal to the experience of the ordinary person as being a self-evident source of legitimacy results in what he describes as an “ethics of inarticulacy” (*Sources of the Self* 53-90). Secular considerations of what constitutes legitimate personal experience and expression de-emphasize ontological accounts of coming to be – accounts of the forces that produce the conditions and framework for moral orientations and the sedimentation of habitus. The result is the refusal to admit as having a legitimate bearing on the public discourse of the nature and authority of the self



those dimensions of experience outside those transparently rational. Emotional attachment, ethical orientations, and communal myth-making are still operative in public discourse, of course, but unacknowledged, barely visible, and unable to make their respective claims audible. Taylor here sounds a note of dissatisfaction with liberal secularism that is much like Connolly's. Of course, discontent with the ramifications of Enlightenment rationality is hardly new. It is in part to this kind of discontent that we attribute the development of Romantic literature, and the *métier* of post-Romantic literature seems less the business of the transparent rationality of the ordinary experience of the self than it does exploration of those modes of experience forced to the margins of public life.

Seen in the light of a contested secularism, modern literature appears as a rather complex and frequently contradictory field of engagement with the process of secularization. On the one hand, transformations in the grounds of legitimacy for linguistic utterances as cultural products has meant profound stylistic developments such as the increasing dominance of the novel but also and significantly the insistence on innovative style as demonstrative of a sincere and authentic expression of a creative individual. An important account, for instance, of the development of Romanticism generally is M. H. Abram's description in *Natural Supernaturalism* of the naturalization of figures of divine power into the expression of human potentiality in the work of poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge. Another account specific to the American literary scene of the nineteenth-century would David Reynolds' insistence in *Beneath the American Renaissance* on the emergence of a peculiarly American literary expression as the secularization of its vibrant popular religious culture. Revisiting through the work of

Asad and Connolly the narrative of the inevitable and desirable triumph of secularization as an ideological projection requires that we also rethink literature's role. Modern literature has been both a reflection of the process of secularization and crucial part of its distribution and production, but to view it as such means that we also need to take into account its involvement with the instantiation of modern forms of religion rather than merely its escape. In this light, Gregory S. Jackson's reevaluation of literary realism and naturalism as a reciprocally involved in the production of evangelical Christianity is particularly instructive. Jackson sees the conventions of the modern American novel as developing along parallel tracks with certain specifically Christian practices that create "a practical link between reading and doing, knowledge and action, representation and reality" with a particular emphasis on Christian engagement with and reform of social problems (643). The narrative of the secularization of literature that privileges the naturalist and realist fiction as disengaged representation and contemplation of social issues rather than directing sympathy and action severs the practical link served by the Christian Social Gospel novels and robs an account of the development of American modernist fiction of its socio-historical specificity.

It is curious then that Jackson insists that the recovery of "these novels' function as their readership understood it" requires the reconstruction of "a set of reading practices derived from older sermonic and religious pedagogic traditions," since the parallel track of the Christian homiletic reading practices and the development of narrative strategies of literary modernism would suggest that the peculiarly religious interpretative strategy that favored an activist link between reading practices and social problems was a recent innovation. Following out from Urban and Asad, it is not difficult to see how the

religious reading strategies that Jackson identifies are themselves driven by identifiably secular interests and practices. Jackson writes that the allegorical mode of these novels in which Jesus was imagined as a contemporary of the readers and as a stand-in for the Christian readers' experiences involved "real-life scenarios that demanded narrative participation, insisted upon moral volition, and asked readers to apply discursive enactments to their own lives through imaginative exercises for structuring everyday reality" (643). The fictional character of Jesus, though, who as a stand-in and witness for the readers' religiously inflected sympathy for the less fortunate, is here grounded not in any specific religious authority so much as its reference to the sincerity of the author in investigation and recasting the concerns addressed by the novel against the values of the church and the accessibility to the experience thus portrayed to that of ordinary Christians. As such, the narrative's grammatical economy of characterization is as secular and driven by concerns of novelty and authenticity as the genre of the novel in which the narrative is cast. Jackson points to the practical concerns of this particularly Christian reading strategy as part of that which is lost to the secularization of the novel genre and its critique: "Homiletic narrative built networks of reform, translating individuals into communities of action that read religious fictions as experiential templates for their own lives" (644).

Certainly the transcendence from practices directed specifically at individual experience and its validation forms an important part of the critique of secularism for its discontents, but the move to identify the transcendence into a community involved in symbolic negotiation of images of its wholeness is part of secularism's instantiation of religion as its own other, as Vincent Pecora's work has shown. Pecora discusses how

Emile Durkheim's nearly contemporary theories of social formation rely on a particular anthropological understanding of religion. In Durkheim's account, religion appears to emerge naturally as an "effervescence" that "induces within distinct individuals the sense that there is something greater than the sum of their separate existences ... The hypostasized 'something' over and above them, but also within them, represented by the totem is what in fact produces their social existence" (113). Although it may be tempting to do so, I would argue that Durkheim's contemplation of the religious basis of societies is not descriptive of the social cohesion experienced by adherents of Social Gospel. Instead we should look at the religious nature of the social cohesion as an important part of their self-understanding. The sense that a hypostasis involved in the cultivation of sympathy for the less fortunate requires a totemic figure in the person of Christ and that the cohesion thus expressed is properly and inherently religious seems as much driven by secularism as the narrative strategies and reading practices. This late nineteenth-century phenomenon, while ostensibly religious, is very much an American manifestation of what Pecora diagnoses through Durkheim's positioning of a religious sensibility at the heart of social imaginaries:

a powerful expression of a particular historical moment in the evolution of the idea of society, an expression of the degree to which, for much good but also much ill, mass or collective identity came in European life to possess a near-sacred significance in its own right and to demand a near-sacred allegiance that tended to trump other forms of meaning and all other claims of affiliation. (129-130)

Thus, Jackson's account of how specifically religious reading practices and circulation of texts came to define a secular genre can be reconfigured to examine how secular narrative practices and grammars of self drive the development of a powerful mode of affiliation – contemporary American Christian evangelism – that understands itself as specifically

religious.

The upshot is that a study of the relationship between literary expression and the process of secularization, particularly in the critical period of the nineteenth century must be aware of the variety of manifestations of secularism and its discontents. Due attention must be paid to the period's own sense its being subject to the progressive disenchantment of the world. While the modernist self-understanding of the necessary and desirable triumph of secular humanism over religion's medieval remnants is a scarcely credible account today, that historical self-understanding was a profoundly important component of the secularist sensibility of the past two centuries, and like Taylor has said of the sensibility of secularism generally, that historical thesis has real effects in the determination and production of social imaginaries. Literary expression may describe itself as driven by and participating in that secularist process, such as the excitement expressed in Whitman's work to be participating in an age of scientific revolution that was parting the clouds of ancient superstition, and it may, as in Poe's work quoted above, identify itself as belonging to the remnants of an earlier sensibility of myth and enchantment. As part of the negotiation of shifting valences in individual and social experience, literary works would have found themselves engaged in the production of circulation of secularism through the exploration of the new grammars of selfhood and genre strategies for legitimating written expression. At the same time, literary works may have found themselves situated in areas of experience that secularism was relegating to private realms of expression and could participate in either/both the critique of secularism as it was developing and/or the celebration of the religious sensibility that was being created.

What emerges is not only a picture more nuanced and more contradictory than the beleaguered historical narrative of secularism's triumph, it also offers a richer picture of the relationship of the literary and linguistic expression to the secular than Taylor's ethics of inarticulacy. As Pecora notes about the urgency of the issue of secularism on a global scale throughout modernity, "if political modernity seems to entail secularization, it may be because so much more is at stake for the modern citizen, whose political role is far more active and self-determining, and who as a result sees the political state as an important facilitator of or hindrance to individual and collective happiness" (38). Secularization's consequences have been profound and wide-reaching, such that it becomes impossible to ignore and unavoidable, and a movement and position that must be addressed largely on its own terms, given its influence in structuring the manner in which the individual and social institutions form their mutual relations. If an important critical engagement with secularization has been to reveal the limitations and blindness of secularism as a political movement, the corollary would be the discovery of how pervasive, corrosive, and productive secularization has been as a larger process of modernity. Modern literature, though, has come to make similarly outsized claims for its relevance, its ability to burnish truth out of the encrustation of myth and hide-bound tradition, and its creation of new ways to live. Speaking of romanticism specifically, Colin Jager writes that its potential contribution "toward an analysis of secularism resides in the outsized claims it makes for literary representation (or, more generally, aesthetic representation)" which he calls to task to "analyze and amend secularism's similarly outsized claims to have solved the seeming irresolvable conflicts of religion" (301). I would press Jager's own claims further to encompass the contribution of a number of

strands of post-romantic literature generally, and specifically the American modernism that arises out of the nineteenth-century's turmoil of competing and complementary enthusiasms for religion and for worldly knowledge and power.

Although secularism itself may be from time to time even the ostensible topic of the literature – and that's certainly true of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the two main subjects of the chapters that follow, the source of both that literature's outsized claims and the site of its engagement with the currents of secularism is not so much its advocacy for or against secularism as political engagement but its transformation of the signifying power of literary form. In particular, I will be examining the two poets' use of literary forms associated with religious traditions and practices – associated with myth and ritual – in conjunction with the explorations of modernism's revolutionary grammatical forms of the individual's address to the social. The early use of forms associated with religious and liturgical genres should be regarded as more than just raw material made available through secularism but an important part of the logic of literary engagement with it. These forms are an important part of the habitus of religious experience whose role and significance are coming under increasing review and criticism, and in no small part a critical discourse on the meaning and possibility of literary expression. Here we can see how modern literature aligns itself with the Schlegelian mode of a decentered subjectivity that Jäger finds significant for a post-secular romanticism – that criticism neither completes nor judges literature but stands in a continuum “to extend that which literature already is” (320). Modern literature under secularism does not necessarily reproduce the secular so much as a constant negotiation of the multifarious possibilities of expression that persist at the margins of what Taylor

describes as the ethics of inarticulacy. These modes of expression that are emotional, often with deeply encoded moral stances, and often incidental and glancing in their effects, and if properly pursued reveal what Jager describes as “an alternative path for modernity, one that does not culminate in the secular marginalization of ‘the religious,’ because it understands the religious not as a universal essence but as a formulation every bit as contingent and paradoxical as the secular itself” (321). The issue of significant form that I will examine is not a story of how secular poetry takes on a borrowed shine from a lost and discredited religious sensibility, but how modern poetry takes on a continual negotiation of the relation of the individual to the social through its production of experiences that can in turn be described as secular, religious, and something that may not be adequately articulated by that binary.

### III. What I Have Done and Why

In turning to the work of Dickinson and Whitman, I have not only taken on the two poets that high modernist poetry identified as its most significant precursor figures but the two poets of the nineteenth century whose engagement with secularism was the most profound and complex. I do not think the two unrelated. To turn to a helpful example, let us look at Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz when I died” (#591). The poem takes on a perennial concern of Dickinson’s – the lack of religious surety in a disenchanted world, here dramatized as the moment when that lack of surety is most keenly felt, when one’s death approaches. Dickinson’s approach to unresolved claims of the individual on the collective, knowledge being one such claim, is to present the claim in dizzying differences of scale, here the grandeur and poignancy of waiting for one’s



death and the mundane insignificance of the interposing fly. The poem's insists on piercing conventional solemnity and reveals its speaker's inability to redirect focus from the mundane and inconvenient. The irony of the situation is characteristically modern. Yet the poem is about more than the modern deflation of conventional pieties through skepticism and irony. Its significant stylistic move is not the irony so much as the posthumous persistence of the speaking voice. The poem represents the worldly claims of the self having all been resolved – "I willed away my Keepsakes," she writes, "Signed away / What portion of me be / assignable" (9-11) – the unassignable portions being what remains to observe and comment on the death that occurs at that moment the fly interposes with its "uncertain stumbling Buzz" (13). The fly prevents the speaker from focusing on the blue light that might confirm that "the King / Be witnessed – in the Room" (7-8), yet there would be no language, figurative or otherwise, available to the poet to convey adequately and authentically what that experience might be, and the fly, uncertain and stumbling, works to represent that lack of representational faculty in addition to presentation of modernist disenchantment. It is that figuration of irony that allows for a stylized representation in the poem of the persistence of a spiritual – unworldly – dimension of personal experience into immortality. The final paradoxes of the poem – "the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see" (15-16) – do not despair of an modern inaccessibility to sacred knowledge: they instead revel in an deliberate literariness that reveal the opposite condition, the ability of a modern literary aesthetic to sustain the virtual experience of a religious sensibility past its rational barriers of an individual consciousness.

To persist a little further with a specific trope of spiritual immortality as an aspect

of modernist style, let us turn to Whitman's "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life." The poem is particularly notable in Whitman's oeuvre for its publication history: it was his first poem in his mature style to be published in a major periodical, James Russell Lowell's *Atlantic Monthly*.<sup>8</sup> Whitman had at this point self-published the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*, but now the third edition was shortly to appear under the imprint of the Boston publisher Thayer and Eldridge, and Whitman's position as an established if controversial author seems fairly assured. The poem is helpful in pointing up aspects the American experience of secularism as well, since in it Whitman contemplates how a poem might function meaningfully under a secular dispensation, particularly as it involves the circulation of printed material throughout a transatlantic Anglophone audience. The publication of poem seems anticipated in its writing, as the poem contemplates how Whitman's work is going to fare now that it is to be set and distributed by hands other than the poet's own. The scene of the poem is the shore of Long Island (or Paumanok, as Whitman preferred to call it in the poems) familiar to Whitman from his childhood. He walks the shore that he refers to as "the shores I know" contemplating his inner, core being, whom he describes as holding and sustaining him and from whom he gathers his material and inspiration for the poems – "Held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter poems" in the later editions, but originally "Alone, held by this the eternal self of me that threatens to get the better of me and stifle me" (7, 14; *Variorum* 1:319). As he walks with his eternal/electric self, he feels seized by a new force, "the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot, / The rim, the sediment that stands for all the water and all the land of the globe" (8-9).<sup>9</sup> Seized by the force that throws up the flotsam on the shore, he finds himself in the second section washed up on

other, unfamiliar shores, “shores I know not” (18). Bereft of the constant presence and organizing force of his eternal/electric self, he describes himself as entering into a deep crisis of confidence in the ability of his work to any more significance than “at the utmost a little wash’d up drift, / A few sands and dead leaves to gather” (22-23). His “arrogant poems” from this vantage seem in a different metaphorical register to be no more than “all that blab” (27-28). All that transatlantic traffic in poems is echoed back to him as interchangeable and meaningless. “I have not once had the least idea of who or what I am,” it seems to him (27), now that he sees his poems as others must, anonymous products caught up in that vast circulating Atlantic ocean of printed text. And yet unlike the others that read his poems, he still senses “the real Me” that “stands yet untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d, / Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows” (28-29).

To a certain degree, the anxiety about the continuing significance of his poems in an anonymous economy of printed texts is a part of the eighteenth and nineteenth century’s nostalgia for pre-modern modes of distribution of authored texts as discussed by Susan Stewart in *Crimes of Representation*. A number of issues connected to Whitman’s handling of that anxiety, though, reveal a dimension of it that relates to specific concerns of secularism. First there is the notion that what underwrites or would underwrite the enduring significance of the works is best figured as being in relation to Whitman’s spiritual self. Secondly there is the poem’s conceit of the tide that is pulling Whitman’s work out to sea and then throwing it in disarray upon other shores. The conceit of the sea perversely works two different figurative registers in the poem, one being the metonymy standing, as “all the water and all the land of the globe,” for global

trade and its circulation of published literary works. The other figurative register of the sea, though, refers us to all that the Whitman considers the transatlantic circulation of texts to not be, the inarticulate emotional depth otherwise represented by the presence of his spiritual self, as at the end of the poem it is the sea rather than the eternal/electric self that we find organizing the poems “from many moods, one contradicting another, / From the storm, the long calm, the darkness, the swell, / Musing, pondering,” etc. (62-64). Finally, there is that final scene of the poem where Whitman figures his authorial presence as dead, nothing more at this point than a place-holder for the origination of the poems that bubble up from his “dead lips” as seawater from a corpse – “the ooze exuding at last, / See the prismatic colors glistening and rolling” (59-60). Whitman uses the poem to fantasize his own death, and he does so to be able to imagine the continued existence of the poem quite literally after his death. Sketching it out briefly, the transition from anguished poet of works torn from him to the image of the dead author and his works serenely tossed from shore to shore attempts to displace the source of the works’ legitimacy from the person of the author, who cannot follow them throughout all their peregrinations, onto the circulation of poems as sustained by a readership that is largely anonymous to Whitman and to one another and yet emotionally invested in the works and their furtherance.

Up to the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman has been able to avail himself of a specifically secular solution to the affective underwriting of the poems’ legitimacy: the nationalist identity that is so much a feature in his prose and poetry of the first and second editions. That national identity, of course, is a transatlantic project, and British readers are invested as well in the limning out an American national character in

contradistinction to their own – if perhaps not quite as emotionally as the North American readers, but it was also clear to Whitman that the circulation of that particular project had significantly different valences on opposite shores of the Atlantic. The challenge of “As I Ebb’d,” and the 1860 edition of *Leaves* in general, is to locate a mode of legitimacy that is able to push up against those marginal discourses of secularism that are charged with emotional, moral, and often manifestly religious attitudes in an effort to distinguish them from the universal, anonymous, and impersonal modes of authorial legitimacy fostered by the modern print economy. The particular authorial persona that threatens the poems and that may be seen as manifestly secular is that occasioned specifically by the circulation of printed material in the eighteenth century. This figure, part of the rhetorical grammar of the American print public sphere as described by Michael Warner in the *Republic of Letters*, is an anonymous and disinterested party whose motivations are characterized as driven by a universal rationality rather than parochial or partisan interests. As a body of literature understood as self-consciously aesthetic as opposed to practical modes of expression emerges over the course of the nineteenth century, that literature positions itself as both an agent of secularism’s liberatory power and a site for the critique of secularism’s compartmentalization of experience and culture, and therefore develops a fraught relationship with the legitimacy of a grammar of self that presents itself as necessarily anonymous, rational, and universal in scope.

In responding to the problems occasioned by a secular culture in the legitimacy of printed texts, Whitman’s poem nonetheless takes advantage of the secularism’s assigning religion and passionate emotional attachments to the marginal discourses of the self. The poem parodies the loss of the spiritual dimension that is peeled away as the work gets

caught up in circulation of printed texts in the figure of the “Me myself” that mocks the poet for having achieved success at such a cost, but it does so in recognition of the necessity of universality and anonymity of the liberal print public sphere to the dissemination of the poet’s work and its placement in posterity. The central portion of the poem divides in to appeals to a “father” – Long Island, the birthplace of the poet – and a “mother” – the sustaining sea, and its through these figurative and emotional apostrophes that the transition from anxiety to a posthumous serenity is achieved. While the appeals to Long Island can be read in part an appeal to the kind of nationalist self-identity that is such a major concern for the poems of the earlier editions, there is also a recognition that any poet is only one such person in a generational succession:

I too Paumanok,  
 I too have bubbled up, floated the measureless float, and been wash’d on your  
                   shores,  
 I too am but a trail of drift and debris,  
 I too leave little wrecks upon you, fish-shaped island. (41-44)

What allows for Whitman to imagine his work as continuing to speak in his absence and even after his death, though, is the apostrophe to the ocean as “mother,” that elsewhere in the poem is the metonymy for the distribution of printed texts and here is apostrophized as the force of life itself as well. Here Whitman invests the ocean with the same emotional reciprocity as the place of his birth and asks it treat him gently as he culls verses from its flotsam: “Rustle not up so hoarse and angry against my feet as I touch you or gather from you” (54). The circulation of texts is, like the fatherland, capable of generating inspiration for the poet, and it is also capable of a similar reciprocal emotional attachment. As the “I” of the poet disintegrates through death into the “we” of his poems, that inclusive gesture of emotional attachment opens out to include his potential

readership as well. One such poet in a succession of poets, and one such poet across an Atlantic ocean circulation of poets and their poems, Whitman insists in the poem on the potential for the cultivation and maintenance of a deep emotional attachment to those who find themselves somehow in the presence of the poems – the anonymous “whoever you are,” the “you up there walking or sitting” who the poem in the end addresses and who has found the *Leaves*, so to speak, “in drifts at your feet” (71-72). That emotional attachment is not a given, part of the background of which the poet emerges, but appears after the fact, as part of a deliberate exploitation of the contacts enabled through the anonymous distribution of text, and yet that emotional affiliation from reader to reader comes to be very much like religious sentiment, figured as it is in the ability to sustain the ability of the poet to speak as a spiritual presence after the poet’s physical death.

As we can see in the examples from Dickinson and Whitman, the poems display an in the large historical processes determining the secular and the religious, and in particular in the competing or complementary regulation of the interactions between the individual and society. These processes do not receive so much a direct thematic treatment as they do as an indirect appeal through the formal dimensions of the works, such as their adroit manipulation of tropes of figuration and their rhythms and sounds. In addition to the inarticulacy of the dimensions of experience affected, there is also a certain vagueness and hesitation, as well as contradiction and inadequacy, in the approaches of the poets and their contemporaries to the issues secularization brought about. I have therefore endeavored to remain acutely sensitive, as indeed any critic of literary texts should be, to the manner in which the formal dimensions of a text signify. The intensive formal nature of these texts is what marks them as literary, and is also what

defines them as text, in that it is the use of formal strategies that distinguishes a text from the surrounding discourse and allows its being distributed for the sake of being taken up and read. These formal strategies are themselves cultural products of considerable lineage, and the rich signifying potential of certain formal strategies is what attracts poets to their use, but that potential may also compound the potential inarticulacy of the medium through the varieties of potential association or signification. I feel that too often critics of literature read formal properties as epiphenomenal manifestations of other core social concerns. While I would not want to dismiss the influence of socio-historical pressures on the shape that poems take – after all that is a description of this study as much as any other, I have taken efforts to respect that aesthetic formal properties have in a sense their own natural histories, have a certain resiliency of shape and utility that gives them a degree of materiality, and are tools used in the production of culture just as much as they are in themselves products of culture.

Viewing poetics as concretized practice that often bears the impress of earlier cultural or political interests or struggles does not diminish the creative involvement of the writer in the act of writing. Far more than the kind of cultural studies that would view the formal properties of the literary work as a mere symptomatic reflections of the structural properties of underlying social strife, and therefore the writer as a transparent conduit through which society presses out the works, a due sensitivity to poetic form recognizes the writer as a creative agent involved in a deliberate negotiation of what form will and will not do in achieving the desired effect. I have in this taken guidance from Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs's work on the role of poetics and performance in the anthropological evaluation of linguistic expression. Their work attempts "an agent-



centered view of performance” that emphasizes a careful attention to the “textual details that illuminate the manner in which the participants are collectively construing the world around them” so as not to “disregard the multiplicity of indexical connections that enable verbal art to transform, not simply reflect, social life.” In their discussion of trends in the analysis of performance, they note a shift from viewing performances in isolation to viewing performances as taking part within a larger context that informs the possibilities and significance of the performance, what they describe as a movement toward contextualizing the performances, and therefore a more careful attention to “active process of negotiation in which participants reflexively examine the discourse as it is emerging, embedding assessments of its structure and significance in the speech itself” (69).

Bauman and Briggs recommend in the analysis of performance then an awareness of process that they call *entextualization* or *decontextualization*, “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a *text* – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (73). This awareness requires asking how and where linguistic utterances acquire formal properties that distinguish that utterance from adjacent utterances, and how readers or auditors acknowledge those formal properties that require specific handling and attention that would separate that performance out. Rather than focusing on how deeply embedded and inextricably embedded in a particular context a performance is, the interest in entextualization focuses attention on the formal aesthetic properties coded into the performance that allow for its distribution outside from the immediate context of its creation and also on those same formal properties as they allow for the text’s *recontextualization*, its application and use

in another social context. Attention to the process by which formal strategies are brought to bear to articulate a particular performance has proven to be particularly useful in a study of Whitman and Dickinson as working within a society wrestling with the implications of secularization. As secularization made legitimizing strategies like the appeal to traditional, received forms less palatable, a variety of other formal possibilities were coming into play as part of secularism's interest in defining new legitimizing strategies more in line with the sensibilities of modernism. An important part of reading their work is the effort to identify how certain formal choices opened up the possibility of experiencing certain performances aesthetically and how those choices affect the larger experience of the work. This kind of attention also involves how the formal properties of the work intend to direct the work's recontextualization – that is, in a different critical register, asking in what kind of world does the text imagine itself taking an active part, whether resisting or reshaping.

Attention to formal properties and the significance of genre choices also means taking a deeper look into the relative positions and roles of the formal elements in the work, and here I have been particularly guided by Bakhtin's essay on "The Problem of Speech Genres" in which he takes to task the tendency in analysis of linguistic performances to regard the "speaker" or "listener" as coherent and stable entities at either ends of the speech act. "The fact is," Bakhtin writes, "that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution and so on" (68). The speaker intuitively this and "does not expect passive understanding" but "response, agreement,

sympathy, object, execution, and so forth.” The speaker, furthermore, is also a listener – “a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and others’ – with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another” (69). Any given performance, therefore, does not index solely its speaker and auditor “is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication” (91). “However monological the utterance may be,” he continues, in reference specifically to “a scientific or philosophical treatise,”

however much it may concentrate on its own object, it cannot but be, in some measure, a response to what has already been said about the given topic, on the given issue, even though this responsiveness may not have assume a clear-cut external expression. It will be manifested in the overtones of style, in the finest nuances of the composition. The utterance is filled with *dialogic overtones*, and they must be taken into account in order to understand fully the style of the utterance. (92)

Given the tremendous free play allowed the indexing of speaker and auditor in a modern poem, and given how much formal investment there is in foregrounding that play, consider how much more multifarious and significant those dialogic overtones might be in such a work. I have tried to read accordingly.

One theoretical underpinning I have had to do without is an operable definition of religion to complement the extensive literature of secularism and secularization as alluded to above. This has not been for a lack of contenders, but instead is emblematic of the object of study. Given that the process of secularization produces the category of religion as its own object of study, any definition of religion seems to emerge from the

point of view of secularism, whether the one doing the defining is or is not an advocate. Take for instance William James's definition of religion in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*: "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (36). Whatever notion of the divine is preserved here is lost beyond the hedge of qualifications, and what James identifies and moves to the fore are the emotional quality and the solitary, private nature of religion considered in its capacity as experience – those elements to which secularism relegates religion as properly occupying. The notion of what might constitute religion or the religious has therefore been left to the immediate context of whatever facet of the work is being examined. More often than not, in such a situation I have found myself returning almost instinctively to a simple distinction between material and immaterial worlds and the host of attitudes and orientations respective to the two sides of that division, and I have been able to take comfort in the sense that such a metadiscursive orientation well respects the nineteenth century's own sense of the question.

James's own sense of religion, though, offers a further dimension to the study, in that I find he elaborates a common sense of religion that has a determining affect in the cultural handling of poetic form then and now, and that is the sense of religion being at its core a powerful innovative force driving forward cultural change. He writes,

A genuine first-hand religious experience ... is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witnesses, the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman. If his doctrine prove contagious enough to spread to any others, it becomes a definite and labeled heresy. But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it becomes itself an orthodoxy; and when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. (369)

The passage is meant as part of a critique of established religion, but it does through a definition of the properly religious as a “heretical sort of innovation” that “lives itself out within the private breast” (367). That innovation eventually calcifies into establishment and tradition, which then must, it would appear, be leveled by new religious innovations that will create new cultural forms in their turn. Here true religion is none other than what in a different context would be characterized as secularism itself. And yet the insistence upon religion as a motivating force of innovation has solid scriptural authority. Isaiah exhorts his listeners,

Sing unto the Lord a new song, and his praise from the end of the earth, ye that go down to the sea, and all that is therein; the isles, and the inhabitants thereof.

Let the wilderness and the cities thereof lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar doth inhabit; let the inhabitants of the rock sing, let them shout from the top of the mountains. (42.10-11)

Surely innovation is here a religious sentiment, an expression of the regenerating presence of the divine inspiring what would otherwise be barren and silent?

The chapter in Isaiah in which that passage occurs concerns divine righteousness, but it is also concerned with literary inspiration, so to speak. Isaiah describes God as saying at the beginning of the chapter, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; / I have put my Spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles” (42.1-2). The passage from a Christian vantage is generally read as presaging Christ as Messiah, but its core sense is of a powerful divine force that directs our being (“I have put my Spirit upon him”) and works its way to justice through our actions. Likewise, the impulse to produce something to be offered in gratitude can be seen in this context as arising not from inside but from a larger field of being. As the image of the “inhabitants of the rock” rising in unison to sing to the heavens, and thereby

turning barrenness into rejoicing, suggests, there is something affectingly both personal and transpersonal about the experience of innovation, a sudden compulsion from without to produce something out of one's own person. And yet there is nothing to suggest that this experience is necessarily oriented solely to an experience of the divine. It seems quite likely to me, for instance, that Whitman had in mind the following well-known passage from Isaiah when inspired to name his collection *Leaves of Grass*:

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the  
goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field:  
The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the spirit of the LORD bloweth  
upon it: surely the people is grass.  
The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for  
ever. (40.6-8)

“All flesh is grass,” says the prophet, and in this we have a germinal notion of democracy: in the face of God's unthinkable power, all worldly beings are alike in their weakness. Whitman takes up this image of the uniformity of the grass without its reference to the eternity of God's power, and finds that it stands self-sufficient, and more than merely self-sufficient: acknowledgement of the idea's sufficiency is a cause for which to advocate and a force that drives innovation.

Even in secular modernity the Bible is a central cultural text. A key event for the literary engagement with secularism would be the 1754 work of Robert Lowth *Praelectiones Academicæ de Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum*, published in English translation in 1787 as *On the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. The profoundly influential work examined a number of Old Testament works not on their religious or moral merits, but on their aesthetic principles. The Bible had become literature. More was involved than simply a shift in perspective on the Bible that would allow it to be viewed as cast by, and therefore reflective of, human efforts, though, as Lowth's work emerged at the

intersection of a interrelated discourses on nationalism, literary originality, and political liberalism. My first chapter examines the inception of *Leaves of Grass* at the far end of these Enlightenment discourses. Whitman's radical and thorough application of egalitarian democracy to his poetics meant that neither inspiration from above nor outside himself, nor a special status for the vocation of poet was possible. The accounts available to him to legitimize a work of poetry were primarily secular accounts of primitivism consistent with a nationalist account of the origins of national characters, languages, and literatures. Seen in this light, Whitman's situation does not differ from many of his contemporaries who found it desirable to ground their works at some distance or time from the contemporary moment, the Orientalism of Bryon and Poe and the antiquarianism of Longfellow and Scott being two such strategies. Whitman's adaptation of the prose hexameter cadences of the King James Version engaged in a polemic on the origin and nature of poetry and the existence and role of national literatures in ways recognized by his early reviewers. While the ostensibly secular focus of primitivism as an understanding of world history made that borrowing possible, the Bible also functioned in these as an index of secularism's reconfiguration of religious practices. Reading the Bible as a world mythology becomes a spiritual practice of the interiorized self. Thus by choosing the scriptural line as his signature poetic form, Whitman indicated his reliance on the literary nationalism with which the form is associated, even as he displaced that nationalism in favor of secularism's emphasis on the sacral nature of the individual self.

The idea of the individual self as a sovereign entity and a self-evident source of moral validation is an integral part of the broader process of Western modernity and an area where the movements of democracy, liberalism, and secularism intersect. There are

a number of important congruencies between Whitman's work and liberal secularism, and there are a number of tensions and contested areas as well. Although Whitman and his readers envisioned the larger moral and cultural project of *Leaves of Grass* as a secular movement in both its freedom from organized religion and its focus on the worldly dimensions of human experience, Whitman and figures in Whitman's intimate circle, such as the alienist and Whitman biographer Richard Maurice Bucke and the popular nature writer John Burroughs, frequently claimed that Whitman was best read not as a literary figure but as a religious teacher. My second chapter reads the insistence on the spiritual nature of experimental form as a critique of the variant of secularism that emerges as part of political liberalism, one that valorizes the universal, volitional, and rational self at the expense of the contingent and particular dimensions of the self that liberalism restricts to religious dimensions of experience. My analysis of section twenty-four of "Song of Myself," a section which displays a fervent secularist bent even as it relies upon liturgical and scriptural form, describes the way in which Whitman brings out an alternate version of the self, one that highlights contingency, contiguity, ethical obligation, and pre-rational realms of experience. Putting Whitman back into this context allows me to challenge recent critiques of Whitman, such as Richard Rorty's and Wai Chee Dimock's, that see Whitman's use of poetic form as validating primarily a liberal secular vision of a categorical and ahistorical self. Moving to the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, I find Whitman consolidating his own interpretation of *Leaves of Grass* as being religious in outlook. In "Starting from Paumanok," one of several poems that appear in that edition and that emphasize the religious interpretation of the collection as a whole, Whitman looks back to his inauguration of the *Leaves of Grass* project and finds



the impulse to innovate to be an expression of the strong ethical encumbrances attendant upon a self enlivened through its contact with the immediate environment and given shape through its history of contact with others.

While Whitman's use of forms with religious associations gesture toward a poetics that evokes intimate, contingent, and even local networks of affiliation and obligation, Emily Dickinson's practice more neatly embodied such a poetics in her orientation to and her micro-publication for an intimate and local audience of friends, family members, and selected literary figures. Her most apparent connection to religious verse practices is the shared basis of her prosody and of nineteenth-century American hymnody in the work of Isaac Watts. Dickinson's work shares with hymnody more than just the quotidian verse form known as common meter, however. My dissertation identifies formal strategies, such as an intense metaphoricity without clear referents, that hymn-singing uses to construct its community of singers oriented toward the shared goal of salvation. Previous formal analysis of Dickinson's work has tended to regard it as characterized by a deeply private lyricism. Reading the poet through nineteenth-century hymnody allows me to explore instead the manifestations of her complex engagement with an audience through her manipulation of not only the formal features of hymn-singing but also the close association of these traits with popular religious practices intended to produce ad hoc religious communities linked by intense affective bonds. Although the assessments of the religious resonances of Dickinson's work have typically interpreted them as the residue of a heroic and solitary secularization, contemporary critics have begun reversing this assessment to characterize her as a profoundly religious writer working within an pervasively religious culture. I find common ground with the

religious readings of Dickinson that identify her work as oriented toward communal rather than individual expression, but I argue that current understandings of secularism offer the best framework for a full appreciation of Dickinson's work. While her alternative modes of publication and formal strategies connect her literary output to a largely religious milieu, her signature deformations of grammar, meter, and rhyme also serve to indicate the writer as an irreducibly singular presence. Dickinson circulated this experience and practice of a meaning-laden self as an exploration of demands secularism placed upon the individual. The poems orient writer and reader alike toward a secularized public sphere while retaining a sense of the works' and therefore the audience's irreducible contingency and particularity.

The initial goal of the study was to plot out a genealogy of the modernist imperative to innovate as an authentic expression of significant form, but at its conclusion I find that goal still out of reach. What the chapters that follow were able to encompass is more modest: the demonstration of the effect of secularization on the meaningful capacity of poetic form during a crucial period in American history for both the development of secularism and modernist poetry. At issue for both Dickinson and Whitman was how to proceed as poets at time when secularization seemed to split the possibilities for authentic literary expression and divide it against itself, either asking it to gesture toward a prosey transparency to a rational and universal public order, whether as policy or satire, or assume the air of a private and cloistered nostalgia for myths and exotica. We could read any poet of that time and place for a variety of engagements with secularization and the ensuing strategies of legitimization, but Dickinson and Whitman are attractive subjects not only for their success in responding to the challenge to the crafting verse that signaled

authenticity and depth of personal experience but their audacity in dealing with the contradictions of secularization head on. Secularization may have acted on poetry as a chastening force, limiting possibilities of expression by casting doubt on the legitimacy of inherited conventions, but it acted as a motivating force as well that, in addition to the sheer exhilaration released through its leveling of hierarchies perceived as limiting or outmoded, offered a new range of thematic concerns. It also offered in the hands of these two poets a new use for poetic forms with strong associations with religious practice. While the legacy of Dickinson and Whitman and the issues and strategies with which they wrestled is a restless experimentation in the possibilities of formal experimentation in verse, Dickinson and Whitman's own work used some rather familiar and seemingly inappropriate, outmoded, or inconsequential formal apparatus – apparatus that the modern age would seem to have cancelled out. These forms allowed them to recast and rework in their work the respective roles of writer and reader as an expression and an investigation of secularization's reconfiguration of the roles of the individual and the social realm. In so doing, they produced bodies of work imbued with a striking originality that spoke not just to the works' exceptional nature as singularities but to the possibilities for a freer and more sincere encapsulation of modern experience.

This study makes no claim to describe any process or transition to a high modernist and secularist privileging of literary innovation. Its more modest claims concern the portrayal of a key and fertile moment in American literary history that was saturated with a fever unleashed or provoked by secularism for the new. Not only did the modern age and its possibilities impress themselves deeply onto the imaginations of nineteenth-century Americans, the idea of a refreshment and renewal of religion swept

across the country in arenas more orthodox, such as the Second Great Awakening and its far-reaching consequences for American Protestantism, and less, such as the self-consciously religious tenor and focus of much of Transcendentalism. These chapters are primarily concerned with the literary manifestations of this intertwined fascination with the secular, the religious, and the new. As such I offer it as a contribution to the criticism of nineteenth-century American literature generally, and in particular as an examination of the kind of culture work occurring in and through the poetry of the era. Given the recent and sustained interest in the relationship of the peculiarly American religious experience to literary expression, I believe that these chapters provide a complementary investigation into the manner in which the mutual constitution of the individual and the social regulated, defined, and produced the possibilities for such a relationship between the religious and the literary. Finally, I expect that this study will also serve as a complement to a study of the literary historical moment of high modernism that was projected in the origins of this particular project, as I have in this study identified and examined a number of currents of modernism that by the twentieth century had, as secularism, faded into an accepted background of moral orientations, as religion, become part of an anthropological self-understanding and an unspoken other to the literary realm, and, as innovation, had become synonymous with and inextricable from the literary altogether.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams, despite a perhaps even greater stylistic debt than Pound's to Whitman and Dickinson both, invoked Edgar Allan Poe in his *In the American Grain*. Given William's incessantly competitive relationship with Pound, it certainly seems in character. Williams's perversity extends even to the acknowledgement of formal debt. It is after all not Poe's poetry to which Williams points as enabling modernist verse practices, but his prose criticism. His chapter on Poe is the penultimate in a sequence intended to set the literary historical stage for the full-blown emergence of a modernist literature, and it is to Poe that he gives the credit for "giv[ing] the sense for the first time in America, that literature is *serious*, not a matter of courtesy but of truth" (*American Grain* 216). Poe's blistering criticism of contemporary poets cleared the ground, allowing for an original body of American writing to emerge – original, Williams points out, not in its derivative senses of new or unique but in its core sense of rooted solidly in the immediate local context. Williams cannot extend this critical courtesy to Poe's poetry, though. In Williams's view, Poe's poetic muse could not take root and flourish in a ground he had so thoroughly opened and emptied through his critical method, and we see this in Poe's excessive "passion for the refrain": it is "like an echo from a hollow. It is his own voice returning –" (*American Grain* 233).

<sup>2</sup>To be fair and accurate, Poe's other work, the criticism as Williams discusses in the note above and the fiction – especially key pieces like the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and the detective tales, represent the process of secularization from a more favorable view. It is a view of modernity in which the disenchantment in the clear light of science and rationality may yield to the experience of horror – a world in which it is possible for Dupin's inspired and singular processes of deduction to reveal the recent presence of a murderous orangutan in an supposedly inaccessible room, for instance, or the *Narrative's* closing scene of existential madness at the universe's far, extreme limits of the reach of human experience, but it is a secularization that can nonetheless be represented as productive of text and of aesthetic experience if not specifically enlightenment. There are writers other than Poe we can locate that display in their work different attitudes toward and of secularism. No writer's grasp on a social issue is ever consistently and fully transparent to their artistic ambitions and interest. It may be useful and interesting, following out from Poe's fiction like the *Narrative*, to consider the gothic science fiction of H. P. Lovecraft as a prose double of Whitman's poetry mirrored and reversed in aspect through the mirror of the secular, darkly. And we can certainly locate modernisms in poetries also deeply invested in explorations of the secular, religion, and the significance of innovative form that are more in line with the sympathies of Poe's poems above: Yeats, for instance. And it is conceivable that one may want to argue for Hart Crane as occupying a similar outlook. The argument in this study is not meant to close down these possibilities or deny their relevance, only pick out the contours of a particularly significant and influential attitude toward secularization and secularism definitive of American modernism.

<sup>3</sup>The interest in an American national identity and the origins of American exceptionalism were not specifically North American cultural developments or concerns. They result from a transatlantic Euro-American discourse on national identities, republicanism, and secularism that projected a whole host of anxieties and possibilities

on the American colonies and then the new republic, its unfamiliar geography and wildlife, its encounters and struggles with a native population, and its peculiar institution of slave labor. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, literary editors of London and Edinburgh discussed the possibilities and ramifications of an American national literature much as they did in New York and Boston. And in the early part of the twentieth, we find Yeats declaring finally the arrival of modern poetry with the emergence of Vachel Lindsay as the raw, barbaric American, the first poet of the Jazz Age.

<sup>4</sup>See Graham Ward's *True Religion* for a genealogy of that concept as the intellectual motor of secularism.

<sup>5</sup>When Peter Berger wrote *The Sacred Canopy*, his classic offering in the mid-twentieth century discourse known as a "secularization theory," he could put forward the apparently relatively evident proposition that the world-wide movement (if one conceives the world and its interests as largely European) toward modernity meant that world religions must confront and adapt to the inevitability of secularization and their decline of influence if they were to survive at all. Only thirty years later, Berger finds himself revisiting and admitting the "value-free" observation he had made earlier with other "secularization theorists" that "modernity necessarily leads to a decline of religion" is "essentially mistaken" (*Desecularization* 2, 3). Instead, the persistence and growth of certain religions that had substantial adaptations to secularization – at least in certain areas – rather than their decline, such as liberal Protestant Christianity in America, and in particular the emergence of global counter-secularization forces such as variety of Islamic and Islamist revivals and other fundamentalisms that reject any effort to "catch up" to modernity mean that we live in a world that if anything is more religious now than it was at the start of the twentieth century (*Desecularization* 9). Berger finds that the secularization thesis is not entirely false, though: a significant exception is the ascendancy of secularization in the Euro-American cultural subset that promulgates the theory, academics and other knowledge professionals. "This subculture," Berger writes, "is the principle 'carrier' of progressive, Enlightened beliefs and values. While its members are relatively thin on the ground, they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the 'official' definitions of reality, notably the educational system, the media of mass communication, and the higher reaches of the legal system" (10). Berger claims that the populist nature of the counter-secularization movements makes the "desecularized" world largely out of reach, conceptually, for secularists: they do not encounter it except when they stumble upon it accidentally as surprised observers – as an isolated anthropological event, making it all too easy to continue to believe in the secularization thesis's validity (11).

<sup>6</sup>See Chapter 13, "Publicity as the Bridging Principle between Politics and Morality," 102-117, for Habermas's discussion of Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?," and Chapter 6, "The Bourgeois Family and the Institutionalization of a Privatness Oriented to an Audience," 43-57, for a discussion of the sentimental affect of a private domestic realm as performing an authorizing function for the specific understanding of subjectivity that begins to be circulated in the eighteenth-century public sphere.

<sup>7</sup>Recent controversies over accommodations made to Muslim students at American universities – facilities for ritual bathing or single-sex gym hours – might suggest that the outcome would be far from certain, though.

<sup>8</sup>Before emerging as Walt Whitman, the bardic poet of *Leaves of Grass*, Walter Whitman had a substantial publishing career as a journalist and newspaper editor and frequently

published fiction and poetry as well. Prior to *Leaves*, his published poetry largely consisted of doggerel pieces or political statements in ballad form.

<sup>9</sup>Here and following the changes from the first to later versions of the poem are very slight.

## Chapter 1

## “You Shall Possess the Origin of All Poems”: Walt Whitman, Originality, and Scriptural Poetry

The American tradition of formal experimentation in poetry began in 1855 with the publication of Walt Whitman’s first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. To the extent that the imperative to experiment with the possibilities of linguistic form became a distinctive attribute of literary modernism, and of American modernism in particular, Whitman occupies a crucial position as the first to break the new ground as well as a persistent presence encouraging continual innovation in the field of poetry. Gertrude Stein pointed to this role of Whitman as an instigator of high modernism in *Lectures in America* (1935) when she claimed that the twentieth century began in the United States and that “you see it first in Walt Whitman. He was the beginning of the movement.” That movement began, in Stein’s terms, with Whitman’s “change in the form of poetry” (quoted in DeKoven 226), a discovery of Whitman’s that William Carlos Williams believed as important to the shape of the twentieth century as the discovery of radium (Williams, *American Idiom*). That change in the form of poetry was the rejection of traditional and conventional English-language prosody in favor of a verse form that has become known, after the French symbolists’ adoption of Whitman as a precursor figure, as free verse (*vers libre*). About the same time that Stein was delivering her lectures in America, Gay Wilson Allen wrote the following:

The one thing that every one knows about Whitman is that he started a *new* mode, style, or type of versification. He is famous (or in some quarters still infamous) as America’s most revolutionary and prosodically original poet. Yet if we ask what was “new” about Whitman’s prosody, we learn only that it does not have conventional meter or rime. (217)

Allen then goes on to demonstrate the antecedents of Whitman’s prosody in a number of



sources widely read in Whitman's time, specifically the King James' Version of the Bible and James Macpherson's imitation of biblical cadences in his epic forgeries collected in *Poems of Ossian* (1773). Allen then also discusses Whitman's style of versification, with its emphatic and persistent use of epanaphora and parataxis, as possessing an inherent similarity to oral, primitive poetry from cultures throughout the world.

Outside the question of the originality of Whitman's prosody, we can point to a number of traits evident in Whitman's poetry that distinguished *Leaves of Grass*: his frank celebration of sexuality, including and particularly male-male affective bonds; his sympathetic depiction, especially in the poems appearing in the earlier editions in the *Leaves of Grass*, of the myriad of American artisan and working-class occupations and activities; and his investigations into an enthusiastically non-standard poetic diction that included slang, indecorous vocabulary, nonce words, and idiosyncratic borrowings from foreign languages.<sup>1</sup> Even so, the question of form remains. If not specifically the prosody, what exactly did the form of Whitman's poetry innovate that precipitated and legitimized an entirely new approach to verse form? Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* in a style that his contemporaries associated with translations, imitations, and forgeries of national folkloric and scriptural forms of poetry. To the extent that Whitman's work resembles these supposedly unauthored folk poetries, we could say that not only was Whitman's poetry unoriginal, Whitman was aping a style of verse that was associated with an implicit denial of any claim to individual originality. In a sense, one of the things that was new about *Leaves of Grass* was that Whitman presented itself unabashedly as the author of a work written in the style of a work that had no author. Pressing further on that point,

our answer would have to address the nature of Whitman's innovative engagement with the metapoetic discourses of the production and publication of poetry, specifically the metadiscourse of legitimation of authorship. This brings us back to an investigation of innovations in the verse form, the implications of which are still alive to us today: how did Whitman and his readers justify the categorization of the innovative works contained within *Leaves of Grass* as poetry if those works eschewed the conventional verse marks of an authored published poetry?<sup>2</sup>

Whitman's poetics in *Leaves of Grass* are part of the shift from a neoclassical principle that artistic productions must be new in subject and treatment in order to delight into a modern principle in which originality as an integral component of the work signifies the work's authenticity and its demonstration of the primal and essential expressive nature of human existence.<sup>3</sup> This transition parallels that described by Foucault in the transition from a neo-classical existence in which the linear and potentially limitless trajectory of human history as juxtaposed against a timeless plane of divine transcendence gives way to a modern existence in which the influence of the originary forces of existence are felt as immanent and omnipresent but obscured within each human heart.<sup>4</sup> That is, the issue of genre in *Leaves of Grass*, or what we could describe as the legitimation of a certain mode of utterance as authored verse poetry, is a problem of secularization. The end result of the transformation in aesthetics was the shift from viewing innovation in form as having occurred at an inaccessible remove into viewing it as necessary to each work or significant style. At the point that *Leaves of Grass* appears, though, the transition to a modernist poetics was far from complete, and what signifies primarily to Whitman and his first readers is not innovation – newness for

its own sake – as a first-order aesthetic strategy but originality – an attempt to reconcile reference to first things with a contemporary effort to do something not derived from a previous work. In the transition to a modern, secular worldview, poetic form becomes a scandal or problem: how does a work produced out of the inner recesses of one's unique and sovereign, solitary existence become viewed as a legitimate and worthy of the attention of others. The solution is to appeal to a particular rhetoric of legitimation, and originality was only one such that the process of secularization opens up. Other key rhetorics emerging in the wake of the Enlightenment revolving around literature were those of aesthetics and nationalism, and both had strongly determinate roles in how Whitman made the case for the significance of his originality.

The history of the reception of *Leaves of Grass* has tended to focus on the rhetorics of aesthetics and nationalism rather than on the issues of originality and the formal aspect of the poems in which Whitman negotiates the problems and scandals of an original poetry. Absent a full account of the significance of form in the work, critical approaches typically offer interpretations of Whitman's break with convention as analogies for his engagements with certain aesthetic or political concerns, organicism and republican democracy specifically. The first significant analogy offered was the organicism of idealist aesthetics. This theory based the legitimacy of poetic form on the necessary development of the work's interior principle as analogous to the growth of living things, as opposed to a conception of the work that would have it be an assembled artifice analogous to the constructed nature of mechanical entities. We find the development of this theory in the Anglo-American transmission of German Romanticism in the writings of Coleridge, Carlyle, and Emerson – all of which were familiar to

Whitman.<sup>5</sup> Whitman himself repeatedly evokes the analogy of poetic form to organic growth in his Preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, as he does, for instance, in the following oft quoted passage from the Preface: “The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form” (714). Whitman’s early endorsement of this critical model seems to have ensured its enduring relevance to his work despite the perceived loss of critical endorsement over the last few decades of organicism’s fuller expression in the some of the critical approaches of the New Criticism.<sup>6</sup>

Though discussions of organic form continued to dominate Whitman criticism and scholarship, a number of scholars have contributed significant efforts toward reversing earlier approaches that dehistoricized poetic production and consumption. The new Whitman scholarship largely concerns itself with efforts to reconnect Whitman’s work with the cultural environment that produced it.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the pressing issue guiding discussion of Whitman’s form has been the articulation of the relationship of the development of the form to the work’s engagement with politic issues of the time. We can note a touchstone for this tendency in the frequently cited comparison first made by Bliss Perry in *Walt Whitman: The Life and Work* (1906). Perry implicitly summoned the possibility of linking republican rhetoric to discussions of Whitman’s poetic form when, as evidence for the availability of such thinking to Whitman, he quotes Blake on the rejection of conventional metrics in the prophetic books: “Poetry Fetter’d Fetters the Human Race!” (89). Here Perry and those after him link allegorically or iconically the

lack of formal constraints of what would in the 1910s become referred to as “free verse” to the existence, real or desired, of political freedom. That is, as a republican democracy – once it truly manifests – does away with the arbitrary social and political constraints placed upon persons under the feudal European dispensation that prevented the unimpeded movement of the autonomous will of an individual, so then “free verse” removes the constraints placed upon the poet’s individual creative expression by the continued adherence to traditional and artificial inherited forms.

That Whitman’s formal idiosyncrasies are analogous to the forms of democratic association has become an important critical commonplace. This approach generally links the lack of grammatical subordination in Whitman’s epanaphora and parataxis to Whitman’s egalitarian democratic principles that agitate against the subordination of any one person to another in a hierarchy of political authority.<sup>8</sup> His expansive catalogues of American types, one of the most distinctive features of the early poetry, are a frequently cited demonstration of his efforts to represent within a formal unity the unreduced particularity of American diversity. The lines that in later editions of the *Leaves* will comprise section fifteen of “Song of Myself” – the section that gives the poem its final title – are perhaps the most famous instance of this. Here Whitman gives a lyric and seemingly unsystematic itemization of recognizable occupational or social types, generally one per line, the lines linked through proximity and their grammatical parallelism:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,  
 The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild  
 ascending lisp,  
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,  
 (264-266)

and so forth, ending with the following quasi-apotheosis:

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,  
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,  
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself. (327-329)<sup>9</sup>

Depending on one's confidence in poetic form to negotiate cultural contradictions, the thematic articulation of diverse types within a formal unity could be said to reflect or to transcend democracy's conflicting demands between individual sovereignty and the profound equivalency of each person's rights in their subordination to the general commonweal.<sup>10</sup>

Betsy Erkkila gives us, in *Whitman the Political Poet*, a thorough attempt to link Whitman's poetry to his politics through an exposition of "his attempt to create democratic language, form, content, and myth commensurate with the experimental politics of America, to embody in his poetic persona America's unique political identity, and to engage the reader as an active participant in the republican politics of his poem" (69). As a "revolutionary formation" of a literary work commensurate with the unfinished project of republican egalitarianism, the *Leaves* are also an effort "to reinvent both the language and substance of verse and the genre of poetry itself." Invoking the exhortation from Blake on the freeing of verse, Erkkila writes that "Whitman's free verse originated from a similar desire to release humanity from the fetters of external form, political or artistic" (86). Form emerges in this and similar discussions as a negative criterion, the rejection of existing conventions of poetic form once their allegorical connection to ideological forces becomes apparent. David Reynolds, for instance, extends this criterion from the formation of Whitman's verse line to examine the larger fragmentary and aleatory nature of the poems as a rejection of narrative or sustained meditation in favor of

“odd juxtapositions and radical disjunctions designed to shock the complacent reader” (Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* 315).

Political analogies for free verse also have that verse assume a positive construction in line with a desirable form of political association. Wai Chee Dimock highlights the syntactical austerity, as against the wealth of reference, of Whitman’s verse in its relationship to notions of the thinness of the liberal public self and the unencumbered generalized self as developed in the discussions of democratic liberalism by John Rawls and Michael Sandel, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Another approach discusses the grammatical fit of Whitman’s end-stopped line to a phrasal, rather than metric, prosody as an analogy of the desirability of the transparency of one person to another. That is, in Whitman a line of poetry is a grammatical phrase, and a stanza block, more often than note, is a complete sentence. As opposed to a metrical principle that works through the tension of the metrical demands of the line against grammatical demands of speech rhythm, the refusal of free verse to allow arbitrary conventions of personal style to muddy a sense of a virtual “reciprocal” presence of the writer to the reader indicates the desirability of a political economy based on the equivalence and transparency of persons to one another in an unsubordinated and yet unmediated manner (Grossman, *Poetics of Union*).

The issue of originality, however, can be nothing but a scandal to attempts to read into Whitman’s poetry a politics of form, and the value of viewing *Leaves of Grass* though its engagement with secularization and issues of originality is that it disturbs what continues to be a limited and limiting reading of Whitman’s work. While Whitman without question is an important innovator and a valuable precursor figure, the role of

Whitman as originator seems to confine contemporary Whitman criticism to the dynamics already present in Whitman's initial gesture in producing the poetry. We can represent the history of the criticism as the movement or translation from analogies of organic form to analogies of political formation, and yet the transition from organicism, generally figured as a universal model for growth or development, to political analogies for the development of psychologically-individuated and ethical sovereign selves is a crucial strategy for Whitman in the legitimation of his poetic voice. Whitman's own understanding and presentation of his break from conventional prosody recognized and promoted the possible analogical application and interpretation of the poetry, but he also realized that even as his project exceeded the merely literary realm, it also exceeded the political realm.

We can see Whitman's reading of the larger ambitions of his verse project in his unpublished "Introduction to the London Edition," prepared a few years after the end of the Civil War in hopes that Rossetti would print it anonymously as an introduction to edition of selected poems he was preparing in England. The description of the work and Whitman's explanation of what lies behind its assumption of original forces echo persistent themes in Whitman's prose writings about his poetry, here rendered more succinct through the demands of a nationalistic self-presentation. The brevity, in any case, makes it easier to follow the rhetorical registers he moves through in the justification of the work. Here Whitman claims that America has yet to offer anything "more original, more autochthonic, than its late contribution in the field of literature, the Poem, or poetic writings, named *Leaves of Grass*" (Workshop 150). In the context of Romantic theories of language and scriptural and national literatures, original and



autochthonic are largely synonymous, and both infer a deep organic connection between national literatures and languages and the national geography of which they are the first fruits. Whitman then moves from a general literary account of originality to a description of the work's uniqueness: its relation to republican political theory and the development of the sovereign individual. "True to its American origin," *Leaves of Grass* is to anticipate and help construct "a more complete, more advanced, idiocratic, masterful Western personality – the combination and model of a new *Man*." The plan, scientific and ethical, from which the work is written is "born of & designed to justify the Democratic theory of [Whitman's] country" (Workshop 150-151).

According to the introduction, if we were to use any one word to describe the overall development of the whole of the book and the interrelation of its various parts that word "would seem to be the word Democracy. But," Whitman adds, "it would mean a Democracy not confined to politics; that would describe a portion only. It would need the application of the word extended to all departments of civilization & humanity, & include especially the moral, esthetic, & philosophic departments" (Workshop 152). It would then be religious, a term that assumed increasing importance in Whitman's description of *Leaves of Grass* after the Civil War. Whitman here describes the religious nature of the works as a reflection of its origin in his own person (stated anonymously) as a "thoroughly *religious* being" whose "interior & foundation quality . . . is Hebraic, Biblical, mystic" (Workshop 153-154). We begin the introduction with an organic model of development, the autochthonic growth of the poetry out of its land and its bearing that land's characteristics. Instead of an organic principle of ineffable nationality impelling the development and articulation of that work, Whitman claims that a democratic theory

sustains and organizes the poetry, a theory unique to America, with which the theory is identified, but global in its implications. Yet the import of that theory, the development of a new type of person, a fully sovereign individual, is found to have not a political but a religious basis as evidenced by the final justification of the poetry being dependent upon our acceptance of the “Hebraic, Biblical” nature of the author, “this new, powerful, & . . . most typical American” (Workshop 154). *Leaves of Grass* exceeds the political realm in that while it adopts the political articulation of a fundamental category of democratic liberalism, the individual, that individual becomes sacralized, adopted into a religious conceptual framework, through the repeated rehearsal of its being uttered into existence in a national, scriptural epic form analogous to the primitive antecedents of the Hebrew Bible.

Recent Whitman scholarship has renewed our acquaintance with a number of literary works whose formal properties bear strong resemblances to Whitman’s, works that Whitman’s contemporaries recognized as being possible or likely antecedents, and works that furthermore seem to further a political program at odds with Whitman’s own. A political reading of poetic form could not but at some point be forced to draw equivalencies between Whitman’s work and its formal antecedents in imitations of national-scriptural verse forms and then be led to equate Whitman’s project with the nationalist, nativist, and imperialist projects of those formal antecedents. Matt Cohen discusses Whitman’s form in relation to the work whose immense popularity in antebellum America and whose similarity in shape and style led a number of nineteenth-century reviewers, including Henry James, Jr., to mention it in the context of *Leaves of Grass*, Martin Tupper’s *Proverbial Philosophy: A Book of Thoughts and Arguments*,

*Originally Treated* (1838, 1849). Other than through its formal association with Whitman's verse life, Tupper's work is remembered, if it is remembered at all, as a byword for the banal extremes of Victorian sentimentality. Tupper's proverbs looked on the page like a more sedate version of *Leaves of Grass*, and there are some common stylistic mannerisms between the two: the individual works comprising the volumes are composed of prosey end-stopped lines, these lines achieve a sonorous, cadenced quality through their frequent grammatical parallelisms, and large portions of both are composed out of sequences of unsubordinated or otherwise mediated figures – didactic allegories in Tupper's case where we might find the national, occupational, or regional types in Whitman's. Cohen notes that “the two men had substantial ideological differences. Tupper was a Tory and an Evangelical Protestant, and his chief objective in poetry was to promote religion . . . Whitman's rejection of hierarchical social structure and orthodox religion represented a fundamental challenge to Tupper's world-view” (24). From this, Cohen wants to highlight the “curious irony in the fact that Whitman's famous formal innovations, now seemingly the inevitable poetics of a democratic bard, may have been shaped by the success of an aristocratic aspiring poet laureate,” and then to draw the following conclusion: “Certainly the use of similar form for different ends suggests that there is no necessary connection between politics and form” (26).

Rather than assign form to the purely incidental, Cohen wants to relate the commonality of form to a shared “poetical attitude of tremendous self-confidence” – in a shared posture of a presumptive egotism in their blithe disregard of established poetic conventions (26-27). Whitman's poetic persona projects all of that brash optimism associated with mid-nineteenth century America, and when linked to some of his more

radical philosophical and religious inheritances – such as the doctrine of personal divinity that Whitman found not only in Emerson’s writings but in the Hicksian “inner light” Quakerism that was a significant part of his upbringing – that persona could produce utterances of a serene omnipresence and seductive power that overreached all but the voice of God. Readers responded to this, and some negatively, as egotism. One contemporary reviewer noted the Tupper-Whitman similarity wrote of the poetry that “it seems to resolve itself into an all-attracting egotism – an eternal presence of the individual soul of Walt Whitman in all things, yet in such wise that this one soul shall be presented as a type of all human souls whatsoever.”<sup>12</sup> I agree with Cohen that the presence of Tupper, and other writers whose styles anticipate Whitman’s supposed free-verse revolution, embarrasses not only the claims for Whitman as a formal innovator but also our attempts to justify the interpretation of disjunctive or unconventional poetics, of Whitman and his successors, as allegories of political engagement.<sup>13</sup> I also agree with him, at an initial level, that the formal similarities indicate a further commonality between Whitman and Tupper, and I would add Macpherson and others, of a certain presumption of the authorial persona in writing in such a manner. My agreement ends here, however, when I insist we take into account that the response to the presumption falls out differently in different cases: for Macpherson it is accusations of forgery, for Tupper charges of banality and an impertinent sense of self-importance, and for Whitman credit for the inaugural gesture of the first truly modern poetry.

I find it instructive that while all three works display some claim to their consideration within the generic category of poetry, Macpherson’s and Tupper’s works adopt the mantle of an antiquarian and prose mediation – whether in earnest or not – of

original poetic form. Macpherson's versions of the Ossian poems, fragments and epics, were presented as literal prose translations of the original poetry, but prose nonetheless. Tupper was quite explicit in directing readers' attention to the similarities between his work and the poetic books of the bible, and *Proverbial Philosophy* was received by many in America as – and looks to us in retrospect like – poetry, Tupper himself did not make such a claim for the work, and according to his biographer was surprised to find it made on his behalf (Hudson 41-44).<sup>14</sup> Whitman, in distinction from the other two, did in fact identify his own work written in the scriptural style adopted by all three writers as poetry, but it is important that we remember that in the first edition that claim was only implicit. In the Preface Whitman discusses poetry in its relationship to the American nation and people and discusses the poet presaged by that relationship, but he nowhere states that he would be that poet or that the ensuing works are poetry of any kind.

Furthermore, Whitman's manner in assembling the poems and writing the Preface demonstrates a sustained indeterminacy as to the genre of the individual works contained within the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* or the book as a whole. Are the twelve poems contained within in fact separate works and, if so, how they would relate to one another? As all of the works were untitled, unless one assumed them beneath the sporadic running title of "Leaves of Grass," and as the division between what we now identify as individual works was variously indicated, readers justifiably responded in a variety of ways in classifying the contents of the volume. The review in *Life Illustrated*, the periodical published by Fowler and Wells, the distributor of the 1855 *Leaves*, does not distinguish among individual works and does not recognize that the lines of poetry coalesced into any discrete single work, stating that "the volume is filled with 'Leaves of

Grass,' which are lines of rhythmical prose, or a series of *utterances* (we know not what to call them), unconnected, curious and original."<sup>15</sup> In the *North American Review* Edward Everett Hale, who while eventually describing the work as a prose preface followed by twelve poems begins by echoing an assessment of the book's hodgepodge or commonplace-book arrangement, writing that *Leaves of Grass* is "a collection of observations, speculations, memories, and prophecies, clad in the simplest, truest, and often the most nervous English."<sup>16</sup> A number of reviewers described the work as comprising a single work entitled "Leaves of Grass," and indeed Whitman himself at least as late as the original framing of the "Introduction to the London Edition" demonstrates some indecision about whether the book in its entirety is a single "Poem" or perhaps a collection of yet generically indeterminate "poetic writings" or "utterances."

Perhaps more significantly, a number of reviews did not recognize the poems as poems. That fact becomes cited in our contemporary rehearsal of the career of the innovative nineteenth-century poet as evidence of the poet's audacity in innovation. Whitman's audacity in publishing the *Leaves* is incontrovertible, but more than just critical blindness was involved in that gesture of critical refusal. Those who denied the poems the generic status of poetry recognized that such a claim was being made upon their attention, regardless of the justification offered for their refusal of recognition, just as those who described the works as poems recognized that their attribution of the genre label occurred without a clear formal vocabulary to buttress their polemic.<sup>17</sup> "It is a poem," one wrote, "but it conforms to none of the rules by which poetry has ever been judged. It is not an epic nor an ode, nor a lyric; nor does its verses move with the measured pace of poetic feet."<sup>18</sup> In applying the name of poetry to the work, the

reviewers signaled their acknowledgment of the project of innovative poetry, though the use of the term indicates more than a purely rhetorical sign of approval. The absence of any “rule by which poetry has ever been judged” that would distinguish the work from other printed matter would seem to vitiate the usefulness of the term, except that in so assigning *Leaves of Grass* the name of poetry the reviewers who viewed the work favorably were indicating their recognition of the work’s reference to a critical legacy of the eighteenth century that held the spirit or essence of poetry to be lawless – to be prior in the order of cultural development to the formation of the rules of grammar and verse.

We can see that critical legacy at work when the reviewer quoted just above turns to discuss the effect of the poetry on the reader and produces what we can only term a misreading:

If we follow the poet we must scale unknown precipices and climb untrodden mountains; or we boat on nameless lakes, encountering probably rapids and waterfalls, and start wild fowls never classified by Wilson or Audubon; or we wander among primeval forests, now pressing the yielding surface of velvet moss, and anon caught among thickets and brambles. (19)<sup>19</sup>

The reading strikes one as unusual because there is in truth no such experience in Whitman: Whitman’s wildlife, lakes, and mountains are not unknown or nameless, and the landscapes are certainly not primeval and unpopulated. Leaving aside this omission of Whitman’s characteristic trope of the litany of types of persons and names of places, this reading indicates the type of critical discourse that Whitman’s work engaged at its publication. That discourse was the Romantic legacy of the eighteenth-century discourse of originality which literary critical and antiquarian interests had by Whitman’s time largely transformed into a folk primitivism with frequent nationalist tendencies. While we generally associate the term “primitivism” with a Rousseauistic romanticization of the

“noble savage,” that association neglects the wide scope of the interest writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held for what they believed to be the early stages of civilization, and that association limits the analytical power of the term for us today. Though the primitivism which I invoke here in my discussion of nineteenth-century American poetry does value that highly romanticized notion of savage societies for their vigor, directness, and originality, I am ultimately more interested how this interest shapes the reliance of a number of interrelated fields, such as historiography, philology, literary criticism, and the beginnings of anthropology on a speculative reconstruction on the development of human institutions based on an assumption of a shared psychical structure of faculties present in the savage mind, those of speech, reason, and religious awe, or some such related system. Though this speculative historiography is most famously present in the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as in the political economy of Adam Smith, primitivism continues to exert a powerful shaping influence on discussions of humanity as such, or its social and cultural distinctions, throughout the nineteenth century.

While on one level originality had developed into the modern notion of authorship and that notion’s valorization of proprietary role of individual genius over innovation, the interest in originality had also developed the cult of origins idealizing the artist’s ability to access the time of origins that remained present within Nature as a primal generating force.<sup>20</sup> According to the romantic cult of origins, the primitive, in the sense of his or her historical primacy, inaugurates the conventions of verse in that his or her lawless and enthusiastic effusions are the first translations of the impressions of Nature into speech. Those who come after repeat these originary efforts and develop conventions, the rules of



verse, to contain and mark them, yet these regulated effusions cannot recapture the originary passion and beauty of the first such expressions. The contradiction and the scandal that Whitman faced in his attempt to author an innovative poetry exist in precisely this model of originality. That is, the perceived authority for the primitive paeans to Nature's beauty and sublimity rested on their fidelity to their source. The works that follow and codify that expression enabled the continued production of such utterances, but such ensuing works must justify their authority on their fidelity to these rules in order to be recognized as poetry, at the expense of their own originality. The romantic solution was to locate the originary power of nature within the self as its informing spirit, yet that resulted in the scandal of presumptive or overweening genius: that the inference of "the eternal presence of the individual soul of Walt Whitman in all things," in the words of one of the reviewers quoted above, involves the further presumption that "this one soul shall be presented as a type of all human souls whatsoever."

Macpherson and Tupper both attempted to produce works that signified as original but evaded the contradictions inherent in their authorship. Macpherson dodged – at first – the scandal by locating the authority for his Ossianic works in an unavailable original that he claimed to have translated with absolute literary faithfulness. Tupper's attempted authorship of proverbs modeled after Solomon's did not have the taint of forgery and falseness of the Ossian poems, but his appeals to universality of sentiment damned his critical reputation. Susan Stewart has coined the term "distressed genres" for works like Macpherson's and Tupper's, falsely antiqued folkloric forms developed as an evasion of the contradictions inherent in the cult of originality. She points out that the

literary proverb, as one of these “distressed genres,” is highly desirable as an artifact of nostalgia, and yet its structure of authority makes it notorious volatile as “the ‘newly minted proverb’ always has the status of forgery.” Its attraction and its volatility can be called in to account for Tupper’s astonishing popularity in the 1840s and 1850s and the sudden evaporation of the public regard for his work soon after when his name becomes a byword for sanctimonious moralizing. “The voice of the proverb,” Stewart writes, “like the voice of the fable, is also the voice of both everyone and no one. As everyone, it bears upon the situation with the weight of tradition and traditional authority; as no one it escapes the limitations and contingencies of biography and historical context” (81-82). The reputation of Macpherson work managed to survive somewhat the loss of the its author’s good standing: the sonorous prose-poetical quality of his biblical cadences, written as if propelled across the ages by the enthusiasm of a long-distant primitive Gael, was lingering proof of the gravity his project. The Ossian poems were still poetry, even if scandalous poetry. Tupper’s attempts were not as successful. His “original treatment” of his proverbs was only initially justified through his assumption of an authorial position of sheer banality, a banality that soon overwhelmed whatever merit the works might have had.

#### “The Begetter of a New Offspring Out of Literature”

We associate originality with artistic worth. Even now, in a climate in which critics discuss pastiche and simulacra as important artistic modalities, we distinguish those types of quotation from originality’s complementary opposite, imitation, which we associate with lack of value. We do so through reference to the work as a mediation of

the artist's expression and have done so ever since our ways of discussing the relationship of the work of art to its subject changed, as M. H. Abrams identified, from an interest in an Aristotelian *mimesis* of the natural world to a concept of art as an expression of the artist's own self. Edward Young expressed the growing distinction in the discussion of poetry between *mimesis* and imitation in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), the key text in the eighteenth-century's cult of originality, when he wrote that "*Imitations* are of two kinds; one of Nature, one of Authors: the first we call *Originals*, and confine the term *Imitations* to the second" (9). Sir William Jones represents the final stages of the transition from the valuation of the first to the denigration of the second when he endeavors to prove in "Essay on the Arts, Commonly Called Imitative" (1772) that

though *poetry* and *musick* have, certainly, a power of *imitating* the manners of men, and several objects in nature, yet, that their greatest effect is not produced by *imitation*, but by a very different principle; which must be sought for in the deepest recesses of the human mind. (131)

Originality as a first-order criterion for aesthetic value obtains its value through its reference to the work's verisimilitude to the artist's expressivity and the artist's sincerity in so crafting the work, to, in other words, the work's authenticity or genuineness. As such, the notion of originality appears critical to the concept of authorship, and against such we find arrayed, with imitation, a larger range of disturbances to the truthfulness and adequacy of the work's reference to its creator, such as plagiarism, forgery, and the banality of Tupper's prose-poetical proverbs.<sup>21</sup>

The discourses of originality and of literary nationalism had in fact entailed one another since their inception. A decade even before Emerson's American Scholar address and some time before the Jacksonian revival of calls for a national literature, William

Cullen Bryant closed his 1825 series of “Lectures on Poetry” at the New York Athenaeum with “On Originality and Imitation” following upon one entitled “On Poetry in Its Relation to Our Age and Country.” In the penultimate lecture, Bryant affirms the possibility of a distinctly American poetry, even in an age when the rude and animating passion of poetry seemed more and more out of place with an age best represented by the transparent rationality of prose. In the final lecture, he distinguishes in literary history between ages of imitation and ages of originality, describing the glories of any nation’s literature as being largely cemented in those ages of originality that produce the truly immortal works: “The works of the early Italian poets were composed in such an age; the proudest monuments of English verse are the growth of such a spirit; the old poetry of Spain, the modern poetry of Germany, grew into beauty and strength under such auspices” (43). Bryant is in the end silent as to whether the possibility for American literature entailed the approach of just such an age, but there is a palpable sense of hope in his description of the always possible emergence of “some extraordinary genius, educated under different influences than those operating on the age, and compelling admiration by the force of his talents” who will dispel the torpid indolence of an age of imitation (44).

Originality was doubly important for the literary nationalists of the 1830s and 1840s. Not only would its presence indicate the quality and immortality of the works produced under the aegis of the new nation, its presence would also indicate the absence of the imitation of forms and manners inherited from European culture. Imitation of European forms, although necessary until the emergence of American forms, was considered dangerous not only for the lack of distinction threatening the stability of

national self-presentation but also for the perceived inappropriateness of the forms for republican America's national spirit. Reliance on inherited form risked weakening the republican resolve of the United States through the importation of implicit links to monarchy and feudalism, as well as possibly checking American vigor with an influx of the stagnation and decay associated with what was perceived as Europe's imminent decline. Whitman wanted the reading community to perceive his work as responding to the demand for distinctly American forms, and we can see this in the advertisements he drafted and the anonymous reviews of the poetry he himself had written to sell the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. "The New Poet" followed by "America's first distinctive poem – 'Leaves of Grass' by Walt Whitman" was one such advertisement. "An American Poet at last! / Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass' are the commencement for the literature of the world of a large fresh growth of an American school, in place of the romantic school, and of the classical and aristocratic schools," runs another, longer one that highlights the "perpetual spirit of union and equality" of the author's soul and includes a portion of the catalog of American regional types from section sixteen of "Song of Myself" as a demonstration of that (Unprinted ad proofs). "An American bard at last!" echoes the first sentence of the first self-review.<sup>22</sup>

The Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* is perhaps American literary nationalism's densest and most eloquent and riveting testament. Whitman here engages the issue of a distinctively American poetry as being resolved largely through the exceptional nature of the American republic: "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem." According to Whitman, America, "not merely a nation but

a teeming nation and nations” (709), possesses two sources of this poetical nature, the natural wealth and grandeur of its lands and seas, and the inherent grandeur of its “common people” (710). To be sure, Whitman’s real interest lies with a poetry that works from the greatness of the common people, not from the perceived might or grandeur of the state as representative of that people, an approach Whitman would have regarded as undemocratic and outmoded, nor from a sense of an American destiny infused with the awe inspired by the national landscape. “The largeness of the nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the citizen,” Whitman cautions us, and it is in this link between the nature of the American individual and the national spirit as expressed in a revolutionary democracy that Whitman finds the “unrhymed poetry” that “awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it.” Poetries based upon the grandeur of a national geography and the greatness of a court or army as representative of a nation are precisely what the American poetry to come will overstep and replace. As something beyond “the theatre of the antique or the aimless sleepwalking of the middle ages” (710), American poetry will exceed “the magnitude of geography or shows of exterior victory to enjoy the breed of full-sized men or one full-sized man unconquerable and simple.” The emergence of an original American literature depends upon the emergence of a representative poet who will conform to the greatness of his or her people as a measure of the greatness of his or her faculty as a poet: “American poets are to enclose old and new for American is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people” (711).

In rhapsodizing the arrival of the national bard, Whitman consistently refers to the grandeur of the American landscape and the corresponding greatness of the poem and the

poet that corresponds to or incarnates that greatness. Referring at one point to the American national bard, for instance, Whitman writes, “His spirit responds to his country’s spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural live and rivers and lakes”<sup>23</sup>

Immediately following that statement, Whitman includes a long passage naming American bodies of water, including the oceans on either side, covering the breadth of the continent, a breadth that the national bard equals in his or her own capacity as poet:

“When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them” (711). Whitman follows this with a litany of kinds of trees and then kinds of birds, both meant to be evocative of the immensity and diversity of the American natural landscape. The lists and descriptions of the expansive breadth of the American landscape appear as well in a number of key places in some of the early poetry’s significant longer poems: in the poems we know as “Starting from Paumanok” and “Song of the Broad-Axe,” for example, in “Song of Myself” in particular, and the passage quoted from just above becomes incorporated into the poem we know as “By Blue Ontario’s Shore.” Although Whitman never explicitly links the grandeur of the landscape to the spirit of the national citizenry nor to the inherent greatness of an American national literature, the reference to landscape remains an important and frequent trope in *Leaves of Grass*. Certainly no less important than the naming or description of the features of the land is the imitative or iconic representation of the immensity and diversity of the American landscape through Whitman’s frequent use in the early poetry of catalogues, which, even when they describe a landscape of people engaged in particular activities, as they do in the poems we know as “Song of

Occupations” and “Song of Myself,” evoke the breadth of the natural landscape in their cartographic extension of reference.

Myra Jehlen has drawn our attention to the totemic function of the landscape in the formulation of American exceptionalism in the early years of the American republic. The objective meaningfulness of North American geography at that time “was no mere conceit but something real, that this continent in its material form embodied its own historical destiny” (24). That objective meaningfulness had become less clear when Whitman began to write *Leaves of Grass*. Certainly calls for a national literature as commensurate with the apparent grandeur of the national geography continued to appear, but the simple-minded boosterism of such appeals were widely mocked by the critical establishment.<sup>24</sup> And yet even as a conceit, as we can see from Whitman’s efforts, the appeal to the sublimity of the landscape as a basis for literary nationalism retained considerable figurative power. Nor was the lack of any explicit cognizable link between geography and language or literature a barrier to the rhetorical or theoretical force of the landscape. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s influential theories of language, with which Whitman was familiar in at least a second-hand fashion,<sup>25</sup> posited the original linkages defining a nation’s spirit that infused national character into the “physiognomy, body-structure, dress, customs, life-style, domestic civic arrangements, and above all in the impress that people stamp, over a span of centuries, upon their work and deeds” as sealed away into an irretrievable time of origins and as an ineffable interiority of national being deep with the “inmost core of mind itself,” no longer available to rational explication and therefore only to be sensed intuitively or artistically (Humboldt 163). As a nagging but never fully-explicated notion, geographical destiny continued to manifest itself in strange



fashions throughout and beyond the antebellum period. The popular 1849 course of lectures on comparative physical geography by Princeton professor Arnold Guyot at the Lowell Institute in Boston, for instance, linked Humboldt's notions of linguistic forms and national being and Lavatar's principles of the physiognomic links between the body and the spirit to produce an interpretation of North American geography as the locus of the fulfillment of divine providence and the redemption of human history.<sup>26</sup>

Whitman does not in the Preface theorize a link between poetic form and the nation, whether one derived from the landscape, republican theory or otherwise, nor does the Preface deal with any specific issues of poetic form, as, for example, Milton does in the note on "The Verse" that begins *Paradise Lost*. Whitman in the Preface concerns himself instead with the role of the poet and the nature of the poet's relation to issues of originality and the legitimation of poetic utterance. Despite the American republic's powerful authorizing precedent for an original national literature, specific innovations in poetic form remain problematic. Stylistic innovation as a demonstration of one's inherent poetic force would disturb Whitman's vision of the poetry as reciprocally representative of the poet and his or her audience. "The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself," Whitman writes. He then continues, dramatizing the voice of the great poet – the voice that much of the following poetry will assume as its own voice,

He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains [ . . . ] What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me.

Even so, the new American poetry will be a profound innovation upon existing models as

its political formations are profound innovations upon no longer acceptable models of association. The great poet

walks at his ease through and out of that custom or precedent or authority that suits him not. Of the traits of the brotherhood of writers savans musicians inventors and artists nothing is finer than silent defiance advancing from new free forms [ . . . ] [H]e is greatest forever and forever who contributes the greatest original practical example. (717)

When originality appears as a mark of personal style, it is presumptive and disruptive, disturbing the easy equivalencies between people, poet, nation, and poem. Whitman would not, on the other hand, read originality as referring specifically and merely to the self of the author in the case of “the greatest practical example” offered by the American national bard. Originality here means the innovation of styles in conformity to representative character that the poet and the audience would hold in common.

How then do we distinguish between a stylistic disruption indicating an illegitimate egotism and genuine innovation? At one level the test of a poem’s legitimacy would be its truthfulness – its “genuineness” or “candor” to use Whitman’s language in the Preface. That quality would be the fidelity of the poetry in translating, in its capacity as an exemplary mediation, between the world and one’s self generally, or, in particular, between any of the terms the Preface brings into play as fundamentally equivalent: the nation, its people and its geography, the soul, the body, and the poem itself. The body, in particular, in the Preface and the poetry, emerges as a figure for genuineness or candor and the legitimation of the poetry, though I put that forward with the caveat that Whitman intends far more than a figurative reading for the role of the body in the poetry. That said, there is much to Whitman’s much vaunted sexual and physical frankness that would seem to derive from the figurative insistence on the presence of the body as being a gauge or

guarantor of the truthfulness of the verse. The body is, in any case, associated with the display of candor in the theory and the verse, and when Whitman writes in the Preface that “the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors . . . but always most in the common people,” it evidences itself in “the freshness and candor of their physiognomy” no less than “their deathless attachment to freedom” (710).

Because the relationship of the body and expression as reciprocal, expression may find itself bodied forth into physical human form. The body functions so well in *Leaves of Grass* as a figure for the demonstration of candor, the fidelity in translation from one term to another, because it is concrete and visible, and any disturbance in the translation from the spiritual to the physical would result in a visible deformity. Expression presents, therefore, a real danger to physical well-being, and Whitman insists that the great poet’s audience “shall receive no pleasure from violations of natural models and must not permit them” as “that which distorts honest shapes or which creates unearthly beings or places or contingencies is a nuisance and a revolt” and these “exaggerations will be revenged in human physiology. Clean and vigorous children are jettied and conceived only in those communities where the models of natural forms are public every day” (722). Hence the importance of the great poets, “the poets of the kosmos,” who are commensurate with the breadth of each term in the sequence of translations Whitman’s preface posits. “As the attributes of the poets of the kosmos centre in the real body and soul and in the pleasure of things they possess the superiority of genuineness over all fiction and romance” (721). As opposed to the hollow distortions, exaggerations, and

fictions the authors of popular romances produce that weaken and cripple a people, these poets, “known by the absence in them of tricks and by the justification of perfect personal candor” (722), produce work whose value, worth, and legitimacy we can recognize in the strength and health of our own bodies and that of our children.

At the end of the Preface, Whitman summarizes the test of legitimacy as a catechism-like recital of “the jealous and passionate instinct of American standards,” assuming the voice of the representative citizen as reader of the poetry. Whitman asks of the poetry to come (and therefore implicitly of the poetry that commences on the following page),

Is it uniform with my country? Are its disposals without ignominious distinctions? Is it for the evergrowing communes of brothers and lovers, large, well-united, proud beyond the old models, generous beyond all models? Is it something grown fresh out of the fields or drawn from the sea for use to me today here? I know that what answers for me an American must answer for any individual or nation that serves for a part of my materials. Does this answer? or is it without reference to universal needs?

In a restatement of the classic tenet of literary originality, Whitman writes, “The poems distilled from other poems will probably pass away” (728). Original poetry must be distilled from other sources, not already existing poetic models. The test for the “greatest original practical example” in the case of an American national literature will be its ability to mediate from one of Whitman’s “convertible terms” to another:<sup>27</sup> nation or “country,” a democratic republican theory “without ignominious distinctions,” the physical well-being of “large, well-united, proud” “brothers and lovers,” and the new fruits of the field and sea, freshness here being the landscape’s analog of physiognomy’s candor. That is, in the actual reading the poetry, we accept the following claim made in the poem that will become “Song of Myself” as genuine and sincere: “I am the poet of

the body, / And I am the poet of the soul” (422). And in these two lines, we also see a formal representation of the strategies of legitimation that the theory places upon them in that they are grammatically parallel. One mirrors the other.

While the line break accentuates the parallelism of the lines – grammatical parallelism being Whitman’s distinctive formal trait, particularly in the early poetry, if we read them as a single line they approximate a dactylic, or heroic, hexameter, the line of the originals of all originals, Homer’s epics. The hexameter line acts as a ghost, in Eliot’s sense, animating the “free verse” line of much eighteenth- and nineteenth century efforts at original literature. Formal hexameter – which never lost for educated readers the immediate reference to Homer – was revived by Goethe during the height of Germany’s fascination with the cult of originality for his *Hermann und Dorothea*, inspiring later imitations of both the line and the genre of the romantic idyll thus inaugurated by Longfellow and Tennyson. Christopher Pearse Cranch used a rough hexameter line for his “Correspondences,” his free verse poem on the Swedenborgian, and Emersonian, doctrine of the correspondence of natural sign to spiritual fact, a poem that was printed in the *Dial* and probably read by Whitman. Tupper’s biography indicates that at least one critic read *Proverbial Philosophy* as being “expressed in hexameter verse, or what is intended as such,” despite Tupper’s protestations to the contrary (Hudson 42). Kirby-Smith claims to find a rough hexameter – divided like Whitman’s into two parallel clauses – in both the King James Version of the Bible and in much of Macpherson’s *Ossian* (137-9, 149).

The terms in Whitman’s series may be all convertible, but they do not all function alike. Two of them are in fact ultimate terms, in that Whitman’s theory, explicitly or

implicitly, allows them to function as the ground of translation. That is, in the theory of the Preface, we are to recognize a poetic utterance as legitimate in its conformity to the mediation from one term to another, but two of these terms are never translated to, only from: the soul and the landscape. All mediations or translations must ultimately refer to one or the other. As the source of all original poetry, it is their impressions left upon the shape of the material that carry the burden of poetic innovation. “Only the soul is of itself . . . . all else has reference to what ensues,” Whitman writes in the Preface (724). The landscape is nonetheless ever present as an ultimate ground in the theory and early poetry, even if its explicit theorization cannot be accomplished easily. The role of the land and sea as a grounding legitimating function nonetheless appears as a persistent trope at the figural level, as in Whitman’s statement that the great poet must “flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides” and “attract his own land body and soul to him and hang on its neck with incomparable love and plunge his semitic muscle into its merit and demerits” (726).

The use of the soul and the landscape as final terms or grounds for the series of translations from one rhetorical register to another in the poems now affords us a more precise look at the problem of originality. The legitimacy of the poetry is based on its fidelity in translation from one term to another, but where does originality originate? One answer is, in “the inmost core of mind itself” which is not entirely available to translation. After all, it itself has not been translated from anything; it is an original term. Whitman writes in the poem that will become “Song of Myself,” “I too am not a bit tamed . . . . I too am untranslatable, / I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (1132-1133). The lawless primitive utterance, the “barbaric yawp,” what we are

to recognize that Whitman and his reader share as their truest, inmost expression presents itself as the ineffable ground and source of an original poetry. The representative individual soul expresses itself as the untranslatable innovation of “I too.” Nowhere in the poem is the idea of soul as source and inspiration of the poetry more eloquently and affectingly portrayed than in the address to the soul in what we know as section five of the poem, the section that begins “I believe in you my soul.” Whitman here writes of the erotic union of the body and soul as the loving and reciprocal embrace of two aspects of the self, the embodied self as the speaking self, “the other I am,” and the soul as beloved, as a self-transforming epiphany that many readers of the poem recognize as the dramatic basis for the cosmic voice and vision that follow and drive the poem: “the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other” (82-83).

While the presentation of the poem as generated from the representative facets of the self in reciprocal interaction is apparent in the title “Song of Myself,” Whitman did not assign the poem that title until the 1881 edition. The first readers of the poem encountered instead a poem that might or might not have been titled “Leaves of Grass.” The locus of the figure of the grass as representative for the collection appears in the poem in what is now section six, immediately following up the union of the body and soul and the resulting ecstasy and vision. This portion of the poem begins, “A child said, What is the grass?” (99). Section six offers a parallel account of the genesis of the poem, one with reference to the problems of originality but without a specifically spiritual account of the forces that drive the poem’s cosmic mode and propel the sympathetic identifications of which the poem is largely comprised. We find in miniature the argument of the generation of more or less of the entire poem or poems – the book’s

second genesis, so to speak.

The child's question at first prompts an assertion of the question's futility: "How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it is any more than he" (100).

Whitman follows with a series of tentative formulations:

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, [ . . . ]

Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . . the produced babe of the vegetation.  
(101-102, 105)

The grass is a sign, clearly – a flag or a handkerchief dropped as a sign of one's passing, and the speaker attempts to answer the question by locating to what the grass refers. The possibilities offered touch metaphorically upon a number of the terms offered by the theory of the Preface: the grass refers to the body as incarnation of spiritual striving, to the soul itself as a remnant of the divine, and it is also a sign of itself, after a fashion, as an emblem of the generative power of the earth. The child, as we will see later, comes into play here and elsewhere as representative of questions of development, largely mental – spiritual and psychological, but here resonates with the growing grass as representative of what for Whitman is the larger concern of poetic organicism, development and growth generally. The next guess, as if following out a progression, proposes that the grass represents the act or function of representing, "a uniform hieroglyphic,"

And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the  
same. (106-109)

The representation of representation here doubles as the representation of nationality,



though one consistent with continental geography and not necessarily political boundaries, as the inclusion of “Kanuck” as slang for Canadian indicates. The other proper nouns, despite their appearance as suggestive and rather offhand, direct the reader’s attention to the possibility of signifying the constituency of the nation in a variety of ways: regional, professional, governmental, and racial. That a racially inclusive gesture inaugurates the brief catalogue should also serve to remind us of the genesis of much of Whitman’s poetry and poetics in the issues of personhood, citizenship, and nationality attached to the increasingly vociferous debate around slavery at the time Whitman is preparing *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>28</sup>

Whitman then extends his speculations on what the grass represents to include another figure of commonality, our shared mortality: “And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (110). The speculation cannot offer any certainty, though, and Whitman can only reiterate possibilities: “It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men, / It may be if I had known them I would have loved them” (112-113). This persistence in speculation threatens to become uncertain to the point of being disruptive, and the mood darkens somewhat before Whitman accepts his incapacity and announces that the grass, like the soul, is untranslatable speech:

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues! [ . . . ]

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,  
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of  
their laps. (119, 121-122)

Whitman at that point moves to address the reader, assuming as his own the pose of the inquisitive child: “What do you think has become of the young and old men? / What do you think has become of the women and children” (123-124)? The lesson of the grass

becomes assimilable, translatable, to a lesson on the immortality of the soul, and Whitman finally has an answerable question. “They are alive and well somewhere; / The smallest sprout shows there is really no death” (125-126). Though this passage does not contain a representation of ecstasy like the previous section of the poem in which the body encounters the soul, it does reach in its back-and-forth query of what lies behind the grass a voice in the cosmic mode found the previous section: “All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (129-130). Whitman can then move onto the next passage of the poem in the capacity of a representative spiritual being: “I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed babe . . . and am not contained between my hat and boots” (133).

The grass section and the poem that will be titled “There Was a Child Went Forth” are both concerned with the consecutive speculative identifications of a solitary figure in the grip of a passionate enthusiasm for the immediate environment of the landscape. That figure as a type of primitive poet functions in both literary and historiographical post-Enlightenment discourses as the primal originary scene of linguistic and social formation, and as such is the structural link between political and poetical forms and the constitution of the modern liberal subject as both an autonomous individual and an interiorized representative self. In his “Essay on the Arts, Commonly Called Imitative,” Jones presents the originary figure as part of his defense of the transition in theories of poetics from imitative to expressive models, and locates in the originary lawlessness of form a fidelity to the original passions of the self.

It seems probable then that *poetry* was originally no more than a strong and animated expression of the human passions, of *joy* and *grief*, *love* and *hate*, *admiration* and *anger*, sometimes pure and unmixed, sometimes variously modified and combined: for if we observe the *voice* and *accents* of a person

affected by any of the violent passions, we shall perceive something in them very nearly approaching *cadence* and *measure*.

The original passion driving such expression is the sense of awe the primitive mind experiences as it encounters the primal landscape.

For if we conceive a being, created with all his faculties and senses, endued with speech and reason, to open his eyes in a most delightful plain, to view for the first time the serenity of the sky, the splendour of the sun, the verdure of the fields and woods, the glowing colours of the flowers, we can hardly believe it possible, that he should refrain from bursting into an extasy of *joy* and pouring his praises to the creator of these wonders, and the author of his happiness. (131)

Primitive poetry, then, is a representation of the consecutive expostulations the view of the landscape inspires in the as-yet-ungoverned passions of the primitive.

We can see the powerful structuring effect of this scheme of a descending rapture in Whitman's reproduction of it in the aftermath to the mystical experience occasioned by erotic union of the body and soul:

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,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,  
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers . . . and the women my  
sisters and lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is love;  
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,  
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,  
And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullen and  
pokeweed. (91-98)

Note that the effusion of delight from Jones's hypothetical primitive and the speaker of Whitman's poems begin with some expostulation directed toward the extreme limits of their cognition, God for Whitman's speaker and the vault of the heavens for the primitive who with these expostulations is only making the first few steps toward the development of natural religion. The direction of the attention of the poet in both cases then works in

toward the figure's immediate environment, flowers for our primitive and the "mossy scabs" and weeds for our poet of the commonplace. The schematic nature of the progression results from the shared grounding of the two expositions in theories of the development of a general representative self as a social being as the end result and sedimentation of a series of addresses to that self's environment.

The glue holding together the psyche of the primitive self as nascent social being, and the psychological principle that "Song of Myself" derives from the discourse of primitive originality, is sympathetic identification. In *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, an important critical work for the Transcendentalist movement following James Marsh's translation of it in 1833, Herder discusses passionate sympathetic identification as indicative of the original voice of primitive literatures, as exemplified by the early books of the Old Testament: "It is the nature of the human soul to refer every thing to itself, to think it like itself, and thus find itself reflected in every thing . . . In this respect all ancient nations are alike" (2:11). The overweening egotism of the primitive poet lies at the basis of the process of all figuration, in that a passionate self-interest leads the poet to identify analogously with natural objects he or she encounters. We find this process of identification, expressed as the metaphorical use of sensible natural objects and processes to describe mental states and societal abstractions, at the basis of modern theories of language, from Locke's *Essay* through Emerson's "The Poet" and beyond. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, theories of passionate sympathetic identification also played a crucial role in the development of aesthetics and literary criticism, which we can see in the interest in the use of poetic address to psychologize the existence and interaction of objects in the natural world, the trope of *prosopopoeia* or personification –

though writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generally preferred the related term *apostrophe*. There was a fairly unified sense that the essence of poetry, and therefore the core impulse of art, was that of passionate apostrophe, and the origin of the resulting formal conventions and themes could be reconstructed from that base.<sup>29</sup> The trope of apostrophe is the crux uniting the interest in early literatures and the late-eighteenth century rhetorics of sentiment, nationalism, and liberalism, in that apostrophe as a root faculty of psychological development was also regarded as a necessary precondition to psychological interiorization, sociability, and the resulting ethical codes. “This transfer of one’s self into the objects around us,” Herder writes, “and ascription, as it were, of our own feeling to those objects with which we hold converse, has formed not only the inspiring principle of language, of speech, but to a certain extent also the first development and existence of moral principle” (2:12)<sup>30</sup>

“I am he attesting sympathy,” Whitman writes in “Song of Myself” (461), and it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the notion of sympathetic identification to Whitman’s work. The bulk of “Song of Myself” concerns itself with the exploration of the many various possible expressions of sympathy possible in the cultural moment of its composition. In the development of his poetics in the Preface, Whitman even assigns it, with pride, as the most essential faculties of the self: “The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own. But it has sympathy as measureless as its pride and the one balances the other and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other. The inmost secrets of art sleep with the twain” (716). Whitman uses “There Was a Child Went Forth” to dramatize the development of an individual, representative psyche through its formative

accumulation of sympathetic identifications, demonstrating the theoretical underpinnings to that psyche's capacity for sympathy in the other poems.<sup>31</sup> In doing so, Whitman reconfigures the schematic of passionate address typical to the critical rhetoric surrounding the cult of originality. "There was a child went forth every day," Whitman begins the poem in a narrative mode, and then in the lines immediately following he describes the premise: "And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or pity or love or dread, that object he became, / And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day . . . or for many years or stretching cycles of years" (1-4). The narrative proceeds as a series of impressions with which the child identifies, beginning with the natural and close at hand, then proceeding to the figures of the parents and then on to a progression of impressions increasingly social, remote, and abstract. "The early lilacs became part of this child, / And grass, and white and red morningglories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird [ . . . ] all became part of him" (5-6, 10); Later,

The streets themselves, and the facades of houses . . . the goods in the windows,  
 Vehicles . . . teams . . . the tiered wharves, and the huge crossing at the ferries;  
 The village on the highland seen from afar at sunset . . . the river between,  
 Shadows . . . aureola and mist . . . light falling on roofs and gables of white or  
 brown, three miles off [ . . . ] (31-34)

The poem does not, however, present itself to us as a record of the statements of enthusiastic identification, such as might come from Jones's original primitive poet. That is, the poem does not present itself as the reportage of the original voice however mediated by the transmissions from generation to generation. Whitman instead presents the poem as a narrativizing medium, a biographical reconstruction of the identifications that lead to psychological development and a fully developed sympathetic faculty, but

without the apostrophe that constitutes the operative residue of those encounters. Rather than a descriptive account of an individual's socialization, this poem seems oriented instead toward introducing the narrative to the social realm as a standard account of everyone's development as a social and political being.

This distinguishes Whitman's poem at one level from Macpherson's Ossian poems, works that do present themselves as impressions of the series of apostrophes uttered by some person at some original scene. Apostrophe was so much a part of the theoretical climate that enabled and sustained Macpherson work that the poetry is saturated in salutes to natural forces and dead heroes. The complex framing of nearly each utterance as reportage introduces an alienating complexity into the Ossian poems. The narration of events is constantly being interrupted by a song that recounts in the first-person another hero's struggle and grief, which itself may contain the recital of an earlier song, so that the poems take on the form of related series of nesting-box first-person utterances addressed to the dead or to natural forces. An example of Macpherson's Ossian frequently reprinted in the miscellanies of nineteenth-century American periodicals is the final portion of "Carthon: A Poem," generally printed with the title "Ossian Addresses the Sun" or some such synopsis. Whitman had himself clipped and kept three different printings of this brief prose-poem (Stovall 117-118). In the reproduced fragment, Ossian reflects on the sorrow of Fingal, who has just buried Carthon, his friend and companion, killed in battle, and addresses their shared grief to the sun:

O thou that rollest above, round as the shield of my fathers! Whence are thy beams, O sun! thy everlasting light? Thou comest forth, in thy awful beauty, and the stars hide themselves in the sky; the moon, cold and pale, sinks in the western wave. But thou thyself movest alone: who can be a companion in thy course! The

oaks of the mountains fall: the mountains themselves decay with years; the ocean shrinks and grows again: the moon herself is lost in heaven; but thou art for ever the same; rejoicing in the brightness of thy course. (133).<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting that eventually the sun too will fall to the universal forces of mortality, Ossian finds some measure of identification with the sun, assuaging his grief at his solitude:

“Exult then, O sun, in the strength of thy youth! Age is dark and unlovely; it is like the glimmering light of the moon, when it shines through broken clouds, and the mist is on the hills; the blast of the north is on the plain, the traveller shrinks in the midst of his journey” (134). The achievement of thematic or emotional resolution through the

identification with some transcendent natural object or event is hardly unusual in poetry.

What served to distinguish Macpherson’s efforts from such an operation in Romantic lyric in general was his reliance on a complicity with the reader in a certain

understanding of existing theories of poetry. We all know how this is supposed to work,

Macpherson is saying, so let us watch this primitive at poetry’s dawn work it out on his own. The Ossian poems are recognizable for the crudity and simplicity of their figuration

and for the exaggerated naiveté of their speaker, because that is what was expected of

them, and, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notion that the sun itself was mortal would have been accepted as another quaint touch demonstrating the speaker’s

primitive innocence.

Whitman presents his own poem as a theoretically guided representation of the child’s identifications prior to their formation into utterances, and as report at a secondary remove from reproducing the utterances themselves. The action then occurs at a point prior to what in theory would be the actual original effusion of poetic utterance, while the scene of the writing of Whitman’s poem, the poem we are actually reading, is of some



distant later time. The result is an account of the development of a representative psyche: one not rooted to a specific originary place and time, as each spoken apostrophe would be, but general account of the emergence of sympathetic identification as a linguistic faculty of socialization and ethical inculcation. To highlight the poem's consistency with the theory of the development of the self through identificatory processes, Whitman adds the following as an envoi: "These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes and will always go forth every day / And these become of him or her that peruses them now" (39).<sup>33</sup> The lines link the processes of self-formation to the ensuing exchange of those identifications through the poem as a linguistic social medium, and the last line's gesture toward the readers of the poem closes with the recognition that the sympathetic faculty is the result of a general, shared socialization process. This reading of the poem may seem dryly sociological, but that is largely a reflection of the danger inherent in the poem itself – that it become so close to an expression of theory it risks becoming no longer poetry. The poem even develops a formal stutter at one point early on. One of the verse lines does not break into a phrasal rhythm and finds itself impelled well into the realm of prose, if idiosyncratic prose.

The early lilacs became part of this child,  
 And grass, and white and red morningglories, and white and red clover, and the  
 song of the phoebe-bird,  
 And the March-born lambs, and the sow's pink-faint litter, and the mare's foal,  
 and the cow's calf, and the noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of  
 the pond- side . . . and the fish suspending themselves so curiously below  
 there . . . and the beautiful curious liquid . . . and the water-plants with their  
 graceful flat heads . . . all became part of him. (PAP 138)

There is no other line in Whitman's poems quite like that last line that eschews the grammatical parallelism across the line breaks (even while retaining the grammatical parataxis) which in the 1855 *Leaves* is the primary formal mark of the poetic works. The

line returns the reader to the heightened prose of the Preface's metapoetics, dropping for a moment as it were the pretension to poetry.

The emergence in that poem of the formal character of prose theory that underwrites the rest of the poetry should remind us that although Whitman's contemporaries for the most part recognized the nature of his project enough to allow him to claim the label of poetry for the *Leaves*, there is still a certain volatility to his project. The danger of Whitman's innovations was not that they would be rejected out of hand as ridiculously presumptive, but quite the contrary, that they would be misrecognized as a rather prosaic working through of widely accepted theories of poetics. When the publication of the 1856 edition seems to have been carried out, it seems to have become clear to everyone, Whitman included, that the *Leaves* were poems, Whitman normalized into free verse lines the stray prose utterance in what he was then calling "Poem of the Child That Went Forth, and Always Goes Forth, Forever and Forever." He also dropped the final line that extended the identifications toward the readers' self-experience. The verse form that Whitman adopted from the Bible, with the few relatively recent precedents for such an adoption, could sustain that condition of generic indeterminacy between original poetic utterance and prose theory projecting the situation in which the utterance becomes possible for nearly interminable lengths, but Whitman's borrowed verse line also demanded the reader at some point resolve it one way or another. As opposed to Whitman's predecessors in the form, in this case the resolution of the interpretation was on the side of poetry.

Although there is a fluid and productive relationship between the poetry of *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman's prose works, after the publication of the 1855 edition, when

Whitman's work had largely if not entirely comfortably been accepted as poetry, there is a tendency for the poetry to colonize the prose as raw material. The most prominent example of this would be the appearance in the 1856 edition of "Poem of Many in One," what would eventually become "By Blue Ontario's Shore." This poem appears as the translation of the 1855 Preface into poetic form, appropriating large passages of that prose work – which Whitman did not reprint with his poetry again – into a poetic utterance, the first of several occasions when prose theoretical statements drafted to marshal and encompass the poetry contained in *Leaves of Grass* find themselves transported into the poetry. Whitman later reworked the poem into a dramatic mode through the introduction of two characters, a Mother Democracy whom the poet addresses and, borrowing a page out of Ossian, a stern Phantom, largely representative of the Civil War dead, who comes to demand "the carol of victory" from the American bard. In the material's first reappearance as poetry, the utterances are grammatically unified through their presentation as first-person utterances. At the same time, the poem exhibits that fluidity of pronominal reference characteristic to Whitman's work: the poem indicates its subject, the American bard, and it indicates the readership of poetry – as both readers of the bard anticipated in the poem and readers of the poem itself – in the first, second, and third person. Or, to express it in another manner, in the poem the typical American reader imagined by the poem can at one point be described by the poem in the third person (e.g. "Already a nonchalant breed, silently emerging, appears on the streets, / People's lips salute only doers, lovers, satisfiers, positive knowers" 224-225), at another be directly addressed by the poem in the second person ("Have you thought there could be but a single supreme?" 24), and at another assume his or herself the role of the poem's

speaker (“Is it uniform with my country?” 195). The American bard as poet-hero is alike referenced by the poem in the first, second, and third person, as the poem alternately allows the bard to proclaim his or her existence in speaking the poem, quizzes the bard on his or her qualifications or authority to proclaim in such a manner, and describes the bard’s activities and relations to the nation he embodies.

In a sense there are two poets in the poem. One poet is the person of the author, Walt Whitman, whose writings comprise the physical form of the poem; the other is the anticipated national bard who speaks throughout the poem as the emanation of the American national character. That there are two figures in the poem becomes clearer in the later revisions when Whitman relocates the poem, fictionally, as a biographical occurrence with a specific place and time – “By blue Ontario’s shore, / As I mused of these warlike days and of peace return’d, and the dead that return no more” (1-2). The reader is then allowed to distinguish between the historical personage of Whitman as an actual figure framing and constructing the poem and the voice that speaks from the poem that results from that activity. In its first appearance, though, Whitman allows the poem to retain the same productive indeterminacy between speaking roles that gives “Song of Myself” and much of the early poetry its enigmatic power. The voice of the poet as author functions in the early versions of the poem largely as a surrogate for the reader in addressing the figure of the bard: “Who are you indeed who would talk or sing to American? / Have you studied out the land, its idioms and men?” (180-181).<sup>34</sup>

In the Preface the voice of the bard and the voice of the reader appear framed as reportage and preceded by a fair amount of speculative projections of theoretical positions: for example, the introduction of the voice of the American reader in Whitman’s

catechism of an American national literature discussed above. Whitman reworks that passage into what will become section twelve of the poem, leaving only the question “Is it uniform with my country?” unchanged, but the nature and basic thrust of the questions remain. A substantial change in the translation of the prose to the poetry, though, is that while the Preface’s passage is formulated to question the nature of that bard’s work, the poem addresses the questions to the nature and qualifications of the bard himself.

Originally we have the following questions: “Are its disposals without ignominious distinctions? Is it for the evergrowing communes of brothers and lovers, large, well-united, proud beyond the old models, generous beyond all models? Is it something grown fresh out of the fields or drawn from the sea for use to me today here?” (728). Translated into the verse we get the following:

Have you possess’d yourself of the Federal Constitution?  
Do you see who have left all feudal processes and poems behind them, and  
assumed the poems and processes of Democracy?  
Are you faithful to things? do you teach what the land and sea, the bodies of men,  
women, amativeness, heroic angers, teach? (184-186)

Read as poetry, the nature of the utterances, whether actual or anticipated, seem in fact less important than the roles they indicate. And, notably, while the utterance remains in the first person, the emphasis on the addressee becomes more pronounced.

We see congruent transformations in the translation of the utterance of the poet-hero from the Preface to the poem. For instance, when Whitman characterizes in the Preface the common message of the great poets of all ages, that message appears as a direct quotation from the poets addressed to everyone and no one in particular: “The message of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose,

What we enjoy you may enjoy. Did you suppose there could be only one Supreme?" (717). When this passage becomes part of "By Blue Ontario's Shore," Whitman omits its putative source in the bards, yet retains and emphasizes the address to the reader: "All is eligible to all, / All is for individuals, all is for you" (27-29). The drift of the transformation is by no means necessarily toward an emphasis on the addressee of the utterances. We find in the poem a couple of passages where the bard speaks the poem as the referent of the lyric *I*, which appears initially in the Preface as referring to that poet in the second and third persons. The following passage from the Preface anticipates the messianic poet-hero, referring to him as the "one":

Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista. 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. (712)

In the poem the sentences are reworked into lines that are pronounced by that poet:

Others take finish, but the Republic is ever constructive and ever keeps vista,  
Others adorn the past, but you O days of the present, I adorn you,  
O days of the future I believe in you – I isolate myself for your sake,  
O America because you build for mankind I build for you,  
O well-beloved stonecutters, I lead them who plan with decision and science.  
(119-123)

The transformation of the relative positions of the poet and his audience is neither consistent nor complete throughout the poem, but we can make general observations about the drift or tendency in the revisions away from impersonal description toward forms of direct, personal address. Whereas the Preface presents these moments of direct address as theoretically-derived dramatizations, framing them within a neutral, descriptive prose theory as moments of reportage, the poem does not. The utterances in the poem occupy the same plane, as it were, in that they are not subordinated to the

authorial voice.

These statements of the national bard in a cosmic mode are sustained as prose through the techniques of an impersonal prose style that has at its disposal a variety of conjectural framing techniques to defer authority and responsibility for the claims. In a lyric performance, the statements must be otherwise supported. On the one hand, the claims that these lines make – “I isolate myself for your sake / O America,” i.e. – are couched in that sonorous scriptural style of original poetries such as the ancient Hebraic books of the Bible in such a way as to make them evoke the sense of having risen up autochthonously as the first fruits of a new nation. And on the other, the lines’ authority and legitimacy rest on the authority and conviction held by the person of their author. Yet that latter route had less legitimizing force for Whitman as he is writing the lines than it does now reading them a century and a half later. Certainly Whitman in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” is rife with concern over how original or national poetry shall be identified and evaluated: the poem expends more energy expostulating on the recognition and confirmation of the national bard than it does on the need or usefulness of one. Although some of the anxiety is obscured by later revisions, we can see in the poem’s original opening lines a forthright declaration of its legitimacy that is also a canny negotiation of it:

A Nation announcing itself,  
I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated,  
I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own forms. (9-11)

The first two of these lines do not state their mutual relation – they do not explicitly indicate whether the *I* of the second line is the nation announcing itself or the poet making a separate but congruent statement. The implication is the former, but the lack of

specificity enables the easy slippage in the *I* from the voice of the nation to indicating the voice of its bard (“I am he who tauntingly compels men, women, nations” 34) to indicating the contemplative voice of the poet as distinct from the active bard that is added in the post-war revisions. The lack of subordination and framing for the variety of utterances that comprise the poem may do very well as a demonstration of the kind of egalitarianism that Whitman tirelessly promotes, but it also serves very well to displace perpetually out of the body of the poem any authoritative stance for the utterances.

It is not after all the poem that Whitman seems most anxious about but the poet. The last line of the Preface famously reads: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (729). In section thirteen of the poem, the line reappears with a slight but potent difference: “The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr’d till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb’d it” (351). The addition of the “sternly deferr’d” over the course of a single year and a new edition could be and has been read to reflect Whitman’s disappointment that the first edition had not made him a literary star, that the proof had been withheld from his effort and chastened he makes the necessary correction to his theory. That account does not jibe with the biography, though, as the volume had itself been generally if not entirely well reviewed, and if the general readership had not responded, the literary avant-garde as represented by Emerson’s Concord circle seemed to be beating a path to Whitman’s Brooklyn door. Nor does it jibe with the brash optimism of the open letter to Emerson included at the end of the volume in which Whitman brags about the sale of the first edition, his literary capacities, and his plans for the future. We should instead read that retrenchment of the final test of “the proof of the poet” as a demonstration of the inherent



anxiety of Whitman's project and as a mark of the strategies of legitimation on the translation of the phrase into poetry. Now that the poet was speaking there would have to be proof, but that would have to wait until the *Leaves of Grass* project had found their final form. That the proof is "sternly deffer'd" would suggest a degree of self-abnegation rather than censure, as if Whitman already felt that the *Leaves* would be a project coterminous with his own life and that the proof would have to wait until the poet like the poems was complete in form.

"Nationality – (And Yet)"

Whitman's 1855 Preface was written as a testament to the principles of literary nationalism, a movement that had waned considerably by the time Whitman published the first edition of the *Leaves*. Whitman's prior literary career as a journalist and writer of sensationalist fiction had been largely forged in the crucible of that movement's heyday in the 1830s and 1840s. He had written for John O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review*, and shared the magazine's literary nationalism and radical democrat sympathies. He was, like Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, associated with the Young America movement, the political movement in which literary nationalism and radical democratic leanings had crystallized in literary New York, though his efforts at the time were considerably more directed to popular tastes than the other writers.<sup>35</sup> But by the 1850s Young America had become largely a jingoist, expansionist nativist movement, and literary nationalism had largely fallen from favor.<sup>36</sup> The literary community had grown tired of out-sized and never-satisfied claims for the inherent and potential greatness of American letters, and the national mood had become affected by the divisiveness of the debate over slavery and

other issues. Attempts to reconcile the anachronism of the Preface and the heavily nationalist rhetoric of the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*, and perhaps to reconcile Whitman's nationalism with our contemporary distaste for such rhetoric, approach Whitman's literary gestures toward nationalism as attempts to revive that rhetoric in the service of a national reconciliation or healing.<sup>37</sup> Certainly Whitman's discussion throughout his career of the role of the national bard insists on the value and use of poetry to unify the populace into a coherent collectivity that can transcend individual or regional antagonisms. I want to insist, however, that Whitman's literary nationalism is both about and not about a specifically American nationalism. Whitman was clearly an advocate of a peculiarly American literary exceptionalism, yet he harnesses the rhetoric of American literary nationalism to a project that is finally not specifically American or nationalistic, nor is it even entirely political in its scope or its desires. The belatedness of Whitman's intervention into the debate over literary nationalism allows him to rely upon its rhetorical force to engage recognition of his project and its strategies of legitimation, but the distance of the rhetoric from the context in which created it allows Whitman to bend its force to what will unfold over the course of Whitman's career as a primarily spiritual project.

Theories of literary nationalism, Romantic theories in particular, often involved theorizing a hidden or noumenal relationship between a specific national geography and the character or manner of the national populace. Theories based on the particularity of a national landscape were untenable, however, to an American republicanism that insisted on the distinctiveness of its political formation. The value of a democratic political formation lay not only in its exceptional nature but also in its assumption of a potentially

globally transformative phenomenon, the augur and catalyst of a completely new age. And yet metaphorical reference to some model of a poetry's fidelity to the climate and its landscape retained its power as a purely literary and hyperbolic trope. The first growth of life upon a new soil was one such nearly ubiquitous figure. For example, Whitman would have been familiar with the passage from Margaret Fuller's essay "American Literature" that extols the America of "ample field and verge enough to range in and learn every impulse free, and abundant opportunity to develop a genius wide and full as our rivers, flowers, luxuriant and impassioned as our vast prairies, rooted in strength as the rocks on which the Puritan fathers landed" (2:123-124). This abundant and vegetative genius would be the originary growth that Whitman's poetic voice claims both to speak and to offer as proof of the authority to speak. That newly minted genius would "reject none, accept all" as raw material for its representative verse in keeping with the broad inclusiveness necessitated by democratic theory. The proof of the claim to genius would then be the ability to "reproduce all" of that material in that form derived from its originary situatedness in the immediate national landscape. After all, "What is the grass" if not the perfect figure for democratic commonality?

Once we move into demonstrations of the republican soundness of American original literature – its inclusiveness and representative nature, we leave the organic model of a situated and interdependent growth behind in favor of a political model of the democratic self that is both exemplary and ubiquitous. The validity of that self in both producing and being produced by that initial original utterance becomes the final test of legitimacy of the poetry. After all, the voice of the poet-hero insists that it is not necessarily fidelity to the nation or that first growth but to the initial announcement, to his

“own forms,” that determines the suitability of the poetry to come. The political self whose development primitivism theorizes emerges as an ethical, social subject through the application of an inherent poetic faculty. The republican insistence of Whitman’s poetry means that the originary connection of that self to its situatedness in the landscape by means of the poetic faculty must always be revealed as a metaphor for some other relation. Yet the inherently linguistic nature of the political self becomes its own source of anxiety, as the utterance of a wholly linguistic self is a disturbing equivalent to that self. Without a point of origin and some sense of a translation or connection of that point to the self, one’s self as residue of linguistically mediated identifications threatens to lose the distinction between the self speaking and the self being spoken of. We see this in section four of “Song of Myself,” where Whitman begins to prepare the stage for the erotic union of body and soul in the section to follow:

Trippers and askers surround me,  
 People I meet . . . . the effect upon me of my early life . . . . of the ward and city I  
     live in . . . . of the nation,  
 The latest news . . . . discoveries, inventions, societies . . . . authors old and new,  
 My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business, compliments, dues,  
 The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,  
 The sickness of one of my folks – or of myself . . . . or ill-doing . . . . or loss or  
     lack of money . . . . or depressions or exaltations,  
 They come to me days and nights and go from me again,  
 But they are not the Me myself. (66-74)

This section sustains a productive indeterminacy between whether the items listed are what the “trippers and askers” ask of Whitman, or whether all the lines represent a series of items, including the “trippers and askers,” that “surround” the speaker, contributing alike to his or her psychological development. That is, whether the utterance is framed as the dramatic utterance of a self being called upon by hangers-on to give an account of its development or socialization, or as that of a self giving an account of its development as

a necessary part of that process of socialization and entrance into a political community is not settled.

As Whitman's work developed and his thinking about the significance of his distinctive approach to poetic form developed as well, increasing emphasis was placed on the need for the voice of the poem to give some account of the profound depths of selfhood from which it originated to distinguish it from a purely linguistic performance. His urge to give an account of his own person – to testify to the Me Myself – came to be characterized as the inauguration of his innovative poetic practice. As he describes it in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," what was at first a "mostly indefinite" desire, "hovering on the flanks," had

steadily advanced to the front, defined itself, and finally dominated everything else. This was a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of America – and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book. (563)

Whitman's own understanding in the final instance of his radically transformative poetic practice could be expressed as a transition from a poem that may be or may not be titled "Leaves of Grass" to one that is titled "Song of Myself." Although over a century has passed since Whitman's death, our readings of Whitman seem largely constrained by the context of its inception and have not yet reached to take into account his own late understanding of the poetry, nor have they been able to incorporate an understanding of the transformation in the aesthetic imperatives of innovation that Whitman has come to represent. To do so requires a fuller understanding of Whitman's insistence on the scandalous nature of speaking of oneself in a literary context and what it means "to

exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book.”

Whitman’s “Personality” unites in the figure of the poet the representative egalitarian self of republican political discourses with a noumenal force of being that exists prior to linguistic formation and that allows a self a “from” from which to speak. Whitman refers to the entirety of this composite self, the Me Myself, as his soul in “Song of Myself” and elsewhere. Yet I believe the availability here of the religious category, while it conveys the sacral aspect of this self, obscures the representative nature of the composite self achieved by the union, as expressed in section seventeen of “Song of Myself”:

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with  
me,  
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing,  
If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,  
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,  
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing. (43)

The first three lines of that passage are spoken by a representative self originating entirely from a specifically secular political discourse. Of course, once we get to “the riddle,” we find ourselves bordering less worldly territories but carried there by the repetition of grammatical parallelism, the stylistic mark of the original encounter with a national geography. The link between the representative self and that landscape thereby rendered figural by the larger strategies and operations of the poem, the link between that representative self and the spiritual force of being have no theoretical relation but are experienced as equivalent through something very much like a religious mystery, but also something quite transparently an artifact of literary aesthetics and poetic form.

To insist that Whitman’s formal innovations depend on for their authority or for

their significance either the organic or the political neglects the most profound innovation of *Leaves of Grass*: that innovation legitimates poetic utterance to the extent that one can justify that innovation as a faithful translation of the inmost experience of the self as representative. One cannot, however, produce the legitimating ground of the soul, so that while one can speak of it endlessly, its own account of itself is untranslatable, which is why the deepest confessions and personal revelations of the poetic self in Whitman's poems always occur indirectly or off-stage, as in this aside to the reader in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "We understand then do we not? / What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted? / What the study could not teach – what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?" (98-100). To attempt to produce the soul's expression results in either a failure or stutter in one's utterance, a lack of authenticity or genuineness and scandals of authorship, or transition to a fund of tentative metaphorical explorations of the nature or source of one's authority to be speaking in such a manner. To the extent that those explorations can then be positioned or received as innovative, one finds one's utterance justified.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>There also has been a tendency, both generally appreciative and critical, to claim Whitman as the first poet of American vernacular or demotic speech. This is quite simply not so. Although Whitman's poetry eschews a formal neo-classical diction and incorporates slang and a vocabulary much earthier than his immediate predecessors, not only does no one talk like a Whitman poem, Whitman's poems do not aspire to convey such an impression. Rather, Whitman's desire was to write poetry out of the same spiritual tendencies, historical accidents, and republican sympathies that for him conditioned the possibilities of a distinctively American speech (Matthiessen 517-532).

<sup>2</sup>While at one time critics spent considerable effort to decipher the emergence of Whitman's innovations through speculations on a transformative event in Whitman's biography enabling the mystico-religious certainty of the poetry's pronouncements, critics now concentrate on explicating the pragmatic strategies involved in developing a literary persona for whom the cosmic mode of universal sympathy is a justifiable and legitimate mode of utterance. See in particular Grossman (Poetics of Union and Whitman's "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand") Larson, and Maslan.

<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, the discussion of eighteenth-century theories of poetic inspiration in M. H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* (187-98).

<sup>4</sup>From Foucault's discussion of the transformation in the field of history:

All this is a surface expression of the simple fact that man found himself emptied of history, but that he was already beginning to recover in the depths of his own being, and among all the things that were still capable of reflecting his image (the others have fallen silent and folded back upon themselves), a historicity linked essentially to man himself. But this historicity is immediately ambiguous. Since man posits himself in the field of positive knowledge only in so far as he speaks, works, and lives, can his history ever be anything but the inextricable nexus of different times, which are foreign to him and heterogenous in respect of one another. (369)

<sup>5</sup>The locus classicus of idealist organicism is Coleridge's distinction between organic and mechanical models of composition as expressed in "Shakespeare, A Poet Generally."

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the continual reiteration of this approach to Whitman's work see in particular the introduction to M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *The Growth of Leaves of Grass* (1-8). It should also be noted that the organic tradition is not without its significant critics, one being Gay Wilson Allen.

<sup>7</sup>See in particular Beach, Erkkila, Price, Thomas, Reynolds (Beneath the American Renaissance and Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography), and Wilentz.

<sup>8</sup>One may also link Whitman's form to the negotiation of the difficult contradiction in the principles of democratic representation, between what Whitman refers to in "One's-Self I Sing," the first poem of the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, as the twin themes of the work, the "simple separate person" and "the word Democratic, the word En-Masse" (1-2). I will discuss the issue further in the following chapter.

<sup>9</sup>The final line of that passage that gives the poem its title appears in the final version of the poem published in the 1881-1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (Textual Variorum 1:20).

<sup>10</sup>One should not neglect an important counter-formulation: that Whitman's poetry works



against his stated principles; that, in fact, his work represents an ideologically motivated suppression of actual difference beneath the homogenous and oppressive totalitarianism which the transcendental ego truly represents. For the early formulation of the charge see Lawrence; a more contemporary expression appears in the work of David Simpson (“Destiny Made Manifest” and “The Soul of Language”).

<sup>11</sup>The relation between Whitman’s poetic persona and Sandel’s critique of the unencumbered self is discussed at greater length in the following chapter.

<sup>12</sup>Review of *Leaves of Grass*, *Leader* 7 (June 7, 1856) (reprinted in Price, *Contemporary Reviews* 50).

<sup>13</sup>Bliss Perry identifies Tupper, James Macpherson, and Samuel Warren, the author of a minor curiosity known as *The Lily and the Bee*, an encomium written in imitation of biblical cadences for the Crystal Palace exhibit built for the 1851 London World’s Fair, Perry 89-96. To this we can add works of the seventeenth-century genre of the private devotion, such as those written by Thomas Traherne and Lancelot Andrewes (Kirby-Smith 135-77). Though it is unlikely Whitman would have been aware of the writings of Traherne and Andrewes, it is not unthinkable that he would have been familiar with the genre of private devotions generally.

<sup>14</sup>Macpherson and Tupper both wrote conventional metric verse – Tupper quite a bit of it and novels as well. While both seemed to regard their efforts in biblical imitation as ultimately something distinct from what could be considered poetry, Samuel Warren did seem to be straddling the fence. He described the genre of *The Lily and the Bee* as a “meditative utterance,” justified the form on the basis of poetry’s immediacy to the nature of thought, then named the form as “rhythmic prose” (viii). Cohen notes that the tendency of reviewers to make the comparison between Whitman and Tupper as a way of derogating *Leaves of Grass* was more marked in the British reception than in the American. Cohen attributes this to the emergence of the late Victorian aestheticism that found denigrating Whitman to be a convenient strategy as a literary assault against the conventional sentimentality that Tupper had come to represent. To Cohen’s account I would add that perhaps the relative silence of the American critics on the comparison has something to do with the recognition of Tupper’s work as poetry, a development first noted in America.

<sup>15</sup>Anonymous review, *Life Illustrated* 28 July 1855 (reprinted in Price, *Contemporary Reviews* 8).

<sup>16</sup>Edward Everett Hale (anonymously), review of *Leaves of Grass*, *North American Review* 83 (January 1856) (reprinted in Price, *Contemporary Reviews* 35).

<sup>17</sup>One would only need to note the vehemence on the part of the negative reviews at the insistence of Whitman’s unwarranted presumption in offering these works to the public to realize that to refuse to describe these works as poetry was to engage in a strategic move in a literary polemic – to read, for instance, the angry and spasmodic prose of Rufus Griswold’s review, *Criterion* 1 (10 November 1855) 24 (reprinted in Price, *Contemporary Reviews* 26-7).

<sup>18</sup>Review of *Leaves of Grass*, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 September 1855 (reprinted in Price, *Contemporary Reviews* 18)

<sup>19</sup>The reviewer also seems to be referring to Whitman’s Epicurianism. The quoted passage has a remarkable similarity to the formula of Lucretius that opens two of the chapters of *On the Nature of the Universe (De Rerum Natura)*: “I am blazing a trail

through pathless tracts of the Muses' Pierian realm, where no foot has ever trod before. What joy it is to light upon virgin springs and drink their waters. What joy to pluck new flowers and gather for my brow a glorious garland from fields whose blossoms were never yet wreathed by the Muses round any head." The *Daily Eagle* reviewer cements the connection by closing his version with the following assessment of Whitman's philosophical drift that is also a restatement of the core principle of Epicurus: "He believes in the ancient philosophy that there is no more real beauty or merit in one particle of matter than another."

<sup>20</sup>On Whitman's relationship to the cult of origins, see Scholnick.

<sup>21</sup>Meredith McGill has, for instance, demonstrated the depth of the antebellum American literary community's concern with the issue of authorship and its disturbances, particularly as it concerns that period's vexation over the issue of literary nationalism, displayed as it is in the Young American clique's management of Poe's authorial identity and Poe's vociferous critical attacks on Longfellow's alleged plagiarisms.

<sup>22</sup>"Walt Whitman and His Poems," *United States Review* 5 (September 1855) (reprinted in Price, *Contemporary Reviews* 8).

<sup>23</sup>The four dots (and occasionally two or three dots) are a distinctive punctuation of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and do not indicate ellipses. I will indicate ellipses in material quoted from this edition with dots enclosed in brackets, [ . . . ].

<sup>24</sup>See, for example, the conversation between Mr. Hathaway, a caricature of Young American Cornelius Mathews, and Mr. Churchill, the humble schoolmaster and aspiring literati, in Longfellow's 1849 novel *Kavanagh, A Tale*. Mr. Hathaway: "I think, Mr. Churchill . . . that we want a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers, – commensurate with Niagara, and the Alleghanies, and the Great Lakes!" Mr. Churchill: "[B]ut excuse me! – are you not confounding things that have no analogy? Great has a very different meaning when applied to a river, and when applied to a literature. Large and shallow may perhaps be applied to both. Literature is rather an image of the spiritual world, than of the physical, is it not? of the internal rather than the external" (754-755).

<sup>25</sup>The following passage appears in one of Whitman's notebooks on language: "W. Von Humboldt / – that language is the outward expression of wha[t] he calls the spirit or individuality of a nation. –" with a hand glyph pointing to the words "a nation" (*Daybooks and Notebooks* 3:721).

<sup>26</sup>See Stovall for speculation on the influence that Guyot's lecture course, which remained in print as a college textbook for decades, may have had on Whitman's thinking (202-4).

<sup>27</sup>As in his famous statement, "I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms" (*Democratic Vistas* 363).

<sup>28</sup>I will be citing to the poem "Song of Myself" as it appears the standard edition, New York University Press's *Textual Variorum*, but reproducing the lines as they appeared in the first, the 1855, edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

<sup>29</sup>See Sánchez-Eppler and Grossman (*Poetics of Union*) but Klammer in particular.

<sup>30</sup>The debate between neoclassical principles of form and the theories of original primitivism that held to the personification thesis was one of the major literary-critical debates of the last half of the eighteenth century. For instance, the following account of a literary conversation from Boswell's journal: "My Lord mentioned poetry. Sir James said

it was just personification, animating every object and feeling, and that measure was not necessary. Erskine agreed with him. I maintained that personification was only one requisite in poetry, and that measure was absolutely necessary, without which it ceased to be poetry and must be denominated some other work of the imagination” (quoted in Kirby-Smith vii). The standard exposition of that critical principle is found in Blair, Lecture XVI (324-41).

<sup>31</sup>See also Blair, Lecture XVI: “One of the greatest pleasures we receive from poetry, is, to find ourselves always in the midst of our fellows; and to see every thing thinking, feeling, and acting, as we ourselves do. This is, perhaps, the principal charm of this sort of figured style, that it introduces us into society with all nature, and interests us, even in animate objects, by forming a connection between them and us, through that sensibility which it ascribes to them” (331).

<sup>32</sup>As the note in the *Comprehensive Reader's Edition of Leaves of Grass* states, “The poem irresistibly suggests autobiography in its vivid identification of the growing child with his own experience,” and though some early critics did read the work as indicating autobiographically Whitman’s preternatural capacity for sympathetic identification, we should accept the ensuing caution of the editors of the *Comprehensive Reader's Edition*: That in the poem “the poet universalized his testimony . . . Tennyson’s line in ‘Ulysses’ – ‘I am part of all that I have met’ – makes the same point” (364-5nn). According to Edward Carpenter, incidentally, Whitman said he thought “Ulysses” “about the best Tennyson poem” (Carpenter 25).

<sup>33</sup>I would be remiss if I did not note the similarity in sentiment between this popular periodical poem and Whitman’s “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing.”

<sup>34</sup>Whitman dropped that last line from the poem after its appearance in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1856.

<sup>35</sup>In the 1856 version, the lines read as follows: “Who are you that would talk to American? / Have you studied out my land, its idioms and men?” (Textual Variorum 1:201).

<sup>36</sup>For a discussion of Whitman’s involvement with John O’Sullivan’s *Democratic Review*, the flagship magazine of the Young America movement, and the congruence between Whitman’s Preface and the rhetoric of literary nationalism promoted by the *Review*, see Widmer (81-5).

<sup>37</sup>Widmer feels that had O’Sullivan read Whitman’s Preface and the unpublished “The Eighteenth Presidency,” works that are heavily inflected with the literary nationalist rhetoric of Young America, he would have found them “laughably old-fashioned” (85).

<sup>38</sup>See especially Larson and Hutchinson. Also Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, Chapter 5.

## Chapter 2

“The Password Primeval”: Religion, Secularism, and Poetic Form in *Leaves of Grass*

Several years after Walt Whitman's death, in 1896, John Burroughs, the naturalist and close friend of the poet's, writes in his second book on Whitman that “we have all been slow to see that his cherished ends were religious rather than literary; that, over and above all else, he was a great religious teacher and prophet. Had he been strictly a literary poet,” Burroughs continues, “like Lowell, or Longfellow, or Tennyson, – that is, a writer working for purely artistic effects, – we should be compelled to judge him quite differently” (200). Burroughs's literary historical judgment has managed to become both entirely wrong and absolutely right. A slow realization of Whitman's religious rather than literary ambitions never did reach to all of his readers. While at the turn of the century Burroughs was able to address himself to a growing readership of Whitman's work that regarded Whitman more as a writer offering ethical and spiritual guidance, uplift, and encouragement than a poet, it would only be a couple decades before his legacy as an innovative poet and an important precursor figure for literary modernism crystallized, displacing Burroughs's religious reading to the margins. Yet literary modernism's revision of the critical appraisal of nineteenth-century writers makes Burroughs right about Whitman in a way that Burroughs did not completely anticipate. We do not consider Whitman to be a poet in the same sense that we consider Burroughs's “literary poets” – Lowell, Longfellow, and Tennyson – to be poets. Readers of poetry distinguish Whitman from the other three quite easily, at times finding it quite easy to consign Whitman's contemporaries to a largely irrelevant realm of starched decorum, proper technique, and a mild sentimentality while recognizing and celebrating Whitman's

continuing importance and influence.

The distinction made then and now between Whitman and other major nineteenth-century poets is a distinction in the use of poetic form and not whether the poet's ambition was to move readers artistically or spiritually. Lowell, Longfellow, and Tennyson wrote in accentual-syllabic meter, and Whitman did not. Admittedly, each of these poets was formally innovative and distinctive in his own fashion, and all of these poets shared basic assumptions about poetic form – that the form of a poem was not a given but malleable and could be derived or adapted from traditional forms, including formal properties of other literary traditions both modern and ancient, or invented to suit the occasion. Yet Whitman's refusal to write poetry in accentual-syllabic verse reads as significant and new in ways that the formal choices made by the others do not. This difference speaks to the key distinction that Burroughs makes in that moment when it was still a live possibility to read Whitman as a writer of religious rather than literary works. The "artistic effects" to which that Burroughs points as the ambition of literary poets are to a large extent the manipulation of the conventions of meter and rhyme that Whitman deliberately eschewed in writing the work collected in *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman's supporters and detractors alike have understood his refusal of conventional metrics, alongside his refusal of conventional literary decorum in his diction and choice of themes, as a refusal of many of the standards by which a literary performance is judged. Whitman himself points to certain extra-literary standards by which to evaluate *Leaves of Grass*, most frequently the congruence of the formal properties and the themes of the poems with the tenor of the times and place – that *Leaves of Grass* bodies forth the way that it does because it was being written by a

nineteenth-century American man who paid a particular attention his to immediate environment. As Whitman writes in the 1876 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, “As I have lived in fresh land, inchoate, and in a revolutionary age, future-founding, I have felt to identify the points of that age, these lands, in my recitatives, altogether in my own way. Thus my form has strictly grown from my purports and facts, and is the analogy of them” (753). As the end of the nineteenth century saw not only the end of Whitman’s life but also the consolidation of secularism as an irreducible experience of modernity,<sup>1</sup> so it may seem evident that such a refusal of poetic tradition should be read as congruent to a secular as opposed to religious outlook, particularly given Whitman’s insistence on his form’s congruence with the facts of his world as an explanation for his distinctive form. There is as well in Whitman’s and Burrough’s writing on *Leaves of Grass* a sense of the poems’ form being intimately involved with a transition out of a hidebound and hierarchic traditional worldview – “all the long, tenacious and stifling anti-democratic authorities of the Asiatic and European past,” as Whitman describes it in the 1876 preface (748) – into a modern world whose outlook is governed by a clear-sighted and progressive science. Burroughs writes of Whitman in his 1896 study: “He does not, except very briefly, sing the praises of science, but he launches his poems always from the scientific view of the world, in contradistinction to the old theological and mythological point of view” (179). Not only has the progression into the modern world meant that poetry’s themes of “the old theological and mythological” age – “love and war, lords and ladies, myths and fairies and legends, etc.” – be jettisoned, Whitman applies the same refusal “to the forms as well, excluding rhyme and measure and all the conventional verse architecture” (218). In any case, coming down to the present day, the

interpretations of Whitman's refusal of literary standards and decorum, and therefore the extra-literary standards by which his work has been evaluated, have constellated about the secular significance of the formal properties of the poems in *Leaves of Grass*, not their religious or prophetic nature. That is, we now read his refusal to write poetry in accentual-syllabic meter as congruent with a particular worldly or political perspective. This despite Whitman's insistence in the 1876 preface in other writings attached to or commenting on *Leaves of Grass* that the true nature of the poems should be sought in their spirit of religious enervation – which is “the greatest office of Scientism,” Whitman writes in 1876, “and of future Poetry also” (753).

Whitman's emphasis on a religious interpretation of *Leaves of Grass* has not escaped critical notice. David Kuebrich, for instance, reads *Leaves of Grass* as an expression of Whitman's desire to found a fully established religion with *Leaves* as its scripture and creed and Whitman as its founding figure. George B. Hutchinson and Michael Sowder read *Leaves of Grass* as having been produced by Whitman in response to the perceived spiritual needs of Whitman's compatriots and potential readers, and David Reynolds has written of the close relationship of *Leaves of Grass* to popular religious expression in antebellum America. As Kuebrich points out, though, most critics chose to evade the spiritual claims made for *Leaves*, and those that do address the insistence on religion typically normalize that insistence into one or another conventional and secular mode of understanding the poems. Kuebrich identifies three main tactics critics employ to normalize the language of religion in the poems and ancillary literature. First, a psychoanalytic approach that describes “the religious language [as] really something other: namely, the symbolic manifestations of the distorted desires of the id”

(2-3). Secondly, “the ‘phases’ approach views Whitman’s assertion of a fundamental religious purpose and prophetic self-image as the fabrication and posturing of an older, chastened, and complacent poet” (3). The third evasion is particularly notable: here critics “acknowledge the presence of a religious theme in the various editions but unwittingly misinterpret[] it in two important respects”: that the spirituality becomes read as one conviction among several, misreading its centrality to the conception and ambition of *Leaves of Grass* as a whole, or it becomes read as “as a set of intellectual convictions rather than a special transhistorical mode of consciousness that gives rise to a certain recurring values and beliefs” (3). Kuebrich does not, however, discuss the tendency to normalize Whitman’s religious enthusiasm as an endorsement of an egalitarian democracy – perhaps because he himself falls victim to that critical evasion when at the end of his book he is impelled to describe the transhistorical content of Whitman’s new faith. As he works toward a conclusion of his study of Whitman as a prophet manqué, he writes: “In order to understand both Whitman’s purposes and his enduring appeal, it is necessary to approach him not as a poet or even as an interpreter of the needs and aspirations of our private souls, but as the prophet of the political and spiritual possibilities of our national community” (177).

Another significant example of a religious reading of *Leaves of Grass* would be Malcolm Cowley’s introduction to his edition of the 1855 edition of *Leaves* for Penguin. Cowley takes quite seriously the contention of Richard Maurice Bucke, Whitman’s most far-reaching disciple, that Whitman’s poetry was the consequence of a number of profound mystical experiences, one of which, the most important one, is described in “Song of Myself” (Cowley xii-xiii). Cowley relates *Leaves of Grass* to a world literature



of such experiences, including Blake and Rimbaud, but particularly the Vedantic literature of the South Asian subcontinent, and finds Whitman's doctrines as expressed in the early poetry largely consistent with "mainstream Indian philosophy" (xxii). The consonance is largely an unconscious one, according to Cowley, who subscribes to a version of the diminution thesis that Kuebrich identifies. In Cowley's account, the aging Whitman becomes increasingly cerebral and doctrinaire about his spiritual experiences in attempt to sustain control over the poetic inspiration that has largely receded with the ebbing of the experiences and their aftereffects. V. K. Chari has explored the relation between Whitman's themes and Vedantic philosophy in more detail in *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism: An Interpretation*. The consonance of *Leaves* with Vedantic philosophy may not have escaped Whitman's contemporaries. Thoreau famously asked Whitman if he had read "the Orientals" as Thoreau had found *Leaves* to be "wonderfully" like them. Thoreau's "Oriental" literature, though, is an impossibly broad term indicating rather than an actual body of works more of a preconceived set of expectations derived from a largely imaginary body of literatures in which there is believed to be no distinction between secular or religious purposes – primitivism, in another word. Though Whitman had not in fact read "the Orientals," he was familiar with at least the imaginary attributes of the genre from his reading of the popular and learned literary criticism of the day.

Whitman's own sense of his literary ambition was not consistent, and different critical or theoretical pronouncements at different points in his career display different emphases. Certainly by the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, though, he was highlighting a sensibility he described as religious, and while a specifically worldly interpretation of

*Leaves*, or of literature, never wholly absented itself from his writing, his reliance on religion as a category to explain and evaluate his work grew in force from that point, and the relative importance placed on religion for a reading of the work distinguishes his later comments on *Leaves of Grass* from the earlier. Hutchinson, for instance, in his discussion of Whitman as a religious figure – a shaman, to be specific, in a cross-cultural sense – registers the shift in the poems and the critical prose toward more emphasis on the spiritual realm in the 1870s as a “turning point in Whitman’s career” that “indicates the poet’s attention to shift his focus toward ‘Poems bridging the way from Life to Death’” (170). And yet the vocabulary of religious belief is present right from the start – in fourth line of the first poem of the first edition, “Song of Myself,” for instance, where he writes, “I loafe and invite my soul.” The preface to the 1855 edition discusses in particular the unique relationship between poets and the soul in language borrowed from contemporary religious discourse: “The greatest poet does not moralize or make applications of morals . . . he knows the soul,” Whitman writes (716). That relationship between poet and soul is fully realized, whereas that of most people is nascent: “Folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between their reality and their souls” (714). What he means by *soul* here is rich and various and includes both a secular meaning of one’s sense of ones own identity and awareness and a more religious sense consonant with the Transcendentalists’ Oversoul, the divine spark of awareness which also the Godhead. The basic thrust of the preface, though, is not any more religious than one of Emerson’s essays, whose influence provides the preface with much of its grandiose thematics and rhapsodical character, and while Emerson’s work cannot be regarded without some sense

of its spiritual character, neither Emerson nor Whitman would have acknowledged their work at this point as primarily religious in ambition. The emphasis of Whitman's preface is on his version of American literary nationalism, and his metaphysics of soul and poetry are here subordinated to his claim that "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (709). And so it is with the open letter to Emerson that closes the 1856 edition. There Whitman does not identify his ambitions outside the work of "making poems" except as "to meet people and the States face to face, to confront them with an American rude tongue" (730-1), by which he means an original literature made according to American models of personality, models in which he claims to have "perfect faith" (731). The new and much remarked-upon emphasis in the letter to Emerson is the announcement of his intent to produce in the poems a frank and celebratory treatment of human physiognomy and sexuality as an integral part of this rude American literature. Religion is referenced throughout the letter as a source and component of a truly American literature, and Whitman once again harnesses religious discourse to a secular aim in describing those who would sustain "the lack of an avowed, empowered, unabashed development of sex" as guilty of "infidelism" (737) – lacking Whitman's perfect faith in American models and in literature.

In the 1860 edition Whitman's pronouncements in the new poems about the nature of *Leaves of Grass* are explicitly aligned with a religious reading of the work. It is in the first poem of that edition, then entitled "Proto-Leaf" and later "Starting from Paumanok," that he writes, "I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a religion" (102). It is also in the third edition that he starts capitalizing "Soul," an idiosyncrasy he will maintain for subsequent editions until reverting back to a more

conventional orthography in the final edition. From this point forward, Whitman's writing about *Leaves of Grass* will foreground his perception of its religious ambition. Different critics handle the significance of Whitman's change in emphasis differently. Kuebrich largely ignores the shift as irrelevant: he reads critical attempts to interpret the shift as having a bearing on the religious significance of the poems as an attempt to evade the spiritual implications of Whitman's project. Hutchinson views the profound change in Whitman's orientation toward spirituality in his writing, despite a relative consistency in the nature of Whitman's religious sensibility, as a change necessitated by the war and its close: the impending crisis no longer providing the requisite creative tension to his work, Whitman becomes a "prophet in repose," in Hutchinson's terms (170-171). In this manner, Whitman's own interpretation of his fundamental break with accepted literary and formal practices resembles that of those readers Burroughs describes as only slowly coming to an awareness of the spiritual nature of *Leaves of Grass*. For Whitman, the religious reading of his work's ambition or significance is deeply involved with an attempt to articulate and understand the significance of his radical break with literary convention, and like his twentieth-century readers, he views the significance of *Leaves of Grass* and its distinctiveness as inextricably engaged with the nature of its formal innovation. I want to take up Burroughs's neglected claim and argue that we understand poetic form best in *Leaves of Grass* when we grapple with what Burroughs and Whitman mean by the religious ambition of the work.<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that we vitiate the history of claims for the political resonance of Whitman's work, nor do I advocate a retrenchment into enthusiastic readings of his work as a revealed spirituality, but an insistence on a religiously oriented reading works not only to redeem a fuller appreciation

of his work and the significance of innovative poetic form in literary modernism generally, it also works against the reductive normalization of the political dimension of his work that is all too common in contemporary readings of the enduring significance of *Leaves of Grass*.

The difficulty in considering Whitman as a religious writer is that religious works generally occur within a specifically religious matrix of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that orients and manages the interpretation of the text toward spiritual rather than worldly ends. *Leaves of Grass*, although distinctive and idiosyncratic from the start, was from first to last imbricated within the specifically secular orientation of the transatlantic circulation and consumption of printed texts from which develops the category and standards of the “literary” that Burroughs agitates against. Burroughs’s distinction between literary and religious recognizes the implicitly secular interpretative environment into which Whitman’s work is received, making his religious designation of Whitman’s work a strategic intervention, but what kind of intervention? David Kuebrich believes that *Leaves of Grass* represents Whitman’s deliberate attempt to inaugurate a wholly new religion. Kuebrich writes, “He wanted his poetry to serve two functions: to promote the spiritual development of his readers and to provide them with a coherent vision which would integrate their religious experience with the dominant modes of modern thought and action – science, technology, and democracy” (2). Groundbreaking and sui generis works such as *Leaves of Grass* do tend to create their own audiences out of receptive members of an existing readership, but Kuebrich insists on an intent that does more than segregate readers according to the nature of the message they take away from the poems. The best readers of Whitman, Kuebrich seems to believe, are those early

enthusiasts who founded and peopled the chapters of the Walt Whitman Fellowship, International in the last decades of the nineteenth-century and for whom “the *Leaves* was more than literary art; it was sacred scripture” (1). The intent of Whitman in publishing *Leaves*, Kuebrich insists, is either understood as promoting just such a singular devotion to the poems as revealed truth, or it is misunderstood.<sup>3</sup> Although Kuebrich marshals a substantial amount of textual support from the poems and the prose that points to Whitman’s prophetic conception of the role of the poet, his readings of Whitman’s work succeed only so long as they neglect Whitman’s repeated insistence that the worldly and obdurately physical reference of the poems be given weight and footing equal to the spiritual. “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,” he writes, for instance in “Song of Myself” (422). A religious reading of *Leaves of Grass*, I argue, if it is to be responsibly aware of the breadth of the volume’s thematic canvas and its figurative and rhetorical funds, would need to acknowledge that for Whitman true religion could not be distinguished from either a notion of the secular as a source of value or from secularism as a progressive movement of human enlightenment and freedom. We can neither oppose Whitman’s religion to secularity nor can we equate or align them. An understanding of what it meant to Whitman and Burroughs to read *Leaves of Grass* as having religious ends requires a careful appreciation of the points where religion and secularism intersect, contradict, or fail to connect.

Yet it is perhaps better to err on the side of a predominantly religious reading than to neglect the insistent possibility to read Whitman in a religious light. One important advantage of the religious reading is that it helps work against the dominant tendency in scholarship on Whitman to repress the spiritual dimensions of the poetry in favor of its

secularist strands. The reductively secular readings normalize Whitman's themes and his formal choices into a perceived congruence with a stated or unstated political sympathies, and the frequent consequence if not the source of an excessive bias toward a secular reading is the position Whitman in contemporary criticism as an exemplary spokesperson for a democratic and secular liberalism. Richard Rorty, for examples, promotes what he sees as a particular mode of worldly engagement in Whitman as an alternative to what Rorty views as an entrenched illiberalism of the academic left. Rather than fostering a humanistic engagement founded upon broad claims of universal goods with the ills of society, Rorty finds the academic left to have sequestered itself in an ivory tower haunted by the specters of post-structural theory. He believes the academic left, instead of promoting the voluntaristic ideals of Enlightenment liberalism he finds expressed in Whitman's writings, has retreated into a deterministic and metaphysical world-view, "a world in which all the daylight cheerfulness of Whitmanesque hypersecularism has been lost, and in which 'liberalism' and 'humanism' are synonyms for naiveté – for an inability to grasp the full horror of the situation" (95-6). In Rorty's view, the grip of theory has resulted in an academic paralysis of engagement that is furthermore celebrated as subversive, a refusal to bestow solidity or force to any concept that might provoke one to take action. To counteract what he diagnoses as a crypto-religious tendency of academic theory, he advocates an embrace of an American "civic religion," of which Whitman and John Dewey are the prophets. Yet he takes pains to distinguish this "civic religion" from religion *per se*, as he finds "the most striking feature" of this "civic religion" to be its "thoroughgoing secularism" (15). What he finds valuable in Whitman is the redirection of human attention and interest away from unseen realms of

suprahuman power toward the human world – toward humanity itself as a historical and political entity.<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis on Whitman as an exemplary figure for an enlightened humanism is not possible without a certain degree of selective reading of his statements and suggestions. Roy Harvey Pearce, for instance, writes in his introduction to the reprinting of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* that this edition's value lay in its being the most fully realized document of Whitman's "humanist phase" prior to his fuller immersion into religious conceptions and interpretations of the role of poetry (x). This kind of critical emphasis on the secular and humanist nature of Whitman's outlook cannot be but uneasy with his endorsements of religious sentiment, and therefore generally requires some explaining away of what Whitman has written. So Pearce, for example, recognizes that reference to religion abound in pre-war editions of *Leaves of Grass* but insists that its appearance in the early poetry is a "misuse," and that at Whitman's best "his religion was the religion of humanity, the only religion a work of art can directly express, whatever other religion it may confront and acknowledge" (xxviii, xi). What often results from this secular normalization of Whitman's religious rhetoric is the reinterpretation of that rhetoric as political enthusiasm – reading him not as a prophet per se but as a prophet of democracy. To be sure, Whitman's own writing offers a certain amount of support for this reading, particularly *Democratic Vistas* (1871), his most extensive political tract.

In *Vistas* religion emerges as a mediating category between what Whitman sees as the two poles of liberal democracy's fundamental antinomy: the inherent dignity and freedom of the individual self and the demands and strictures of a collective egalitarianism. He equates the expression and cultivation of a religious sentiment with



literary expression and regards both as an attempt to ameliorate the conflict between the celebration of individual dignity, what he calls Personalism, and the voluntary acceptance of a collective and universal egalitarianism and the limitations it would require, to which he simply refers as Democracy. His distinction between Personalism and Democracy expresses the classic antinomy of liberty and justice, but it also deliberates on liberal secularism's resolution of the conflict between them into the theory of public and private versions of the self. The negotiations between the demands of individual sovereignty and those of universal equality produce in liberal theory the insistence on the necessity of a public self as a discursively maintained political category. The public performance of the person as citizen, in the theory and practice of political liberalism, is constrained and defined by the allegiances and moral attitudes that are held to be generally and categorically available to all citizens. This set of allegiances and moral attitudes emerges out of the public sphere debate between persons who have ostensibly disavowed any particular ties or obligations other than to the general good of the public or to whatever role which the public has assigned them.<sup>5</sup> Such a version of the self requires a corollary development of a private self as a residual category where one may retreat to explore all the convictions and contingencies that cannot be universally shared that have resulted from one's accidents of birth and circumstance – one's religious experiences and conviction in American political and cultural history being a paradigmatic case of just such a private contingency.

Rorty and others understand Whitman's religious conviction and enthusiasm as a metaphor for the private individual's celebration and passionate embrace of the universal and generalized abstractions a liberal democratic society posits as a suitable basis for the

ordering of public life. From the standpoint of a secular liberalism, though, the categorically public aspects of the individual self will never reach all the way down to encompass the particularities and peculiarities consigned to an individual's private self. In Rorty's version of a Whitmanian liberal utopia, the mutual demands of the private and the public will be negotiated through "experiments with new forms of individual and social life [that] interact and reinforce one another" but will not collapse the one into the other. "Individual life," Rorty writes, "will become unthinkably diverse and social life unthinkably free" (5). And yet diversity and freedom will remain incommensurable, as the implication of Rorty's discrete social and individual lives is that there will always be aspects of a private individual's particularly that will not jibe with the demands of public life. But what readings like this miss in Whitman is the equation of poetry and religion as an ameliorative response to the antinomy. Rather than bolster the split between public and private selves as a means to sustain a society both free and just, Whitman posits religion, and in particular the religious dimension of poetry, as a solution to the compartmentalization of the person as a result of the antinomies of a secular liberal society.

The misreading of Whitman's religious enthusiasm as political rhetoric is also a literary problem: reading Whitman as a prophet of democracy neglects the literary nature of *Leaves of Grass*. The failure to anticipate, for instance, the differences that might obtain between a prose theoretical work such as *Democratic Vistas* and the radical formal experiments in verse that comprise *Leaves of Grass* leads George Kateb to write that in *Leaves of Grass* Whitman is "the greatest philosopher of the culture of democracy" because Whitman "writes the best phrases and sentences about democracy" (525). I do

not mean to assert a necessary distinction between the genres of philosophy and poetry, particularly as Whitman gains so much by making those boundaries more fluid, but an understanding of Whitman's ambition for *Leaves of Grass* must begin with an attempt to register the significance of Whitman's wanting to shape those "best phrases and sentences" as lines of verse. Even so, Kateb insists on reading *Leaves* as a "work in political theory" rather than a work of poetry (548). The designation allows Kateb to pick and choose what is serviceable and commendable in *Leaves of Grass* and what seems private and inconsequential – not suitable nor salubrious for a work of political theory. The positive aspects of the work Kateb assigns to Whitman's democratic view of the self, and the negative to what he describes as Whitman's religious conception of the self. The first, the democratic and secular self, he views as a "crowded house" of potentiality, a compendium of possible stances and roles through which the self can envision an engagement with the word and which functions as a virtual representation of a democratic public (551-2). This "crowded house" acts as an internalization of the public discourse on the attributes and attitudes of public life, and Kateb holds it in sharp distinction to the religious self where he sees Whitman indulge in "a religious conception of the soul as unique and unalterable identity, whether immortal or not" and which Kateb passes over as objectionable, inconsistent, and unimportant for an appreciation of the poetry (560). Thus Kateb makes *Leaves of Grass* function quite well as a document of the culture of democracy, and he is not entirely wrong to do so, but he can only do so by not engaging the connection between the work's claim to religious ambition and its literary distinctiveness, thus becoming blind to, in a manner of speaking, the poetry – the soul – of the whole enterprise.

“Not bibles in the old way, but in new ways”

While Whitman may not have begun his career as a poet discussing *Leaves of Grass* with the same kind of emphasis on its religious ambitions as he does in his post-war writings, the religious and spiritual vocabulary used and themes explored in the poems are fairly consistent. The religious reading of the poems for Whitman is more than the making explicit its implicitly spiritual thematics: it is for Whitman a mode of understanding the significance of his distinctive poetics. The poem that will become “Song of Myself,” which in the first edition is either untitled or titled “Leaves of Grass” along with the volume’s eleven other poems,<sup>6</sup> opens with a declaration of intent to focus on his own person – “I celebrate myself” (1) – and turns to invoke the soul as well: “I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass” (4-5).<sup>7</sup> That inaugural moment of inspiration, an invitation to a spiritual self whose presence beams lines of poetry into the receptive physical self of the poet, Whitman repeats at key points in the poem under different auspices, notably the sexual union of the body and the soul in what will become section five and the contemplation of the leaves of grass as the tongues of the dead in what will become section six.<sup>8</sup> The trope of the mutual regard of the fleshy and the ghostly versions of the self is more than a productive model of inspiration, it also informs Whitman’s understanding of the poem’s formal concerns, and, given the centrality of the poem to Whitman’s *oeuvre*, forms the germ of Whitman’s understanding of the spiritual significance and efficacy of his poems overall. We find the germ of the religious reading of *Leaves of Grass* in those moments where the mutual regard of the material and spiritual versions of the person are echoed in Whitman’s

contemplation of the formal significance of what he has written. In “Song of Myself” the pivotal moment of this authorial self-regard is what becomes section twenty-four of the poem. This section is central to the poem for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it is in this section that Whitman identifies himself by name as the poet – which, in the case of the first edition, is the only place in the volume where the author’s name appears, and is the first instance of Whitman naming himself as Walt Whitman, the name by which he will identify himself as a poet, as opposed to Walter Whitman the journalist, editor, and reluctant carpenter.<sup>9</sup>

What emerges from this self-consideration is neither an overweening secular sense of mission nor an inherently religious sense of vocation, but a careful if exuberant parity between the two. A number of lines after he introduces himself by name he makes explicit reference to the poem as a formal entity: “I speak the pass-word primeval . . . I give the sign democracy; / By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms” (506-7). In the second half of that first line he indicates the poem’s alliance with democracy and its secularizing and leveling force, yet in the first half he aligns the force of the poem with scriptural inspiration, the spiritual revelation of a natural religion whose “primeval” impulse was felt to underwrite the expressive capacity of all poetry. The twinned insistence on the secular and the spiritual sets up an interplay between manifest content and unspoken significance that Whitman will exploit throughout the section, asking us to consider the poem as being much like a password – a sign whose significance is determined through its use in a particular context rather than its explicit significance, so that even as we are deciphering the words’ import, we are being directed to the esoteric and the unspoken significance to which the lines promise

access. The same doubling between manifest content and invisible contingencies extends to the second line, where the refusal to recognize hierarchies or superiorities renders the interjection of “By God!” as sarcastic, and yet the reference to God continues to highlight the sense that the presence of the unseen and the unsaid is what sustains the lines even as the excitement of democracy’s leveling force gives them their outward shape. The aggressive political posture suggest a public stance – the radical democratic in a moment of passionate speechifying, and at the same time the lines insist to the reader on their true nature as enabling an esoteric exchange between two parties offstage and outside the public eye, mirroring the poem’s defining trope of the meeting of the body and the soul.

Whitman’s evocation of the interdependency between material and immaterial planes should serve as a reminder that a religious reading of *Leaves of Grass* should not be a reason to neglect the considerable energy the work derives from the secularization of religious impulses but an opportunity to clarify the relationship in the work between the secular and the religious. To a very large extent, an account of religiosity of *Leaves* is also an account of its sympathy with modernity’s project of secularization. This is not as paradoxical as the terminology might suggest. Secularism is not inherently an opposition to religion, but instead involves a change in the way which the claims of religion and the claims of the world are negotiated, and, furthermore, is not a single, monolithic cultural movement but a constellation of interrelated practices and discourses (Asad, *Formations* 1-16). In terms of Whitman’s own immediate historical moment, the waning influence of denominational churches on the public sphere, the concomitant movement of religious expression to the domestic sphere, and the presence of anticlerical sentiments and anti-doctrinal “free thought” movements were all significant registers of secularization’s

transformative power and changes in American religion taking place over the course of the nineteenth century. Even the most basic reading of religion in *Leaves of Grass* would have to acknowledge that Whitman's sense of religion was not that of a conventional, or churched, religion. Yet *Leaves of Grass* also engages strands of secularization as it has been experienced in the larger movement of the West toward modernity and the establishment of liberal democratic nation-states: transformations in the social and political imaginary from hierarchical arrangements for the mediation of power toward more "horizontal," egalitarian models (Taylor, 1998 38-48); the belief in a progressive enlightenment (the Age of Science) that has dispelled and will continue to dispel the myths and superstitions of the past that deform and limit true knowledge; and a reconfiguration of the ideas of the self that imbues with a sacral aura the individual self as a rational, volitional, and sovereign being (Asad 21-66).

Explicit theorization of all three strands is evident in Whitman's consideration of the relationship between religion and poetry, and all three are certainly evident in *Democratic Vistas*. Whitman insists in that work and elsewhere that a modern religiosity begins only with the individual self secularized to the point that identity becomes constituted without regard to creeds. The individual can only "really confront Religion when it extricates itself entirely from churches and not before," and only as an individual – not as a member of a particular community: "Only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality may the spirituality of religion positively come forth at all." An attachment to the reading of scripture as a religious experience must likewise be dismissed, Whitman believes, as a hidebound remnant of a superstitious past. No text can adequately describe the communion with one's spiritual nature. "Bibles may convey and

priests expound,” he writes, “but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one’s isolated Self, to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commune with the unutterable” (398). At this point, after the rejection of the influence and interference of church religion, the secularized individual emerges not as a recipient of religious truth but as the source: “Alone, and silent thought and awe, and aspiration – and then the interior consciousness, like a hitherto unseen inscription, in magic ink, beams out its wondrous lines to the sense” (399). Rather than offer a hieratic transmission of religious knowledge from a traditional and authoritative source to a waiting supplicant, Whitman reconfigures the conventional model of religious understanding to an enlightened mode of understanding that is egalitarian, participatory, and centered about the individual. Whitman models this secularized mode of religious transmission in particular on the transmission of text – on the appearance of a “hitherto unseen inscription.” More precisely, Whitman describes the religious experience as the double move of composition – the beaming out from “interior consciousness” and its reception through the senses. But while the religious experience may be a form of reading, it is not an ordinary but an original relationship to the text: the individual in the grip of this secularized spirituality “knows not bibles in the old way, but in new ways” (398).

The “new ways” involve an understanding that religious experience is ineffable and to a certain extent inarticulate. So while religious experience may have a literary quality, in that it produces scriptural text and reflects back upon itself in an effort to interpret its own significance, it is far from literal in its expression. What can be easily conveyed or expounded is instantly suspect: the gist of the experience evades direct statement.<sup>10</sup> Whitman’s refusal of conventional form in *Leaves of Grass* works to a



certain extent as a confirmation, a guarantee, of his refusal of direct statement. In that refusal, we find the starting point of a seemingly necessary connection between innovation and difficulty in American literary modernism: the notion that the conventional and traditional must be thrown off in favor of the newly created and authentic, and that ease of understanding is to be avoided as the mark of experience obtained at second- or third-hand. The rejection of direct statement and convention and the process of secularization out of a traditional religiosity in this light seem to have some structural resemblance, and both gestures of refusal resonate with Whitman's reflection on his rejection of conventional form in section twenty-four of "Song of Myself" – that the lines of the poem are a "sign democratic" and a "pass-word primeval." In both cases the gesture of refusal presents itself as a denial of the reader's expectations, and in both cases it points to something else in its presence that it, indirectly, claims to reveal. In the refusal of direct statement, Whitman calls the reader's attention to a fantasy of an unspoken and esoteric bond between himself as poet and the reader; in the refusal of form, he calls the reader's attention to the possibility of more primeval formal properties that conventional form might otherwise obscure, as the length and cadence of Whitman's line find their closest parallel and their authoritative precedent in the early "poetic" books of the Old Testament – Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, etc.

Whitman's strategic use of the scriptural line in *Leaves of Grass* involves a broad spectrum of secularism's convoluted engagement with religion. On the one hand, the acquisition in the eighteenth century of the ability to read the Bible as poetry is an epochal moment of secularization, one that sets the stage for the consideration of the Bible as both a historical and literary document. And yet more is at stake in the reading of

the Bible as poetry than the humanization of the work and its removal from a specifically sacral context. As Talal Asad notes, when the Higher Criticism is able to characterize biblical scripture as a “spiritual poem,” human but still inspired, we can recognize that inspiration as a whole has not only been liberated from a ritual context, it has undergone a transformation “from an authorized reorientation of life toward a telos . . . into a psychology or artistry whose *source* is obscure – and therefore becomes the object of speculation” (Formations 37). In the earlier ritual emphasis on the training of the senses, the materiality of the reading experience – the sounds, the attitude of the body, the sense of the place where reading occurs – forges “a sensuous connection between inside and outside, a fusion between signifier and signified” (Asad, Formations 38). With the advent of secularized readings of the Bible, the reading experience undergoes a psychological interiorization whereby language now generates its effect as a spiritual poem through the translation of its materiality into an individualized reading experience. Faith becomes regarded as the motivation for and the consequence of individualized investigation into the obscured source of inspiration that stands at an oblique relation to the text.

The ability to read the Bible as poetry also entails the potential existence of canon of scriptural literature that can be subjected to a similar investigation, hence the nineteenth century’s burgeoning interest in the scriptural traditions of other cultures. The inclusion of the Bible’s Old Testament books into a canon of “primeval” scriptural and folk traditions involves reconfiguring the theory of literary, or non-scriptural, poetry as well. The secularization of the Bible does not preclude its ontological distinction from secular works, but instead of being set aside as purely religious the Bible becomes perceived in part as a manifestation of an first-order mode of inspiration and expression

that underwrites the second-order and derivative literary work of more civilized societies. Whitman's use of the scriptural line is in part calculated to evoke the continuing presence of that ontologically prior mode of inspiration.<sup>11</sup> The theme of democratic egalitarianism expressed in those lines obtains much of its force not from the cryptic persistence of religion but from its secularization, from his insistence on the liberation of inspiration from a mediated and hieratic mode of access into a potentially unlimited distribution to readers as individual selves – that what was once the sole operation of priests is now part of the contract between the poet and the reader. As the Bible becomes more human and historical a document, secular poetry becomes potentially more aligned with its horizontally distributed but now obscured and inarticulate source of inspiration. David Reynolds notes an analogous process of secularization as integral to the antebellum American literary scene, which he describes as “a widespread shift in the style of popular religious discourse from the doctrinal to the imaginative.” “Popular sermon style,” he writes, “which had in Puritan times been characterized primarily by theological rigor and the restraint of imagination, came to be dominated by diverting narrative, extensive illustration, and even colloquial humor ... At the same time, a spirit of piety permeated much secular fiction and poetry.” The consequence for American letters was that the precursors to American literary modernism – Reynolds identifies Emerson, Melville, and Dickinson as well as Whitman – “were in fact distinguished among their literary contemporaries by the breadth and intensity of their responsiveness to experimental developments on the popular religious scene” (15).

“Divine am I inside and out”

In section twenty-four of “Song of Myself,” Whitman turns his attention toward the implications of adopting the scriptural line as simultaneously a reference to true religion as it is also an advocacy of a secularization of literature and inspiration. The consideration occurs at a largely formal level, and as Whitman contemplates in the poem the significance of the scriptural line, other religious genres, specifically the liturgical genres of the creed and the antiphon, colonize the section’s formal expression. And as with the scriptural line, the use of these genres in a literary context conveys an overtly public and secular stance, and their use also saturates the section with reference to religious community, ritual, and language. For instance, in parody or imitation of a confessional creed, he writes, “I believe in the flesh and the appetites, / Seeing hearing and feeling are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle” (522-3). The lines invert the affirmation of spiritual belief to celebrate the rejection of a transcendental divine as an arbiter of ultimate value:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from,  
The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer,  
This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds. (524-6)

He sustains that same materialist defiance – the same secularization of spiritual terms of value (“divine,” “holy,” etc.) and the same inversion of religious hierarchies of value – in the latter two-thirds of the section in a litany addressed to his body. Like the creed which he parodies, the litany is a ceremonial and communal genre, a series of single line or hemistich prayers offered on the behalf of a supplicant and followed by an antiphonal response in unison on the part of the congregation. While continuing the creed’s use of religious and ceremonial qualities in the formal environment and diction, he also retains

in the litany the section's secular bent. "If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of my own body" (527), he insists at the litany's start.

With the repetition of "It shall be you," the antiphon of his secularized litany, he directs the response of what would be the congregation back to himself in the second person, echoing the act of spiritual self-regard that opens the poem and also offering the line as being spoken on the behalf of a congregation of readers. Such multi-voicing, with Whitman speaking alternately or simultaneously to and for his readers, forms an important part of the public stance of "Song of Myself" and a distinctive part of his style.<sup>12</sup> A important component of this multi-voicing is his insistence on the ability of the utterances in the poems to act as representative utterances for any or all persons. A key instance of this from another point in the same poem would be in section forty-seven: "It is you talking just as much as myself . . . . I act as the tongue of you, / It was tied in your mouth . . . . in mine it begins to be loosened" (1248-9). The assignment of voice appears particularly poignant or urgent where Whitman represents the readers' or potential readers' own voices as "tied" and unable to articulate an account of their existence or their desires. And yet neither is Whitman's representative utterance fully articulate in these moments. He immediately draws back in section forty-seven, for example, from giving an full account of his own capacity for representative utterances or his investment in it, putting conditions on when and where a fully articulate speech would be allowable: "I swear I will never mention love or death inside a house, / And I swear I never will translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air" (1250-1). What is being inferred here is the relationship of the poem's esoteric significance to the nature and integrity of a speaking self and its contact with others. And

although love and death – the self’s capacity for intimate contact and its inevitable dissolution of particularity – are conventionally private events, he agitates against their expression within the private and domestic realm of the home. The full meaning of the self, its constitution, its immediate activity, and its fate will instead be revealed only to those who are able to meet the poet in an idealized public arena of mutual and complete transparency – “the open air” – and at the same time engage in an impossible act of “privately stay[ing]” with him as a personal intimate.<sup>13</sup>

To return to section twenty-four, Whitman there addresses the antinomy between public and private versions of the self and their relationship to the poem’s imagined capacity to assign its voice to others. In the first line he writes, “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos.” (497). He identifies himself here as an individual and asserts his sovereign dignity thereby, a dignity that arises out of a universally available mode of significance, that each and all persons alike are in themselves a universe. He creates the impression of a particular and contingent origin for the passage’s voice – “Walt Whitman, an American,” only to rupture that particularity into the contingent flux of urban humanity that so frequently inspires him to rhapsody: “Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist . . . . no stander above men and women or apart from them . . . . no more modest than immodest” (498-9). Grammatically this series of adjectives and participles comprise the appositive attributes of the eponymous Walt Whitman, but thematically they celebrate the traits of a broad and anonymous swath of the emerging American urban working class and its Jacksonian democratic sympathies – the people that in his poems are a metonym for his vision of a fully-realized New World democratic republic. He writes as if he

means for his readers to acknowledge his presence but lose sight of him in that crowd. The displacement of the singularity of the author's person onto a porous and fluid mass of people accomplishes a congruent democratization of expression: the poem is both exemplary, the characteristic expression of one, and representative, the virtual expression of all.

An autobiographical impulse and its ramifications seem to hover about the poem through its publication history. After fulfilling the obligation of an author to put his or her name to a work in the first edition, Whitman titled "Poem of Walt Whitman" in the second, and then simply "Walt Whitman" until the poem received its final title in the final edition. And yet despite the seeming assertions of an autobiographical impulse behind the poem, very little of Whitman's person actually appears in this poem or any other. The lack of autobiographical depth or resonance in *Leaves of Grass* has seemed to many the consequence of a specifically secular democratic poetics that prevents the full representation of any singular and particular existence. Whether this is taken as a positive or negative quality, or a description indifferent to its political ramifications, a pointedly secular understanding of *Leaves of Grass* understands it as a model for a social imaginary necessary for the success of a democratic and egalitarian polity.<sup>14</sup> The commonplace reading of Whitman's distinctive verse form is hinged upon seeing Whitman's distinctive lines as being paradigmatic expressions of the individual self of a democratic liberalism. Gay Wilson Allen, in a classic expression of this point of view, writes: "Nowhere in the universe does he recognize caste or subordination. Everything is equally perfect and perfectly divine." The reliance on line-to-line grammatical parallelism, the lack of subordination, and the sense of an endless variety within a formal unity are "a verse

structure appropriate for expressing his cosmic inspiration and democratic sentiment. The expression of such doctrines demands a form in which units are coordinate, distinctions eliminated, all flowing together in a synonymous or ‘democratic’ structure” (215). The locus classicus of this reading of *Leaves of Grass*, and “Song of Myself” in particular, is section fifteen of the poem, where Whitman lists a series of American types with whom he identifies through the poem:

The pure contralto sings in the organloft,  
 The carpenter dresses his plank . . . . the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild  
                   ascending lisp,  
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanksgiving dinner,  
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
 The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready. (264-8)

Etc. These identifications then lead him to the section’s final lines: “And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am” (327-8).

While Rorty and Kateb read Whitman’s “democratic structure” favorably, as a necessary secularization of the category of the individual self, others have viewed the representative self that seems to emerge as a consequence, with its lack of biographical depth or individual particularity, as not only the signal flaw of Whitman’s work but also indicative of a larger damning tendency inherent in a liberal political dispensation.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Bellah in particular has described Whitman as the exemplar of a social transformation of American individualism to an “expressive individualism” that insists on the ontological priority of the individual self to any commitment or obligation of that self might recognize (27-51). Whitmanian religion, according to Bellah, as a paradigmatic secular religion, finds its contemporary form in a “vague pantheistic mysticism” that selects from a “consumers’ market” of religious traditions and that presents itself as a



kind of authentic self-expression that nonetheless misguidedly and selfishly acts to “construct the world somehow out of the self” (233-5).<sup>16</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, to cite an influential and interesting recent example, also accuses Whitman of participating in liberal secularism’s denial of anything ontological prior to one’s own self, and she turns in particular to John Rawls’s conception of a just society, which she regards as just another such neo-Kantian fantasy, to diagnose Whitman’s version of the self. Rawls’s theory of liberalism requires a public self that is, as Dimock puts it, “a universal subject, one whose political dignity is absolute [and] about whom one can make a categorical claim” (105). Liberalism’s economy of representation insists that any attributes of a person that form an irreducible particularity and cannot be disassociated from one’s identity cannot be part of the repertoire of attributes for public self-representation. Instead, according to Rawls, the universal subject must have some categorical foundation strong enough to define it without recourse to specific allegiances or obligations. But the vision of what constitutes the self must be thin enough, the theory insists, to prevent it from being tied down to any project other than its own inviolable dignity, and liberty, as an inherent quality of that dignity, must be an absolute rather than contingent facet of the self’s experience.

Michael Sandel, in a well-known critique of Rawls’s project, refers to the emergence of this universal subject as the fantasy of an unencumbered self. In the words that Sandel gives it, this self would demand, “No role or commitment could define me so completely that I could not understand myself without it. No project could be so essential that turning away from it would call into question the person that I am” (86). Dimock, with explicit reference to Sandel’s critique of Rawls, finds this principle of divestment at

the core of Whitman's formal technique. Instead of accepting Whitman's potentially endless series of identifications as inclusive, she reads the "myself" celebrated in "Song of Myself" as distinguished from and defined against each of the identifications the "I" makes. Through a syntactic pattern of identification, grammatical closure, and then subsequent re-identification in the potentially and seemingly limitless series of identifications the poems offer, each of these identifications appears as having no more grip or demand on the individual self than any other: they are equivalent and fungible. "Whitman," Dimock writes, "works his way through the various syntactic modes of the subject in order to recover a truly foundational self, one whose democratic dignity is absolute, transcendent, and unconditional" (113). The "I" of the poem entertains and then releases each of these contingent identifications on the ground that they are "not Me Myself," as Whitman writes in section four of the poem. The end result, as Dimock would have it, is

a poetry that spins out as an endless catalog of the self's many attachments only to distinguish the self from all attachments... [thus] removing the self from all its contingencies and defining these contingencies as "not Me Myself," so that finally detached from them, the self can be defined against them, as a principle of absolute necessity. (114)

Read as an analog of a secular vision of absolute and complete egalitarianism, Whitman's poetry seems to imagine a world of simultaneous, horizontal, and discrete instances on which the self can find no lasting purchase. In this worldview, personal attachments, therefore, carry no weight and no meaning.

Yet in section twenty-four of "Song of Myself," we find not an absolute, categorical self nor a poetics of divestment and noncontingency, but a self derived and sustained through its appeal to a contingent environment of intimate contact. In the litany

with its antiphon of “it shall be you!”, Whitman refers to the self and its attributes as “me” and “mine,” but the reference is slight and glancing. The reflexive reference in the second person to a self as composed of itemized physical attributes dominates the section:

If I worship any particular thing it shall be some of the spread of my own body  
 Translucent mould of me it shall be you,  
 Shaded ledges and rests, firm masculine coultter, it shall be you,  
 Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you,  
 You my rich blood, your milky stream pale strippings of my life;  
 Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you,  
 My brain it shall be your occult convolutions,  
 Root of washed sweet-flag, timorous pond-snipe, nest of guarded duplicate eggs,  
 it shall be you, (527-35)

Etc. The shift across nearly each line in this passage from a stated or implied first person reference to a physical attribute into the second-person pronoun of the refrain further distances and objectifies the sensuous experience of the person from speaker of the poem, but that discontinuity need not be read as a divestment or loss of contingent relation. Poetic speech and the body no longer quite map on to each other in the passage, yet they also remain somewhat continuous and intimate. Furthermore, the habitus of religious and liturgical training, whether acquired through a practice of personal devotion or as a culturally sustained and transmitted complex of attitudes and behaviors, prompts a visceral and uncanny response on the part of the reader. Reading the antiphon, the reader feels a leap to respond as if summoned into a congregation. The quasi-somatic and involuntary nature of the response alienates the reader to some degree from his or her own body, finding it figured in the poem as Whitman’s own body and at the same time sensing it as driving the reader’s response to the poem. The reader’s position becomes analogous to Whitman’s as represented in the poem: through the poem both the author

and reader are offering a hymn of praise to their own body viewed as not entirely identical to their own self yet in constant contact with it.

For Burroughs and like-minded readers of Whitman, it is this palpable awareness of the physical person of Whitman that is central to a religious understanding of the poetry. “In fact,” Burroughs writes in “Flight of the Eagle,” an essay published in an 1877 collection of literary criticism, “his poems are physiological as much as they are intellectual. They radiate from his entire being, and are charged to repletion with that blended quality of mind and body – psychic and physiologic – which the living form and presence send forth” (229). Burroughs identifies a number of consequences of Whitman’s physiological poetics. One is the sense of Whitman as a living presence behind the poems – that one feels a “tremendous personal force back of them, and felt through them as the sun through vapor; not merely intellectual grasp or push, but a warm breathing, towering, magnetic Presence that there was no escape from.” In addition to a sense of the person of the poet, there is also a sense of the poet’s unmediated contact with nature – “the faculty of being in entire sympathy with actual nature, and the objects and shows of nature, and of rude, abysmal man; and appalling directness of utterance thereupon, at first hand, without any intermediate agency or modification” (215). And finally, the representational capacity of the verse – that *Leaves of Grass* speaks, as Burroughs elsewhere writes, not merely for “Walt Whitman the private individual, but of Walt Whitman as representative of, and speaking for, all types and conditions of men; in fact, that it is the drama of a new democratic personality” (*Walt Whitman* 192) – means for Burroughs that through the poems Whitman and reader alike explore their intimate bond and their rootedness in the material world: “‘Leaves of Grass’ is essentially a dramatic poem, a free representation of

man in his relation to the outward world, – the play, the interchange between him and it, apart from social and artificial considerations, – in which we discern the central purpose or thought to be for every man and woman his or her individuality, and around that, Nationality” (“Flight of the Eagle” 230-231). What is important to note is that the religiosity of the poems is not found for Burroughs in their message, or not merely, but in their formal capacity to engage the reader as a contingent and physical existence.

Repeatedly Whitman insists in this section on the capability of the poem to assign itself as the voice of others, rising to a high rhetorical pitch with the claim to represent those who have no persuasive voice of their own. He presents these voices as those whose claim upon the dignity presumably available to all has been neglected or denied:

Through me many long dumb voices,  
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,  
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,  
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs. (508-510)

The ability to represent those whose claims are not well represented appears in the section as an ethical responsibility incumbent upon the poem, and the importance of such a claim for a liberal secular reading of the poem as democratic policy cannot be underestimated. But what is striking about this particular passage is its impersonality. Alongside the voices of those who remain inarticulate because of cruelty, misfortune, or the inequities of power, the passage claims to speak for the voices of cosmic and natural forces – the largest to the meanest – as well:

Voices of the cycles of preparation and accretion,  
And of the threads that connect the stars – and of wombs, and of the fatherstuff,  
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,  
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,  
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung. (511-515)

Rather than the rehearsal of potential attributes as part of the abstraction of a truly

universal and categorical general public self, the assignment of voice here celebrates a contingent and inhuman environment against which a one singular and particular voice emerges. This does not vitiate the ethical force of assigning the language of the poem to others; it deepens it. The passage gives voice to the sense of ethical responsibility and indebtedness to the forces which enable the individual self thus represented to develop and acquire speech and self-awareness.

A crucial component of this individual self's emergence is the experience of the inarticulate pressure of physical desire. Desires are themselves potential if barred positions from which to speak – “forbidden voices” – that Whitman incorporates into the contingent environment to which he is compelled to acknowledge by giving it voice: “Voices of sexes and lusts . . . voices veiled, and I remove the veil, / Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured” (517-518). As part of the background against which the utterance of the poem emerges, the “forbidden voices” mediate between the body that propels them and the voice which they in turn propel. These voices, though, once “clarified and transfigured” into the voice of the poet have a somewhat different relationship to the poem. Whitman has the poem claim this body as his own, describing his relationship to the emergent physicality in the first person:

I do not press my finger across my mouth,  
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,  
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is. (519-21)

The passage, however, does not represent this physical presence to which the voices cling as being a stable and inviolable locus of kinesthetic and sensuous experience. This body acts instead as a site of physical events that reveal its permeability and the continuity of its interior with the immediate environment. The points of contact for the movements

between the interior of the body and its environment are the mouth, bowels, and genitals in their ingestion, evacuation, and copulation, and Whitman highlights the involuntary nature of these and their related functions when he refuses to place an embarrassed hand over the mouth to cover a rude noise, or equates the involuntary spasms of sex with the unknowable and unbidden finality of one's death throes.

As this section of the poem moves through the litany, not only do the relationships between Whitman, reader, speaking self, and body become charged and indeterminate, the integrity of the physical experience represented becomes questionable and diffuse. The body dissolves into a series of figures, beginning with the evocation of the body as "the spread" of a field to be tilled and then following through with a largely metaphorical sequence of parts of the body. The movement working from a cultivated to a wilder landscape, returns several times to celebrate pointedly the phallus as a site of contact between the self and its environment. Whitman does not employ the phallus in the sequence of metaphors as a sexual organ *per se*, but as a point of contact between the physical self and impersonal forces, and one that may be in possession of the body or the forces that press upon it. Whitman first exclaims it as the tip of the plow that will cultivate the field of its own body: "Firm masculine coulter, it shall be you." In the following line, it becomes whatever force that "goes to the tilth [tillage] of me" and once again receives the worshipful refrain. At this point the physical self becomes most permeable to its environment, and sexual excitement and release also reach a point where the orientation of the speaker to the body is hardest to decipher. The lines acknowledge the capillary flush of sexual excitement and the ejaculated semen as being both attributes of the lyric physical self in the first person and objectified in that speaker's regard in the

second person: "You my rich blood, your milky stream pale strippings of my life."

Celebrating the body as a field cultivated by the charge of sexual contact, Whitman is less concerned with the body in its brute, and mute, physical existence than he is with the body as the sedimentation of intimate physical contact: "Breast that presses against others breasts it shall be you." And although the self as an accretion of physical impulses and intimacies cannot be completely identified with the speaking voice of the poem, neither can it be unlinked from poetic speech and its capacity for representation. Whitman represents the felt presence of physical urges driving and shaping the poem in the continual return of the phallus as both tenor and vehicle of the passage's figurative language. The phallus reappears behind a rapid series of natural metaphors taken from the bank of a pond: "Root of washed sweet-flag, timorous pond-snipe, nest of guarded duplicate eggs, it shall be you."<sup>17</sup> It then appears further down as itself a metaphor for the tactile experience of the landscape: "Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you" (541). And not only are the lines pressed into service by the spasms of remembered contact, they also contain, shape, and anticipate a continuity of contact, remembrance, and yearning. Whitman presents the physical experience of the self as a membrane enlivened and given substance through the history of contacts and urges that cross it or brush against it. Its containment and organization into a coherent presence, a "you," occurs in the future, outside the frame of the poem and as a consequence of the past diffusive experiences of intimacy represented in it: "Hands I have taken, face I have kissed, mortal I have ever touched, it shall be you" (543). The litany closes on a note of loving familiarity between lover and beloved, with the voice of the poem and the reader's voice gracing each role but without anchoring themselves in either one.



“The primal, original, elemental man”

An important distinction between the public self of liberal political theory and the self that emerges in “Song of Myself” is that the liberal, secular vision of the self is a linguistic self – one that develops out of and is sustained through a discourse on the range of identifications and representations that have a valid claim upon the public’s attention.<sup>18</sup> When Whitman turns in *Leaves of Grass* to consider specifically the categorical public self, as he does in what will become “Song of the Open Road,” one of the major contributions to the 1856 edition, his account of it is saturated with hostility and sarcasm:

Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding it goes,  
Formless and wordless through the streets of the cities, polite and bland in the  
parlors,  
In the cars of rail-roads, in steam-boats, in the public assembly,  
Home to the houses of men and women, among their families, at the table, in the  
bed-room, everywhere,  
Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright, death under the breast-bones,  
hell under the skull-bones,  
Under the broad-cloth and gloves, under the ribbons and artificial flowers,  
Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of itself,  
Speaking of anything else, but never of itself. (198-205)<sup>19</sup>

This other self, this death-in-life, is constituted through speech as a public discourse rather than the exclamations of pleasure or recognition. Skeletal beneath its respectable bourgeois attire, it lacks a body because it has excluded itself from the experience of intimate contact that would sediment the physical dimensions of the self, and it lacks a voice that could give an account of itself, “speaking of anything but never of itself.” In creating this parody of liberalism’s public self, Whitman responds in particular to secularism’s theoretical prohibition against giving an account of one’s self as a justification for one’s appearance in the public sphere, as that account of one’s self would necessary entail an account of one’s coming to be and therefore an account of one’s

particular and contingent environment that has nurtured and produced one's self and still has claims of obligation on that person. In *Leaves of Grass*, the experience of physical intimacy that produces the physical dimension of selfhood and the expression of the account of one's coming to be are connected, and religion is a central aspect of that connection.

Burroughs's understanding of the religious ambition of *Leaves of Grass* revolves about what he regards as Whitman's distinctive ability to convey a palpable sense of his own personal existence in the poems. Religious expression concerns, according to the interpretive scheme Burroughs develops, the cultivation of an authentic relation between oneself and world observed at first hand, as opposed to the literary's reference to past written works and existing standards of taste. The literary realm consists of the achievements of those "few men born to each generation who embody the best thought and culture of that generation" – men like Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes. This faint praise meant to acknowledge the value of literary standards also sets the standards for real persons of genius:

men who are like an irruption of life from another world, who belong to another order, who bring other standards, and sow the seeds of new are larger types; who are not the organs of the culture or modes of their times, and whom their times for the most part decry and disown – the primal, original, elemental man. (Walt Whitman 18)

Whitman's work, as the work of original genius, does not correspond to literary standards; the standards must necessarily evolve according to his cue: "The new man is impossible until he appears, and, when he appears, in proportion to his originality and power does it take the world a longer or shorter time to adjust its critical standards to him" (Walt Whitman 106). While Burroughs finds the literary restricted to the circulation

of the spirit of the age “among scholars in the parlor or counting-houses” (Walt Whitman 75), Whitman’s work distinguishes itself for the singularity of its theme – “the personality of the poet himself. To exploit this is always the main purpose, and, in doing so, to make the book both directly and indirectly a large impassioned utterance upon all the main problems of life and nationality” (Walt Whitman 73). “Whitman’s relation to art, then, is primary and fundamental, just as his relations to religion, to culture, to politics, to democracy, are primary and fundamental, – through his emotion, his soul, and not merely through his tools, his intellect” (Walt Whitman 127). And whereas original and elemental nature of his work means that his relation to religion as a theme is less mediated than the second-hand religion of his contemporary literary figures, the work as a whole “is primitive, like the early literature of a race or people, in that its spirit and purpose are essentially religious” (Walt Whitman 73). This “launching forth of himself” in its radical primitivity is also the “spirit and repose of nature” (Walt Whitman 3) – a standard that is religious because it is both universal – cosmic, to use a favorite expression of the Whitmaniacs – and an elemental condition of the poet’s contingent experience.

An account of one’s own coming to be is, if not inherently a religious account, then an account that is disentangled from religious dimensions of experience with great care and difficulty. This is particularly true in a secular liberal dispensation where one’s contingent particularity out of which one’s self takes shape has profound historical associations and political congruence with the religious realm of particularity and obligation that has been excluded from the public sphere. Furthermore, as the death-in-life reminds us when it appears as the uncanny double of the expressive, sensual self that

speaks for the poet in *Leaves of Grass*, the nature of the self – its constitution and its reciprocal claims and obligations – forms the core concern of modern religiosity. For Whitman, as it would have been for most of nineteenth-century America, the spiritual immortality of the soul was the sine qua non of religious belief.<sup>20</sup> In terms of a religious reading of Whitman, though, it is possible – desirable, if not entirely necessary – to bracket off personal belief while still working toward an understanding of how religion, self-expression, intimacy, and self intersect in the poems. Perhaps because literary criticism is at its heart a secular enterprise, and perhaps because secularism's notion of respect and tolerance for divergences in the dictates of conscience especially when it concerns belief is a valuable directive, but largely in this case because Whitman's account of his own coming to be in "Song of Myself" – and in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and beyond – is not an account of personal belief. When one traces the intimations found in the public attitudes of the poems back to their putative origin in the expressive capacity of the private individual, what appears instead is not the naked soul of the poet laid bare but an indeterminate and inarticulate network of remembered or yearned-for intimate and physical contacts.

The self represented in section twenty-four of "Song of Myself" emerges at a point in the turbulent mass of humanity, a humanity with which Whitman explicitly identifies himself, but that identification does not result in a development of a psychological interiority that one could link to the notion of a private self. Whitman describes this self as developing out of the sedimentation of its contact with its immediate environment, but despite the diffusion of sites of intimacy into that environment, there is no sense of other personalities cohering out of that environment, nor does the self thicken

much inwardly. And while the emergence of this self engages the reader in a complex fashion, neither is it equivalent to the reader. The reader finds him or herself addressed in the poems only as a potential interiority, one that will become actualized through the experience of reading *Leaves of Grass*: “what I assume you *shall* assume.” Because the reader remains always to one side or another of the modes of address in the poem, this emergent self is always but never more than proximate to the reader. The self thus celebrated does not ever emerge as a fully coherent self, yet that incoherence does not result from the programmatic emptying out of all its contingent particularity and sedimented experience. The incoherence arises instead from the fluid and indeterminate nature of the relationship of the self to the voice of the poem and to the poem’s projected readership, which despite Whitman’s rhetoric, do not ever quite evenly map onto one another. Instead, he represents this self as exerting a continuous influence on the language of the poem to which it is adjacent but into which it never fully appears, in ways at the end of section twenty-four he confesses unable to discern and articulate. “Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy,” he writes toward the end of the section: “I cannot tell how my ankles bend . . . nor whence the cause of my faintest wish, / Nor the cause of the friendship I emit . . . nor the cause of the friendship I take again” (545-7). Neither the defiantly secular voice that sets the stage for its emergence, nor the categorical emptiness of a strictly political interpretation, this self has a singular, felt relationship to its contingent environment that appears through the visceral responses to the poem’s evocation of contact. These quasi-somatic events engage but do not fully enter into consciousness, and to a degree even pass it by. “Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven” (555-6), he writes in the

section's climactic moment.

Readers have long recognized that Whitman does not have "Song of Myself" speak for himself personally but as a public and universally available stance for one to explore one's inherent dignity as an individual. This self that he derives from the evocation of the emotional, visceral, and aesthetic contexts of experience is what his and Burroughs's insistences on the religious ambitions of the poetry intend. Whitman's celebration of the pre-rational, impulsive, and earthbound aspects of the individual as derived from a history of and a desire for intimate contact with the near-at-hand and the everyday works specifically against a secularist reading of a noncontingent and unencumbered selfhood. In that he reveals the public mode of his poems to be driven by this impulsive and inarticulate physical presence, his poetry works to imagine a space in which the aspects of the self that he would call religious could continue to have an effect on public life. Religion, however else we may wish to define it, concerns commitments and burdens felt to be existentially prior to the volitional or rational self. This is true whether one speaks from a conventionally church'd perspective, where the condition of faith is the framework in which will and meaning become possible and not the other way around, or from a secular ethical perspective, in which we find that commitments to causes may emerge as the result of long personal investigations but are not chosen so much as taken up as obligations upon us that we recognize but may take a lifetime to learn how to articulate. The dimensions of religious experience also reside in those aspects of our persons not fully available to conscious and rational thought and require a considerable degree of creativity and linguistic free-play in order to find expression. From a literary point of view the felt, visceral, and figurative character of religion and

religious experience would therefore fall into the category of aesthetics, of poetic form in particular.

“Rising Inclusive and More Resplendent”

The topic of “Starting from Paumanok” is the significance of the new poetics that *Leaves of Grass* represented to Whitman and of which “Song of Myself” had always been the signal demonstration. Beginning with the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, when the poem was entitled “Proto-Leaf” and the first poem in the volume, and through the final edition, Whitman always positioned “Starting from Paumanok” immediately before “Song of Myself” as a way into the poem and through “Song of Myself” as a way into the collection as a whole. “Starting from Paumanok” functions in this way much as the 1855 Preface, an explication of the theoretical positions the reader would want to engage to assemble an interpretive apparatus to approach the singular and unconventional poems that follow. The poem adopts the 1855 Preface’s central theme of literary nationalism and the announcement and description of the new American verse, addressing its audience as citizens of the nascent world-redeeming American republic of a thorough-going ethical democracy. “Americanos!” it says,

conquerors! marches humanitarian!  
Foremost! century marches! Libertad! masses!  
For you a programme of chants.

Chants of the prairies,  
Chants of the long-running Mississippi, and down to the Mexican sea,  
Chants of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota,  
Chants going forth from the center from Kansas, and thence equidistant,  
Shooting in pulses of fire ceaseless to vivify all. (37-44)

Like the Preface, the poem describes the qualities by which the poems to follow shall be

seen to correspond to the American people and by which the ambition and suitability of the poems can be recognized:

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 for the ears of the President, full of weapons with  
menacing points,

[ ..... ]

I will acknowledge contemporary lands,  
I will trail the whole geography of the globe and salute courteously every city  
large and small,  
And employments! I will put in my poems that with you is heroism upon land and  
sea,  
And I will report all heroism from an American point of view.

I will sing the song of companionship,  
I will show what alone must finally compact these,  
I believe these are to found their own ideal of manly love, indicating it in me. (74-  
76, 82-85)

etc. And yet there are significant differences between the 1855 Preface and “Starting from Paumanok”: their genre, their appearance at different points in Whitman’s career, and, thematically, the poem’s revision of the Preface’s secularist approach to the potential literature of an egalitarian democratic political association as an expression of American nationalism into a specifically religious interpretation of *Leaves of Grass*.

A tendency long ingrained into the critical reception of the poet has been the reading of Whitman’s insistence upon a religious interpretation of *Leaves of Grass* as a rhetoric of enthusiasm for a necessarily secular democratic social organization. At the root of this reading of Whitman as a “prophet of democracy” has been the critical legacy of relating Whitman’s prose to his poetry as a coherent and unified project with social ambitions. Although reading Whitman’s work as a unified project has had some



significant critical value, particularly in enabling readers to accept Whitman's tendency at times in the poetry toward a jingoistic nationalism, and although Whitman himself advocated reading both his poetry and his prose as a single, coherent life project, the significance of Whitman's insistence on a religious reading of the poetry becomes lost without the tacit corollary that it is somewhat different to read poetry than it is to read prose. Insisting upon the significance of the genre distinctions becomes tricky in the wake of Whitman's late pronouncement that the new American verse was to become more modern through the loss of some of the distinctions between poetry and prose. Yet every reader of Whitman is well aware when reading a piece of Whitman's work whether that piece is prose or poetry. Whitman's interest in certain themes unites his work, and both the poetry and prose display distinctive stylistic features that allow his work to be instantly recognizable, leading some even to suggest that certain more impassioned prose works, like the 1855 Preface, could be reformatted into verse with the addition of line breaks and stanzas, and leading less charitable readers to suggest that the poetry could be simply reformatted as idiosyncratic and impassioned prose. There are deeper and less reconcilable differences between the poetry and prose, though, and these differences go to the heart of the reason for Whitman's insistence upon the religious interpretation of the poetry.

One crucial difference between the poetry and the prose is that the poetry presents itself as wholly original while the prose represents itself as merely distinctive; another crucial difference, and a related one, concerns the ways in which the issues of self, persona, and voice play out between the two genres on the issue of innovation. So that while Whitman writes the Preface and "Starting from Paumanok" for very similar

reasons, they approach these reasons from very different perspectives. Whitman writes the Preface on one hand in the impersonal mode of an objective prose theory, assiduously distancing the authorial voice from any personal identification with the American bard it announces to maintain an appearance of disinterestedness. And for that reason, despite the Preface's rapturous nationalism and concern with a specifically American readership of poetry, nowhere does it indicate that American readership, neither identifying with an American readership through the use of a first-person pronoun nor addressing that readership in the second person, always referring to Americans and their attributes in the third person. The first person does appear in the Preface under two specific rubrics as reportage of theoretically constructed and prospective virtual utterances rather than as reportage of actual speech: one, the virtual utterance of the generalized American citizen which is presented as a model interrogation of the new American bard's poems, and, two, the virtual utterance of that bard presented as a model catechism of a new American poetics for the readers' benefit. Whitman on the other hand presents "Starting from Paumanok" as a lyric poem, and therefore consistently in a first-person lyric voice, one that furthermore represents as the voice of the poet the prospective and virtual utterance of the new American bard such as that found bracketed as reportage in the Preface, yet when it is presented as a poem it requires no such framing.

Without the objective distancing that the framing as reportage gives the lyric voice, the speaker of "Starting from Paumanok" finds itself subject to a range of identifications. These include the generalized categorical self as an American national citizen, the universal cosmic self as a mythical bardic figure, and the spiritual self whose emergence Whitman celebrates in "Song of Myself," which has here as it does in section

twenty-four of “Song of Myself” a strong autobiographical component. Whitman attempts to accommodate all of these possible subject positions in the poem by means of the bardic persona, but they do not cohere. The ostensible justification for the poem, and the favored explanation for the poetics of “Song of Myself” that the poem takes on as its theme, is the generalized categorical self as a nationalistic project of egalitarian democracy, yet what emerges as the poem’s driving force is the singular and contingent spiritual self. As in “Song of Myself,” that self is not necessarily at every point equivalent to the speaking voice of the poem, but in “Starting from Paumanok” the identification of that spiritual self with the figure of the poem assumes an even more significant role. In accounting for the formal innovations represented by “Song of Myself,” “Starting from Paumanok presents itself as the mythic account of Whitman’s personal assumption of the figure of the poet as linked to an autobiographical account of his origins. The first section of the poem, a fourteen-line sentence, opens with an account of Whitman’s birth and passing through a dozen lines of adverbial phrases ends with the declarative assumption of poetic occupation. “Starting from fish-shape Pamanok where I was born,” he begins, indicating the place of his birth with his favored aboriginal name for Long Island, and ends, “Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.”<sup>21</sup>

Central to the first section is the sequence of adverbial phrases that sustain that declaration. These phrases take the form of the distinctive Whitmanian trope associated with “Song of Myself,” the catalog of American types, but with significant differences. This catalog is briefer, indicating rather than performing its seemingly endless capacity for representation.<sup>22</sup> More striking, though, is Whitman’s use of a conjunction to link the types of each line together instead of allowing an implicit parataxis through the tacit

juxtaposition of the lines:

Dweller in Mannahatta my city, or on southern savannas,  
Or a soldier camp'd or carrying my knapsack and gun, or a miner in California,  
Or rude in my home in Dakota's woods, my diet meat, my drink from the spring,  
Or withdrawn to muse and meditate in some deep recess,  
Far from the clank of crowds intervals passing rapt and happy. (4-8)

The use of “or” to link these separate idylls does not disturb any sense of their equivalence. What it does is cement the sense of their being discrete and finite moments. Each identity Whitman describes here he presents as being possible only in the moment of the others’ exclusion, and then for only as long as that moment lasts. The unstated parataxis of “Song of Myself” and other poems affords a sustained indeterminacy between the accumulative – the “and” – and the exclusive – the or,” allowing the catalogs to sustain a simultaneous breadth of identity congruent with the national geography while allowing each type, if fleetingly, the dignity of regnant individualism. The rereading of the trope that “Starting from Paumanok” represents tips its undecidability away from secularist liberalism and more toward a notion of the encumbrance of one’s contingency upon one’s individual existence.

As a reading of “Song of Myself,” the use of “or” in this catalog acknowledges the impossibility of sustaining any such identifications in a catalog as a way of conveying the sentiment of a particularized existence, and the “or” in this catalog also reveals that these identifications, despite their formal uniformity, are not interchangeable. The identifications of the catalog relate to the lyric voice of the poem in a variety of fashions. One, the “Dweller in Mannahatta,” is autobiographical. Coming on the heels of the opening autobiographical account of personal origin, this detail does not allow for its interpretation as coincidental detail: the drift of the poem works to quickly into the

solidity of biographical fact. A number of the intervening details, the adverbial attributes of the poet that strikes up in the last line of the section, are mythic rather than fully autobiographical – the roamer of “many lands” and the “well-begotten” child of a “perfect mother” (2-3), yet their presence does not violate the autobiographical sense of the opening few lines. The mythic details indicate the two tropes of the cosmic self that will become attached to the figure of the poet in the poem – the figure’s wide dispersal and exemplary and singular origin, and as such are mythic renderings of the autobiography. And some of the identifications are fictional, a new feature for the catalog since in “Song of Myself” the identifications in the catalogs and elsewhere are for the most part are made for a theoretical and virtual self for which the distinction between actual and fictional attributes do not apply. In the opening section of “Starting from Paumanok,” they cannot be potential, only a retrospective – version of what might have been but was not. As Whitman was a “Dweller in Mannahatta,” a contingent circumstance of birth and environment that is also an autobiographical fact, he could just as well have been “on southern savannas, / Or a soldier camp’d,” or a Dakota frontiersman – could have been one of many other types represented in other catalogs; could have been but never was.<sup>23</sup>

In the last half of the first section of “Starting from Paumanok,” Whitman introduces with the final “or” a self neither strictly autobiographical nor fictional but a generic portrait of a pastoral poet “withdrawn to muse and meditate in some deep recess,” a theoretical and virtual figure as a replacement for the universal and categorical self that the retrospective reading of the poetics of “Song of Myself” has rejected. The reading of “Song of Myself” that does persist after the rejection of the account of the representative

universal self is the capacity of Whitman's epanaphora to represent in an iconic fashion the breadth of the social imaginary involved in the creation of an identity, here as elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* imagined chiefly as a national identity. Whitman represents this mythic figure of the pastoral poet as someone whose poetic power comes from his intimate and immediate knowledge of the natural world, "Aware of the buffalo herds grazing the plains, the hirsute and strong-breasted bull, / Of earth, rocks, Fifth-month flowers experienced, stars, rain, snow, my amaze" (10-11). As a national identity, moreover, this mythic analog to the figure of the poet also presents that awareness as a specifically oriented toward a national landscape and its distinctive features – such as hermit thrushes, mocking birds, and buffalos – and landmarks – "Aware of the fresh free giver the flowing Missouri, aware of the mighty Niagara" (9). The mythic lyric persona here allows Whitman to reference his autobiographical person as included within this mythic persona, but it also frees the poem from any responsibility to autobiographical similitude.

Whitman takes advantage of this freedom to stage an entirely fictional account of the reception of the gift of poetry from the forces of nature in section eleven of the poem. Expanded from the account in the first section where the mythic figure of the poet "Having studied the mocking-bird's tones and the flight of the mountain-hawk, / And heard the unrivall'd one, the hermit thrush from the swamp-cedars" receives his bardic vocation and "strike[s] up for a New World" (12-13), Whitman introduces a more specific version of the encounter with the mocking bird, but set in Alabama.

As I have walk'd in Alabama my morning walk,  
I have seen where the she-bird the mocking-bird sat on her nest in the briers  
hatching her brood.

I have seen the he-bird also,  
 I have paus'd to hear him near at hand inflating his throat and joyfully singing.  
 (148-151)

Considering another autobiographical account of the transmission of poetic power from a mocking bird in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” that is set in Long Island, the specificity of the location comes off as oddly deliberate. Whitman here rather self-consciously displays the freedom given by the mythic dimension of his national imaginary to resituate a contingent event or attribute anywhere within the national landscape as an icon of national identity. And yet if it the site of the encounter seems oddly displaced from the biography of the poet, the significance of the encounter is in its evocation of immediacy, nearness, and situatedness: the speaker twice insists that this scene results from immediate personal experience – “I have seen,” the hen mockingbird sits amongst her nestlings located with doubled specificity in a nest in a bush, and the male is “near at hand” to the speaker who stops for the purpose of hearing him.

The interest in the contingent circumstances of the scene and the mocking bird’s song reflects Whitman’s conviction that poetry arises from within specific conditions that bear upon, shape, and legitimize the poetic expression, and the scene attempts to negotiate allegorically Whitman’s anxiety about how a new poetry could be in any fashion significant for those not immediate to the circumstances from which that poetry takes its shape. Whitman’s appearance on the scene places him in the position of the reader of distributed print poetry, anonymous and unknown to both the singer, the male mocking bird, and the referent of the song, the she-bird on her nest, and as a reader recognizes in the song a responsibility to understand and the problem entailed: “A charge transmitted and a gift occult for those being born.” The gift reveals itself to the poet in the

scene, as it will presumably to the generation that follows, in an act of reading which involves imagining how the song will be received elsewhere as a transcendence of its immediate circumstance:

And while I paus'd it came to me that what he sang for was not there only,  
Nor for his mate nor himself only, nor all sent back by the echoes,  
But subtle, clandestine, away beyond. (152-154)

The operation of that transcendence, though, is not premised upon a liberal categorical universalism, which is what allows Whitman the imaginative register to create the scene, but is instead couched in the terms of the influence of the spiritual realm as in the creation of the spiritual rather than political self: subtle, clandestine, occult.

A gap in time exists between the inspiration for the song, the charge that it transmits, and the unlocking of the message by its unknown auditors, “those being born,” that is similar to the distance in time that separates the moment of composition in modern poetry and its dissemination and consumption as printed text. Transposed to the situation of the mythic figure of the national bard, Whitman represents another disjuncture in time as existing between the bard and his or her national audience. In the figure of the national bard, moreover, Whitman closes the movement in time from the bard to the audience into a continuous circuit: the existence of a national audience creates the conditions whereby the bard will come into exist and write poems which then enter the process of printing and distribution. “Starting from Paumanok” represents process of the bard’s coming into being through the contractual litany of promises to the national audience for the poems to come – “I will sing the song of companionship,” etc., arriving finally at section six in the poem with the anticipated voice of the bard in direct statement. That is, the poem moves from the repetition of “I will” to “I am”:



I am the credulous man of qualities, ages, races,  
 I advance from the people in their own spirit,  
 Here is what sings unrestricted faith. (95-97)

Once achieved, the bardic voice represents itself as constituted not horizontally or simultaneously, and therefore not itself representative of a secular nationality, but as a single self (“Solitary, singing”) emerging out from a people whose character or spirit he accepts as a principle of faith, the meaning here of “credulous,” and as a given character of the environment that gives the bard his or her charge to express. Whitman describes the bard as a single, and singular, person, but one constituted as a member of a lineage stretching over time, and Whitman represents this linear succession over time of bards upon whom the contingent circumstance of their arising charges with an ethical responsibility for poetic expression as specifically religious: “I too, following many and follow’d by many, inaugurate a religion, I descend into the area” (102). The religion that each of these representative figures inaugurates anew in his or her turn more or less corresponds to the expression of the background against which the poet’s self takes shape, that this religion expresses the temporal and contingent constitution of the people for whom the poet speaks.

As Whitman represents the bardic voice in the poem, though, the lag between composition and consumption does not occur as the result of an interpretive process on the part of the readership but as the constitution of that audience through the bard’s poetic expression.<sup>24</sup> The audience as a simultaneously constituted generation moves out ahead of the bard into the future, keeping on eye on the bard as a measure and standard of what unites that audience as a people:

One generation playing its part and passing on,  
 Another generation playing its part and passing on in its turn,

With eyes turn'd sideways or backward towards me to listen,  
 With eyes retrospective towards me. (33-36)

Whitman's use of the term "religion" is fairly fluid and inclusive, so while it is possible to recognize the situation of the bard as fundamental to Whitman's notion of the spiritual, Whitman also wants us to regard as religious the constitution of a national citizenry as a generation, that is, as participating in a simultaneous, horizontal, and political egalitarian social imaginary. Whitman's frequent return to this insistence in lines like those following has allowed the reading of his American nationalism and his support for ethical and egalitarian democratic culture as being the true reference of his religion:

I say that the real and permanent grandeur of these States must be their religion,  
 Otherwise there is no real and permanent grandeur;  
 (Nor character nor life worthy the name without religion,  
 Nor land nor man or woman without religion.) (110-113)

Yet the self's experience of religion in the poem has no political, national, nor social character to it: it is entirely personal and yet prior to the self's identification with another. "Melange mine own," Whitman writes, "the unseen and the seen, / Mysterious ocean where the streams empty, / Prophetic spirit of materials shifting and flickering around me" (134-136). The character of religious experience is its indeterminacy, its immediacy to the self, and it is pre-volitional and pre-rational nature. The religious character of the constitution of a generation as a secular social body is in the retrospective glance of the individuals of the generation toward the bard as they move past and into the future.

The retrospective glance of a generation's members back toward the source of the bardic voice that unifies and inspires them is analogous to Whitman's retrospective desire to come to a critical understanding of what originally prompted his distinctive poetics. When presenting anything genuinely new, one finds oneself needing to explain what one

provides and why, and yet Whitman's need to set out an interpretive framework for understanding his poetry exceeds explanation even. The prospective and virtual lyric utterance that appears in the 1855 Preface is in the end no different than the lyric voice of "Song of Myself" except that in the Preface that voice appears briefly and framed as reportage. The rapid translation of the Preface into the 1856 poem, "Poem of the Many in One," or "By Blue Ontario's Shore," demonstrates how easily those instances of lyricism can catalyze the surrounding prose into material for lyric utterance. Whitman produces the Preface and the open letter to Emerson printed in the 1856 edition as prose theory tracts on literary nationalism as ostensible substrata to frame and sustain the lyric utterance of the poem. The prose theory of innovative poetics that Whitman seem to produce almost compulsively throughout his career provides the poems' lyric utterances a disinterested and anonymous framing that displaces the utterance's legitimacy and authority from a coherent lyric subject to the impersonal voice of an objective critical theory. Literary nationalism remains an important feature of Whitman's prose justification of his poetic project through the end of his life and career, but having produced a body of poetic work beginning with the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the need to summon and sustain that lyric voice begins to give way to the need to interpret what that voice has left in its wake.

The move toward an emphasis on the interpretation of the poetry over its framing results in the displacement of legitimacy from the disinterestedness of a prose theory onto the spiritual self evoked in the poetry. That displacement onto the spiritual self the poetry engages even more directly that spiritual self's autobiographical resonance. The spiritual self always seems a step behind or ahead of any community of other persons, unlike the

horizontal simultaneity of the liberal secular self. That self becomes a potent figure for the dynamic inherent in the asynchronous relationship between the author and the reader – between the composition of the poem and its consumption. Neither the figure of the author, the solitary and singing self, nor its close analog, the spiritual self, occupy the same temporal or discursive plane as the community from which they take their charge and to which they in turn give shape. This is as true for the metaphysics of national identity in which the bard and that bard's community mutually and in tandem constitute one another as it is for the mechanics of composition and print distribution. Whitman's address to the reader as an anonymous consumer of printed text makes explicit his desire to breach the disjunction between the scene of the poem's writing and the reader's consumption of it. The address also makes clear the advantage this disjuncture confers on the poetry, allowing the poem to reach out in its address to an audience ever expanding across space and through time as if the poem were constituting that audience as simultaneous in the reading of the poem.

The bard as a spiritual self functions more obliquely as a metaphor for interpretation, and much like the engagement of the reader's own voice in the antiphonal prayer's evocation of the spiritual self in "Song of Myself," the mutual presence of author to reader registers through that metaphor as indirect. The relationship between bard and nation, poet and readership, that appears in section twenty-four of "Song in Myself" through the shift in a discursive register – the transition from "I" to "you" within the lines of the prayer – appears in "Starting from Paumanok" as the influence of the seen and unseen worlds upon one another, a vision of incommensurable realms as a metaphor for the mutual non-presence of author to reader. Whitman indicates the presence of the

community of readers through an awareness of vague and indeterminate spiritual others, “materials shifting and flickering,” represented as the source of the inexpressible pressure upon the speaker that produces the poem:

Living beings, identities now doubtless near us in the air we know not of,  
Contact daily and hourly that will not release me,  
These selecting, these in hints demanded of me.

Not he with a daily kiss onward from childhood kissing me,  
Has winded and twisted around me that which holds me to him,  
Any more than I am held to the heavens and all the spiritual world,  
After what they have done to me, suggesting themes. (137-139)

Once again, the issue of song begins with the evocation of intimate and immediate contact, which here Whitman represents as a constant and loving physical intimacy. That intimacy between two persons, though, Whitman uses as a metaphor to represent “the heavens and all the spiritual world” as an ontologically distinct but contingent realm that sustains the self and prompts that self’s utterance. It is important to recognize here a congruence between what is evoked in the grammatical shifts within the lines of “Song of Myself,” the relationship of the seen and unseen worlds of “Starting from Paumanok,” and the grammar of reportage that sustains the virtual lyric utterances in the 1855 Preface. Whitman represents lyric utterance in each case as something that rests against a stratum with which it is in immediate contact but as something that utterance cannot directly represent. The religious interpretation of form in particular reveals an interest in not so much what the lines share or what their common feature may be, but what the lines indicate but cannot represent as their source. Whitman as author of the poems becomes himself the figure for that common invisible source, much as the spiritual self in the poems seems to always refer as well to Whitman’s own physical and particular existence.

As the poem reaches its rhetorical peak, it includes two major catalogues in

sections fourteen and eighteen in the style of “Song of Myself” but with significant differences from the signal appearances of the catalog style in that poem. Like addition of the conjunction to the briefer catalog that opens the poem, these differences do not alter the catalog’s salient features, but instead represent interpretations of the significance of those salient features. The first one, the catalog of section fourteen, recalls the familiar trope of indicating the breadth of the national geography through a metonymic recitation of names of its features, landmarks, and regions, along with local types associated with those regions:

Land of the eastern Chesapeake! land of the Delaware!  
 Land of the Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan!  
 Land of the Old Thirteen! Massachusetts land! land of Vermont and Connecticut!  
 Land of the ocean shores! land of sierras and peaks!  
 Land of boatmen and sailors! fishermen’s land! (200-204)

What emerges instead of merely a serial evocation of national grandeur is an awareness of implicit linkages being made in the movement from one contiguous region to another: from one Great Lake to another, from one original colony to its contiguous states, etc.

The nature of these linkages are made more manifest as the catalog continues:

Inextricable lands! the clutch’d together! the passionate ones!  
 The side by side! the elder and younger brothers! the bony-limb’d!  
 The great women’s land! the feminine! the experienced sisters and the  
 inexperienced sisters! (205-207)

Whitman moves from the inextricable embrace of neighboring regions to the embrace across the nation of all its citizens. But Whitman imagines something more than a personal version of the state’s contiguous embrace. Rather than each to each, what Whitman imagines for each citizen is the embrace of each to all.

The Pennsylvanian! the Virginian! the double-Carolinian!  
 O all and each well-loved by me! my intrepid nations! O I at any rate include you  
 with all perfect love!

I cannot be discharged from you! not from one any sooner than another! (209-211)

The introduction of the voice of the bard as a medium of affective exchange into the catalog effects the transformation from the inextricable embrace of immediate neighbors into the personal embrace of all American citizens. The use of the second-person pronoun renders those citizens as all potential readers of Whitman's poems. Materializing the figure of his poetry as the medium of their embrace, Whitman describes the pages of his books as pressing against the flesh of every person as they enter into the country, "welcoming every new brother, / Hereby applying these leaves to the new ones from the hour they unite with the old ones, / Coming among the new ones to be their companion and equal" (226-227). Continuing to push the figure of the medium of contact even further, Whitman then moves from the material manifestation of the poetry, the pages upon which it is printed, to his own person. Addressing the reader as a single, anonymous person, Whitman writes of his own presence as the unseen and inarticulate force which pushes forth the spiritual self and propels expression: "coming personally to you now / Enjoining you to acts, characters, spectacles, with me" (227-228).

The desire to represent himself as in intimate contact with the contingent spiritual development of each and every reader of his poetry comes out of the anxiety over how the resulting composition of a poetics of contingency might be interpreted in a secularized economy of print distribution. The corollary to this vision of Whitman being immediately and personally in contact with each and every reader is the imagining of the loss of Whitman's personal and singular existence into death. When Whitman begins his rhetorical inclusion of his person into the embrace of each citizen with every, including them all with his "perfect love," he writes as if shouting ecstatically "O death!" He tells

those whom he holds in embrace:

I am yet of you unseen this hour with irrepressible love,  
Walking New England, a friend, a traveler,  
Splashing my bare feet in the edge of the summer ripples on Paumanok's island,  
Crossing the prairies, dwelling again in Chicago, dwelling in every town,  
Observing shows, births, improvements, structures, arts,  
Listening to orators and oratresses in public halls,  
Of and through the States as during life, each man and woman my neighbor. (212-218)

Whitman describes himself as in this strange posthumous existence insinuating himself in-between every person “as during life.” “The Louisianian, the Georgian,” he writes, “as near to me, and I as near to him and her, / The Mississippian and the Arkansian yet with me, and I yet with any of them” (219-220). The contingent regions are still metonymically signifying the impossible embrace of each person to all: as Mississippi is next to Arkansas, say, each American is next to another. Once Whitman can imagine the impossibility of that embrace overcome by his physical presence as the substance of that embrace, the anxiety over the interpretation of the poem can extend the fantasy of posthumous contact with Whitman the single and singular person of the reader experiences. Section fourteen opens with an address to the reader as the anonymous reader of a commercially distributed text: “Whoever you are, to you endless announcements!” (189). Yet following upon that section’s fantasy of Whitman’s own dying into the love that binds together all, the next section opens with its own fantasy of that readership being constituted in terms of its nearness to the poet, its intimacy and its tangibility: “With me firm holding, yet haste, haste on. // For your life adhere to me,” the poem beseeches of the reader (229-230).

Through the scheme of the physical death of the author, the lyric voice can free itself from its contingent locality, but the lyric voice finds that the charge to express



itself, and to do so in a new fashion, still encumbers it. Whitman represents the poems of *Leaves of Grass* as having taken shape from the semiconscious urges present at their inception, a form they retain even as they circulate freely. That freedom allows the poems to direct themselves to the reader, all readers imagined as a social aggregate. Since Whitman's most charged evocation of social identity is the rhetoric of American nationalism, the poem at its most ecstatic and triumphant turns as it does in the beginning to address the reader as an American. The exhortations in the beginning of the poem link the mythic potential of the lyric voice to the autobiographical person of the poet in order to summon into the present moment the full and untroubled bardic voice. Following the fantasy of the author's death, Whitman renders the nationalist exhortations as an echo of the author's dissolved contingent and embedded experience that has been released from a spiritual and onto a national scale: "Here for you! and here for America!" Whitman writes, "Still the present I raise aloft, still the future of the States I harbinge glad and sublime, / And for the past I pronounce what the air holds of the red aborigines" (239-240). The "red aborigines" as autochthonic figures not fully separated from the land from which they originate occupy the space of the contingent and local constitution of the spiritual self. Instead of that spiritual self, the aboriginal people as a nationalist totem have been secularized into a ideological fantasy of national geographical history. No longer physical presences, their trace has been translated into names for places and for bodies of water, an indirect discursive register from which they still influence the spiritual development of the American people:

The red aborigines  
 Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds, calls as of birds and animals in  
 the woods, syllabled to us for names,  
 Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natchez, Chattahoochee, Kaqueta,

Oronoco,  
 Wabash, Miami, Saginaw, Chippewa, Oshkosh, Walla-Walla,  
 Leaving such to the States they melt, they depart, charging the water and the land  
 with names. (241-245)

The trace of the aborigines' presence persists as a spiritually charged environment, an environment which derives from an immediate relation to the proximate landscape but as a model can be extended throughout the continent as a condition for the spiritual development of each citizen as a fully realized individual.

The nationalist rhetoric of the poem attempts to imagine the citizen as a fully realized individual. That Whitman's rhetoric has as its ultimate ambition the spiritual realization of the individual distinguishes his use of nationalist rhetoric from a specifically political project, the creation of a fully realized citizen. The full realization of the spiritual individual, as opposed to the recognition of the citizen in liberal political theory, entails recognition of encumbrances upon the individual that are ontologically prior to the emergence of the citizen and a socialized and political individual capable of rational self-presentation. The encumbrance as something properly unavailable to direct and rational discourse and furthermore not necessarily consistent with any categorical particulars of a universal self, whether that self is imagined on a national or global scale, the shape that encumbrance takes cannot be the specific promotion of any American culture or way of life. Instead Whitman represents the encumbrance upon the self as a blanket imperative to innovate. Whitman furthermore represents that expressive encumbrance upon the self in this poem as a national situation – the distinctively new American situation arising out of the nation's original relationship with its national landscape.

Expanding and swift, henceforth,

Elements, breeds, adjustments, turbulent, quick and audacious,  
 A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching,  
 A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with new contests,  
 New politics, new literatures and religions, new inventions and arts. (246-250)

The reader becomes implicated in these schemes not as the cherished individual as a spiritual self, the poet's intimate, but as the citizen of the en-mass democracy. Dimock insists that Whitman's poetry is an extended fantasy of the generalized and universal categorical self of liberal secularism, yet that self is not to be found in the speaker of the poem, the "I" as it regards "myself." If it is anywhere, it is in the "you, whoever you are," the address to the anonymous reader of the print public sphere. Although Whitman's model of an innovative poetics is in the expressive urge rising from the spiritual dimension of a particular and contingent self, Whitman's model of a readership for poetry is that constrained and constructed by liberalism's confidence in secular nationalism as the best possible social imaginary for a republican and democratic form of political association. And yet while section fourteen's catalog begins with an address to the reader as the "whoever you are," the disinterested, objective, and categorically thin universal self, the poem interprets the innovation in poetics as represented by Whitman's distinctive style as part of the encumbrance to expressive innovation to form an ethical imperative rejecting the impersonality of anonymous readership. While there may be anonymous whoevers that open *Leaves of Grass* and begin to read, it is the conceit of this poem and the others that no one is anonymous any longer when the reading ends.

The secular self as an anonymous and generalized participant in a print public sphere sustains the poems as utterances, giving the poems an object of address as a point about which they can cohere and articulate a sense of purpose and significance. That significance, though, for the poems is the secular self as a site of strategic engagement –

that the poems take on as their purpose the revision of the liberal secular notion of selfhood through a thorough-going application of formal innovations in poetics. In section eighteen of “Starting from Paumanok” Whitman addresses the reader as an American citizen but one as singularly and contingent constructed and as appearing under an encumbrance rising out of that situatedness or embeddedness of the self’s development. Whitman manifests that sense of encumbrance by linking the lines not through a conjunction, as at the start of the poem, but by beginning each line with an imperative “see”:

See, steamers steaming through my poems,  
 See, in my poems immigrants continually coming and landing,  
 See, in arriere, the wigwam, the trail, the hunter’s hut, the flat-boat, the maize-  
 leaf, the claim, the rude fence, and the backwoods village,  
 See, on the one side the Western Sea and on the other the Eastern Sea, how they  
 advance and retreat upon my poems as upon their own shores. (253-256)

The imperative positions the reader within the poem as a analog of coming to oneself as a contingent and particular individual. The steamboat and the immigrants from diverse nationalities open a vista and a future of specifically American innovations ahead of the reader, while the background fills out with icons of the primitive contingencies of the American landscape from a nationalist myth of origins. Although the reader remains as imagined within the confines of a specifically national public sphere, as any reader who accepted the terms of the imperative would find him or herself, the reader in acknowledging the imperative also finds him or herself at the point where the lines of the poem intersect, receiving the charge of the imperative as the onus of the poet’s vision.

Whitman brings the reader into a re-enactment of the forces and pressures upon the composition of the poem as being congruent with the formation of the spiritual – that is, visceral and emotional – registers of selfhood. Whitman thereby enables the poem to

evoke a sense of the reader's intimacy with the poet at the same time it evokes the continuous presence of the poet. Section eighteen's final catalog introduces a final indeterminacy between whether it is within the national landscape that the reader is being situated or whether it is within the poem's representation of that landscape. Whitman directs the reader's attention to specific items within that national landscape, but refers to them as they are on being taken up into the poem: "See, pastures and forests in my poems – see, animals wild and tame – see, beyond the Kaw countless herds of buffalo feeding on short curly grass, / See, in my poems, cities, solid, vast, inland, with paved streets, with iron and stone edifices, ceaseless vehicles, and commerce" (258-259). One may see, Whitman avers, how the waves of the oceans lap against the borders of the poem as congruent with the boundaries of the nation, as one may imagine each ocean doing so against the shores of the continent. Yet the poem presents an imperative to witness what could not possibly be seen. One cannot physically gain the vantage from which to see both oceans at once and the transatlantic telegraph cable as well "through Alantica's depths pulses American Europe reaching" (260). The vantage the poem offers conforms to the vantage of the social imaginary inherent in one's self-identification as an American, and particularly one that closely identifies with Whitman's celebration of emergent working-class identities and values: "ploughman ploughing farms – see, miners digging mines – see the numberless factories, / See, mechanics busy at their benches with their tools" (262-263).

Although Whitman places the onus upon the reader to accept this identification, to place oneself against the poems of which Whitman writes in order to see in them a mapping of the social imaginary of an American identity, Whitman's catalog works

against the fiction of an easily coherent national identity. The catalog concerns itself specifically with the celebration of contemporary innovation as it transforms the imaginary national landscape: the steamboat, the telegraph, the locomotive, and the steam-driven printing press as against the primitive initial development of a distinctive material culture in wigwams, wood trails, rude fences, etc. in arrière. As with the previous section and its exhortation to promote “new literatures and religions, new inventions and arts,” Whitman implicitly offers the new verse line of *Leaves of Grass* as one such innovation in the final catalog, as it is through his poems and, by implication here and explicit assertion elsewhere in the prose, through his poems only that one may see the true breadth and diversity of the American situation. Yet as innovation in poetic form refers finally to the innovator and the innovator’s particular and contingent circumstances, it should not be surprising to find once again Whitman directing the reader’s attention in the evocation of the nationally transformative power of innovation to the reappearance of the posthumous proliferation of the figure of the poet in immediate and intimate contact with all working persons throughout the landscape: “See, lounging through the shops and fields of the States, me well-belov’d, close-held by day and night, / Here the loud echoes of my songs there – read the hints come at last” (264-265).

Although identity for Whitman is irreducibly national, it is not necessarily so. Innovation, figured here by Whitman’s posthumous insinuation of himself between every person and in intimate contact with them all, points to a way in which one might escape nationality through positioning oneself at the origination of identities in the charge to express one’s contingent and particular environment. Whitman presents this reimagining of the situation of identity as the real theme of the poem instead of the nationalist rhetoric that

gives the poem its content but can only hint at a real purpose.

As the poem comes to a close, Whitman represents himself and the reader as having achieved across the poem, despite the anonymity of the reader to Whitman as he writes the poem, a deep intimacy – simultaneous and at all points contiguous to one another. The way the reader achieves this, as the complicated deixis of the final line of section eighteen indicates, is by allowing the inferences and indirections of the poem’s form to lead the reader back to the contingent circumstances under which they are fashioned: “Here the loud echoes of my songs there, read the hints come at last,” Whitman writes. The reader must begin “here” with the text of the poem and trace the hints back through the poem to the “there” of its composition. The final section of the poem then addresses the reader as if he or she had done just that, and arriving as not only present at the origination of the work through a long and winnowing process of interpretation through what has separated them: “O camerado close! O you and me at last, and us two only. / O a word to clear one’s path ahead endlessly” (266-267). And yet the reader is also represented as him or herself being one of the contingent factors of the creative force of that poem that will later stand between them: “O hand in hand – O wholesome pleasure – O one more desirer and lover! / O to haste firm holding – to haste, haste on with me” (268-269). The poem rises from out of this coming together and going on and out as something unbidden, not available to the understanding, nor willed nor controllable through the exercise of the will: “O something ecstatic and undemonstrable! O music wild! / O now I triumph – and you shall also [ . . . ]” (CRE 28).<sup>25</sup> The difference in tense in that last line, that Whitman *now* triumphs and the reader *shall* following that, recognizes that the poem presents a virtual account of an impossible offer to bridge the

mutual lack of intimacy and pretensions to objectivity inherent in the reading contact.

The scene of writing and the work of interpretation remain divided through the mechanics and ideologies of print publication. And yet the effort of interpretation situates the reader in an attitude toward the text where the invisible realm whose pressures upon the hidden side of the poem, the side of its inception and working out, can be intuitively sensed.

As that invisible realm shaping the poem from the other side of the reader's interpretive gaze cannot be separated from the poet's own person as an expression of contingent and particular urges, interpretation becomes a metaphor for an acknowledgment of the persistence of Whitman's person after death, and Whitman's spiritual immortality becomes a metaphor for the continued and perpetual meaningfulness of the poetry. Whitman's insistence in this poem and elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* on spiritual immortality should be understood as in part an attempt to imagine the possibility of reading a body of work that celebrates innovation, immediacy, and contingency without actually remaining in intimate contact with the poet. And as a consequence the immortality of the poet in and through his or her work becomes strangely literalized in *Leaves of Grass*. As the intelligibility of innovation in the work depends upon the ability to imagine the extinction of the person of the author, and the continuation and the dissemination of the poems' significance depends upon the ability to represent metaphorically the spiritual immortality of that person's soul, Whitman's work represents itself as hinging upon the reader's ability to conceive of Whitman's life as having a specific and definable trajectory and boundary, even as Whitman is engaged in the writing of the work.



Whitman recounts in “A Backward Glance o’er Travel’d Roads,” the afterword to *Leaves of Grass* first included in the 1888-9 edition, “After completing my poems, I am curious to review them in the light of their own (at the time unconscious, or mostly unconscious) intentions” (CRE 562). Remarking on the uncertain and experimental quality of *Leaves of Grass* itself, he writes that the genesis of the book was in “a special desire and conviction. Or rather, to be quite exact, a desire that had been flitting through my previous life, or hovering on the flanks, mostly indefinite hitherto, had steadily advanced to the front defined itself, and finally dominated everything else.” Whitman’s final assessment of that semiconscious desire is that was

a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit of its immediate days, and of current America – and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book. (CRE 563)

Whitman does not directly relate this charge to “faithfully express in literary or poetic form” his own person in its totality to the religious interpretation of the poetry, yet the congruence is telling. In a reading of personality one arrives at Whitman’s person in the end as what gives shape and meaning to *Leaves of Grass* not much differently than in a reading for religious significance would lead on back to the singular and contingent circumstances of the work’s composition. In the first, Whitman’s person signifies as encumbrance; in the second, Whitman’s style signifies as innovation. The persistence of innovation in the perpetual syntactic renewal of the world that disturbs certain of Whitman’s readers is not a sign of the inability of Whitman’s work to accommodate an individual presence, but the sign of the ethical rigor required to represent faithfully and credulously the encumbrance to express the contingent and particular constitution of that

individual as against the backdrop of the world in which it finds itself.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>E.g., Henry Adam's "Virgin and the Dynamo (1900)" in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907).

<sup>2</sup>Burroughs was only one of several of Whitman's intimates who enthusiastically promoted Whitman's work for its spiritual benefit over its literary quality – Whitman's "hot little prophets" in Bliss Perry's enduring epithet. Perhaps the hottest of them all was Richard Maurice Bucke, the Canadian alienist and insane asylum director. Whitman's first biographer, Bucke also advanced a crackpot spiritualist anthropology in his *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901) that described Whitman as an early pinnacle in human spiritual development, the first incarnation of a new kind of human more aware of and connected to the deepest spiritual and moral verities of the universe. "Walt Whitman," he writes, is the best, most perfect, example the world has so far had of the Cosmic Sense, first because he is the man in whom the new faculty has been, probably, most perfectly developed, and especially because he is, par excellence, the man in modern times who has written distinctly and at large from the point of view of Cosmic Consciousness, and who also has referred to its facts and phenomena more plainly and fully than any other writer either ancient or modern. (225)

Whitman was apparently aware to some degree of the extremism of Bucke's theories and declined to confirm or criticize them to Bucke or others. But despite the outlandish nature of much of Bucke's thinking, there is a some consonance between Bucke's and Burrough's critical approaches to *Leaves of Grass*. Bucke goes to great length, in fact, to dissociate the poems from any notion of literary value as a sign of the works' spiritual import. Perversely, in addition to Jesus, Buddha, and St. Paul, Bucke lists a number of writers as precursors to Whitman's full-blown expression of the Cosmic Consciousness, e.g. Francis Bacon and Honoré Balzac. In reference to Balzac's supposed inability to form an elegant prose style, Bucke writes:

How is it that these men who form the mind of the race can seldom or never (at least according to their contemporaries) write their own language decently. According to Renan (and he does not seem to be contradicted) Paul's style was about as bad as possible. And down to the present moment scarcely a man has defended Walt Whitman from the purely literary point of view, while thousands have utterly condemned him. (208-209)

He sums up: "The man endowed with Cosmic Consciousness has almost certainly no literary instinct (the chance is millions to one against it), but he sees certain things which he feels he must tell ... The importance of his message causes him to be read" (209). I find Burroughs more useful than Bucke as an entry into a religious reading of *Leaves of Grass* not necessarily because Burroughs's claims were less outlandish than Bucke's, but because Burroughs was much closer personally to Whitman, was a literary figure in his own right whose popularity during his life even eclipsed Whitman's, and was the only figure of Whitman's intimate associates to produce a sustained body of literary criticism on *Leaves of Grass*. As with Bucke's biography *Walt Whitman* (1883), Burroughs's initial work of criticism on Whitman, *Notes on Walt Whitman, as Poet and Person* (1871), was written with substantial input Whitman himself – both editorial and as written contributions, but Burroughs continued to develop as a critic of the poetry independent of Whitman's direct involvement, though the close association between

Burroughs and Whitman ensured common themes and interests in interpreting the significance of the poems.

<sup>3</sup>Kuebrich neglects the variety of associations, some formally chartered and some less so, that shared memberships, speakers, and resources with the Walt Whitman Fellowship, International, groups like the Philadelphia socialists represented in Whitman's intimate circle by Horace Traubel and monthly magazine *The Conservator*, humanist groups like Felix Adler's Society for Ethical Culture, and the supporters of the notorious agnostic and secularist Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll who featured Whitman at a couple of his speaking engagements toward the end of Whitman's life, at one point participating in a public if impromptu debate with Whitman on the survival of individual consciousness after death. These groups advertised in one another's newsletters, shared information and programs, and presumably shared a loose constellation of common concerns and goals, one of which would have been the profound spiritual import of Whitman's work, but not likely the formalization of a church devoted to the promulgation of Whitman's work as scripture. See for instance, Bucke's letter to Traubel in preparation for Whitman's eventual funeral, where Bucke suggests Ingersoll as a funeral orator if Burroughs is unwilling to perform: "I am in favor of asking Col. Robt. Ingersoll – this nonsense abt. his atheism amount to nothing – he is really one of the most religious men living – knows W. and likes him" (97). Ingersoll was chosen in the end to deliver the oration, incidentally, despite the objection of a number of Whitman's supporters, including Burroughs, who believed that Ingersoll's reputation might cast a pall on the proceedings (Traubel 607).

<sup>4</sup>Rorty's observations here are explored at length in Stephen John Mack, *The Pragmatic Whitman*. Mack writes that democracy is the ultimate ambition of *Leaves of Grass* and that in Whitman's view "democracy asserts the primacy of natural and human (in other words, secular) authority. It implicitly yet unavoidably stands as a challenge to all claims of authority rooted in mystical and supernatural representation" (3).

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of the appearance of this construct of liberal self-presentation as an early American literary practice, see Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*.

<sup>6</sup>The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is an oddity in many respects, one of which is the running title "Leaves of Grass" printed at the top of each page throughout and with larger type at the beginning of half of the poems, yet there is no clear sign whether the poems are to be understood as untitled or sharing the same title, or even as one poem or many. Beginning in 1860 and up until the final, 1881, edition, all volumes will feature a shifting sequence of poems with the group title "Leaves of Grass" alongside the volume's other poems, though none of the 1855 poems appear in this grouping. These poems are retitled or dropped altogether by the final edition.

<sup>7</sup>I will be reading the poem as it initially appears in that first edition.

<sup>8</sup>The section numbers of "Song of Myself" are a late addition, appearing in the 1867 edition.

<sup>9</sup>Walt Whitman as the author's name appears in none of the conventional places in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, neither on the cover nor the title page, although Walter Whitman does appear verso the title page as holder of the copyright.

<sup>10</sup>Bucke writes at some length about the inability to produce a direct and convincing description of Cosmic Consciousness, recasting some of the concepts of nineteenth-century aesthetics into an evolutionary physiology. Intellect, the evolutionary

development of humanity that precedes the further cosmic evolution presaged by Whitman, “is that part of the mind that knows,” but the cosmic sense corresponds to the development of a moral nature that Bucke relates specifically to developments in the sympathetic nervous system – it is “the part that feels” (25).

Language corresponds to intellect and is therefore capable of expressing it perfectly and directly; on the other hand, the functions of the moral nature (belonging, i.e. deriving, as they do, from the great sympathetic nervous system – while the intellect and speech rest upon and spring from the Cerebo-Spinal) are not connected with language and are only capable of indirect and imperfect expression by its agency. (25-26)

The consequence is that religious experience is not articulate – speech fits the intellect “in the sense of covering it in every part and following its windings and turning, but it fits it also in the sense of *not going beyond it*” (27). Bucke explains in *Walt Whitman* (1883) the notion of “difficulty” in the reading of *Leaves of Grass*:

There is nothing to understand about *Leaves of Grass* which any person of average intelligence cannot comprehend with the greatest ease. The secret of the difficulty is, that the work, different from every popular book of poetry known, appeals almost entirely to the moral nature, and hardly at all to the intellect – that to understand means putting oneself in emotional and not simply mental relation with its author – means to thoroughly realize Walt Whitman – to be in sympathy with the heart and mind of perhaps the most advanced nature the world has produced. (178)

<sup>11</sup>As is frequently remarked upon, in preparation for the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman jotted down in a notebook that he was ready to commence “*the Great Construction of the New Bible*” (NUPM 353), the likely inference being that Whitman at least provisionally considered *Leaves of Grass* as similar in certain respects to the Christian Bible. See W.C. Harris for a fuller consideration.

<sup>12</sup>See Larson for an exploration of Whitman’s canny manipulations of pragmatics in reference to himself and his readers. Also see Warner’s “Whitman Drunk” for an insightful discussion of Whitman’s vertiginous manipulation of textual pragmatics.

<sup>13</sup>Intimacy is a slippery concept. Some interesting attempts to grapple with it with some bearing on my topic include Lauren Berlant’s collection *Intimacy* and Peter Coviello’s *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature*. I am intrigued by Berlant’s suggestion in the introduction to her collection of essays that we oppose intimacy to discourse, linking intimacy to its cognate: *to intimate*. “To intimate is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity” (1). Berlant examines intimacy as a privileged social category, the desire for which is inculcated within us as a crucial aspect of a hetero-normative psycho-social economy. In terms of one’s life narrative in such an economy, intimacy is the fundamental goal that underwrites one’s own story as meaningful. The achievement of intimacy is marked by silence – all the talking happens whenever there is a crisis in the state of intimacy that requires management, control, and reorganization, hence the emergence and proliferation of therapeutic discourses in the media.

Thus when friends or lovers want to talk about “the relationship”; when citizens feel that the nation’s consented-to qualities are shifting away; when newsreaders or hosts of television shows bow out of their agreement to recast the world in

comforting ways; when people of apparently different races and classes find themselves in slow, crowded elevators; or when students and analysts feel suddenly mistrustful of the contexts into which they have entered in order to change, but not traumatically, intimacy reveals itself to be a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic. We notice it when something about it takes on a charge, so that the intimacy becomes something else, an “issue” – something that requires analytic eloquence. (6-7)

Berlant is rightfully suspicious of precisely of these analytic discourses that might be disguising disjunctions and ambivalences or arguing them into submission, particularly in those cases where people find it difficult to narrate themselves into the kind of life limned out by these therapeutic speech acts that patrol intimacy’s boundaries. And yet Maureen McLane at the end of the volume suggestively recasts Berlant’s observation on intimacy/intimate as a rhetoric of intimacy – that the speechlessness of intimacy is itself a figure of speech (435-6). With specific reference to Whitman’s use of apostrophe in “Song of Myself,” McLane’s rhetoric of intimacy becomes something much more transgressive than Berlant’s administered hetero-normative psychic economy, whereby one might suddenly respond to an intimate address by another in ways which one had not been previously able to conceive, articulate, or anticipate: “You may open yourself, much to your own surprise, even against your ostensible will, to intimacy as a space for transformation ... Perhaps you won’t even know who you are until you find yourself suddenly, vertiginously, unprecedentedly addressed” (441-2). As Coviello describes, “Virtually every stand of Whitman’s thought devolves upon, and is anchored by, an unwavering belief in the capacity of strangers to recognize, to desire, and to be intimate with one another. Whitman’s declarations of aesthetic intent, for instance, all circle back to a quality of intimate affection that he promises to extend to an entire nation of readers who are, to him, perfectly unknown” (127). Raising the issue of intimacy raises its attendant issues of desire and sexuality, and here Coviello is especially perspicacious in addressing the issue of Whitman, comradely love, and same-sex intimacies. Not wanting to reductively identify the erotic charge of intimacy in *Leaves of Grass* as inherently a celebration of gay male desire nor to efface and normalize the powerful currents of that desire expressed through the poems, Coviello insists on regarding sex (along with race) in Whitman as one of several “enormously powerful conceptual models with which to imagine how persons who have never met might yet enjoy a special kind of bond with one another, and as such they are political languages, and specifically nationalist languages, of the highest consequence” (131). To which I would assent but shift nationalism as well to the group of conceptual models, whose political languages would be in the final instance religious and modern.

<sup>14</sup>In using the term “social imaginary,” I am availing myself of Benedict Anderson’s exploration of the modes of psychological development and orientation that underwrite the capacity for national identities. See also Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries* for a further development of the notion of the social imaginary.

<sup>15</sup>D.H. Lawrence, in an early adversarial reading of *Leaves of Grass*, finds Whitman at his most effusive displaying an overweening democratic sympathy that annihilates the necessary and inherent distinctions between persons. Working from that tradition of reading Whitman, one could probably do no better than David Simpson’s article “Destiny Made Manifest: The Styles of Whitman’s Poetry” for an exemplary ideological reading

of Whitman's poetic form that links it to "a total participation in the more extreme formulations of the liberal-capitalist ideology," (188).

<sup>16</sup>M. Jimmie Killingsworth responds to Bellah in "Tropes of Selfhood: Whitman's 'Expressive Individualism'" by emphasizing the extent to which Whitman's utterances and identifications produce and ground the ego the poems represent, rather than present those utterances as having their ultimate justification in the ego itself.

<sup>17</sup>Sweet-flag or calamus is the master trope of Whitman's phallicism and his celebration of same-sex love, as in the *Calamus* sequence of poems that makes its appearance in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Here the calamus plant does not itself convey the entire image of the penis but is part of a composite natural image, visually representing the pubic hair, where the snipe and its nest of eggs are the phallus and scrotum respectively.

<sup>18</sup>One might recall at this point Bucke's insistence that direct speech conveys exactly the content of impersonal human knowledge but nothing beyond it, and that Whitman's poetry as a moral expression of the experience of the cosmic self attempts to impress on the reader the particular experience of the author without having a grammar or vocabulary to convey it directly.

<sup>19</sup>As with "Song of Myself," I am representing the poem as it first appears.

<sup>20</sup>The belief in the continuation of individual consciousness after death is one point on which Bucke was reportedly able to get Whitman's avowal of belief:

I asked him one day when we were alone together whether he believed in the personal, conscious immortality of the soul. He answered: "Yes, I do." I said: "But perhaps you believe it as so many do – as something that is more likely than not, and not as something certain. Are you sure," I continued, "that you will retain individuality and consciousness after death?" He paused a moment before replying, and then said, earnestly: "Yes, I am sure of it." (The Man Walt Whitman 67)

<sup>21</sup>These lines first appear in the 1867 major revision of the 1860 version (Textual Variorum 2:273).

<sup>22</sup>Whitman whittled this reduced catalogue down even further for the 1867 revision (Textual Variorum 2:273).

<sup>23</sup>The mutually exclusive nature of the identifications is more apparent in the poem's 1860 version. There the exclusivity is not merely a matter of locality, but distinct and discontinuous sites of emergence: "Boy of the Mannahatta, the city of ships, my city, / Or raised inland, or of the south savannas [...]" (Textual Variorum 2:273).

<sup>24</sup>This is a frequent theme in John Burroughs's criticism on Whitman: that nineteenth-century literary criticism had no standards by which Whitman's work might be judged and that Whitman's work would itself teach the readers of the future how to evaluate it and all poetry besides (e.g., Burroughs, Notes on Walt Whitman 72-3).

<sup>25</sup>The unavailability of the genesis of the poem to rational thought is more apparent in the 1860 version of the poem where it is represented as the semiconscious strivings of sexual attraction: "O the pensive aching to be together – you know not why, and I know not why" (Textual Variorum 2:289).

## Chapter 3

## “Internal Difference Where the Meanings Are”: Emily Dickinson, Lay Devotion, and Secularism

In one of her letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emily Dickinson describes her family’s religious practice: “They are all religious – except me – and address an Eclipse, every morning – whom they call their ‘Father’” (Letters 2:404). Dickinson’s iconic correspondence with Higginson served both of them as a means to present an authorial persona as a framing device for Dickinson’s poetry, a persona both wise and innocent, irretrievably enmeshed in the local circumstances and concerns of rural New England and yet at an ironic remove from them. It has been long recognized, despite Higginson’s earnestness in printing the early correspondence as an introduction to Dickinson’s genius,<sup>1</sup> that the ingenuous waif portrayed as the author of the letters to Higginson does not correspond well with the figure known to her friends and family, but the pose was crucial to the way in which Dickinson desired to solicit Higginson’s attention as a known critic and benefactor of young writers,<sup>2</sup> and particularly important for the way in which Higginson meant to portray Dickinson’s work as the work of a literary prodigy, wholly authentic and unengaged with the manipulative and self-aggrandizing literary scene. The letter in which Dickinson writes this is the second of their correspondence, written in reply to Higginson’s response to her first letter, which asked him to look at and critique her poems, and Dickinson then uses this letter to give a preliminary description of herself as person and poet not given in that first communication.

The letter catches Dickinson in one outright lie – saying in April, 1862 she had “made no verse – but one or two – until this winter,” when R. W. Franklin has



conclusively dated nearly 300 poems as written before the close of the 1861 calendar year, but much of the remainder is expressed figuratively or obliquely enough that truth seems beside the point: “You ask of my Companions Hills – Sir – and the Sundown – and a Dog – large as myself, that my Father bought me,” e.g. The pose Dickinson affects is one of innocence, by and large. For instance, her account of the inspiration behind her literary output – “I had a terror – since September – I could tell to none – and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground – because I am afraid” – has engendered considerable biographical speculation on what the terror was, but it is easy enough to read her description of being seized by an existential terror that shivers out poems as a pose and a literary convention informed by theories of poetry that emphasize the centrality of the poet’s naive response to a strong passion. The description need not be biographically accurate; it gives an account of how the poet wishes her poetry to be understood. Also crucial to Dickinson’s pose as naïf is the sense of being enmeshed in a particular context, especially as one enmeshed in a family: a brother, a sister, a mother, and the aforementioned father, who also the letter says “buys [her] many Books – but begs [her] not to read them – because he fears they joggle the mind” (261). As in that description of her father among the books, Dickinson frequently uses the descriptions of her entanglements as a basis for an arch and ironic distance she will take from them – a distance and an irony offered, in this case, to Higginson as something to be shared between them.

The pose extends to her portrayal of her relationship to the world of letters: a naive poet but one well enmeshed in the literary culture of the day. She names, for instance, to Higginson her influences as being Keats, Ruskin, Thomas Browne – the latter

two being discussed in Higginson's *Atlantic Monthly* article that had likely inspired Dickinson to contact him initially, as well as the Brownings and the Revelations book of the Bible. While that description is meant to place her as at least aware of what was entailed by literary sophistication, Dickinson closes the letter with a brief account of "two Editors of Journals" who had come to ask "for [her] Mind": "When I asked them 'Why,' they said I was penurious – and they, would use it for the World" (261-262). Aside from the intent in directing this anecdote to Higginson, it is important to note that her refusal of print publication was likely from early on a fully formed component of her project. Given the context of the anecdote, we can view it as another of the letter's attempts to portray Dickinson as an innocent – she has to ask "why" she should publish – and as well enmeshed within a local context, here a literary and intellectual world in which she is known enough that her "mind" is in some demand. Yet we should also recognize that the pose of innocence is arch and knowing, an ironic position whereby her innocence of the world of publishing reveals a knowing sophistication. She is not so enmeshed in this world to which the editors refer that she cannot see what they cannot, that this world cannot hope to comprehend sufficiently or commodify successfully the non-material dimension of her writing that she indicates when she equates it with her "mind."

Dickinson's portrayal of her family's religious practices should be seen as an expression of that same dynamic. It is a literary pose meant to reveal her as an innocent yet caught up in an immediate social network from which she maintains some ironic distance. She portrays her family as uniformly religious with herself as the exception.<sup>3</sup> The nature of the exception is double-edged. Ostensibly she portrays herself as a religiously naive, a heathen innocent who cannot comprehend a religion where the object

of devotion is not materially present – that the family prays to the risen Christ while she only perceives the obscuring blankness of its absence. The pose is one of sophistication, though, as the avowal of disbelief aligns Dickinson with a learned and intellectual position of disregard for a belief in a factual interpretation of biblical events and a worldly perspective on the cultural relativity of Christian beliefs. The position was given considerable viability and currency, of course, with the publication of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in 1859, but it was one that had been developing throughout the century from a number of sources. The pose is complex and ironic: Dickinson the naïf is by virtue of that naiveté more worldly and sophisticated than the local social circumstance that supports and sustains her. It is also hard not to be seduced by it and enjoy the conspiratorial wink we share with Dickinson over our shared if isolated superiority over the lovable but dim uniformity from which she emerges.

Dickinson was careful and precise with her self characterization, and successful. The basic figure of the arch innocent both deeply ensconced within a circumscribing local social network and yet ironically detached and forward-looking has long informed the reception of her poetry. What is important about the letter for crystallizing an understanding of the pose that Dickinson takes and the poetry it is meant to frame is that the dynamic that defines the relationship between the individual person and the local community takes shape as a representation of the transformation of religious practice and observance taking place in nineteenth-century America. The religiosity of Dickinson's cultural milieu and the intensely spiritual concerns of her poetry have always been central to the discussion of her work's significance, so much so that it may seem superfluous to insist upon them once more. But as is so frequently the case, while a certain dynamic

might define the particulars about which readings and responses might move, those readings and responses will typically accrue to one or the other pole, the religion or the irony, rather than exploring Dickinson's need to present herself as alternately socially enmeshed and solitary, arch, and distant.

Despite the her ostensibly limited personal, the figure that appears to us through the poems, the mythology, and the biography has been mercurial and flexible enough that readers seem able to have the Dickinson that they need at any given time. The initial readers of her published poetry that began to appear in 1890, according to Beth Maclay Doriani, read her as an author who helped "revitalize faith and spirit" and admired her "spiritual insight, the wise words, and ... the apprehension of the truth" (185). Interest in Dickinson as this rather stark and extreme exemplar of the Victorian sentimental poetess declined briefly at the turn of the century, but interest in Dickinson resumed in the teens and twenties, identifying her as a precursor figure to literary high modernism. Once again, this version of Dickinson was strongly premised on Dickinson's relationship to religious practice and spirituality, but not on Dickinson as a spiritual poet so much as Dickinson as a solitary defiant in the face of New England Puritan tradition. This version of Dickinson as a secular pioneer retains the sense of immersion in a religious culture and a spiritual sensibility, but much like the defiant and conspiratorial aspect voice of the letters to Higginson, the figure of the poet is viewed as in contrast to the values and interests of her contemporaries and intimates.

It is the secular and solitary Dickinson that emerges as in the early critical work and becomes by and large consolidated as Dickinson becomes established in the canon of nineteenth-century American greats. This is the Dickinson we see in Alan Tate's early

essay that places her on the boundary between the break-up of a unified Puritan worldview and the broken and multifarious modern world. Although Tate decries the critical obsession with the oddity of Dickinson's relative seclusion from all but her closest friends and family members, the seclusion is entirely necessary for his conception of her as a poet. "When she went upstairs and closed the door, she mastered life by rejecting it" (20), he writes. What precisely precipitated the conscious choice to seclude herself does not interest Tate so much as what she rejected and what she produced as a consequence as that rejection: "The effect ... is her poetry," and that effect comes about through her positioning herself against "the whole complex of anterior fact, which was the social and religious structure of New England" (19). This is also the Dickinson we see in Richard B. Sewall's influential biography of the poet. He describes the importance of religion and in particular the conversion experience in her background, noting that "no fewer than eight revivals swept Amherst, college and town, during her formative years, roughly between 1840 and 1862," yet "she could never see herself as a sinner in the hands of an angry God. She could never testify, as so many of her pious friends did, to that direct visitation of the Spirit which was essential to membership in the church" (24). The refusal of conversion and membership in the church Sewall finds to be consistent with her relationship to her New England Puritan cultural background overall: "Confronting that tradition squarely, she appropriated its components selectively and shrewdly, revered it, but never capitulated to it." And by consequence, she was required "to accept the loneliness of such a course, a loneliness endemic in the New England Puritan way and intensified by her own peculiar defections" (26).

The loneliness, in this view of Dickinson, the solitary individual viewed in relief against the crowd, is more than a consequence of her refusal of an accepting attitude toward tradition, and more than her prefiguration of the human condition in our fully secular age, but an integral aspect of her art. As Virginia Jackson has written, the rise of Dickinson's critical stature and the consolidation of a biographical narrative of seclusion and secularization have developed in tandem with the emergence of a particular mode of reading poetry, "that the century and a half that spans the circulation of Dickinson's work as poetry chronicles rather exactly the emergence of the lyric genre as a modern mode of literary interpretation" (6). Fundamental to this mode of interpretation is the way in which the poetic utterance, the poem perceived as lyric, is thought to reflect a certain authenticity of private experience on the part of the poet, and thought to be so extremely private and interior that it ceases to be merely self-directed and becomes instead "a self-address so absolute that every self can identify it as his own" (Jackson 128).<sup>4</sup> Dickinson's refusal of publication and the massive cache of manuscripts discovered after her death make Dickinson's work seem especially apt for reading as lyrics. Her self-expression seems all the more authentic for not being tainted by a desire for recognition by the public, or at least not until her own particular existence had been erased by death, hence the obsessive interest in Dickinson's biography as a condition for appreciating the poetry.<sup>5</sup> Her poems become doubly abstracted through an insistence on reading their address as universal and their condition of utterance as solitary, wholly private, and transcendent.

Recent scholarship has begun to reconfigure the modernist representation of Dickinson's relationship to an audience and to society by returning in a sense to the

appreciation of her as a religious poet. Roger Lundin's *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* revisits the biography as well as the criticism in an attempt to rework Sewall's image of a Dickinson in rebellion against the traditionalism of New England Congregationalism. Lundin's Dickinson is a poet who takes on her society's obsessive interest in the nature of belief and writes "about the objects of belief and its comforts, as well as belief's great uncertainties. With daring tenacity, she explored the full range of human experience in her reflections upon such subjects as God, the Bible, suffering, and immortality." Rather than an isolated figure of secular genius, Lundin expresses his desire to have Dickinson regarded as "one of the major religious thinkers of her age" (3). Doriani and James McIntosh have also written on Dickinson as a religious rather than primarily secular writer in *Emily Dickinson: Daughter of Prophecy* and *Nimble Believing: Dickinson and the Unknown* respectively. Doriani looks at how Dickinson reworks her religious heritage not to define an individual take on it, but to identify where and how she could position herself within that tradition as a woman with the authority to comment on and engage with religious issues. McIntosh, like Lundin, looks closely at Dickinson's focus on belief as her defining topic, but distinguishes her from the conventionally religious in her contemporaries, describing how her experimental takes on Christianity reflect a profoundly religious outlook, but one that could not accept any notion of a constancy of belief. According to McIntosh, Dickinson felt that "a poetry based on settled beliefs was unavailable as well as undesirable" (3), and her own poetry is drawn toward and constituted by an image of human spiritual striving that is in constant flux.

The common element of the interest in the figure of Dickinson as a religious writer rather than a secular writer is the rethinking of the interest of Dickinson as a writer defined by her solitude and the solitary nature of her art. Although none of these scholars explicitly define their writing on Dickinson as attempts to reconsider whether or not Dickinson's work should be considered lyric poetry – as poetry written under a double abstraction from concrete and particular audiences and circumstances, all three consider Dickinson in her capacity as a religious writer to be working in a communal rather than solitary mode of writing. Lundin in particular draws the readers attention to Dickinson's efforts to keep her poetry in constant circulation even if not published as print publication is generally understood:

She carried on a voluminous correspondence and freely sent copies of her poems along with her letters throughout her adult life. We know that she mailed to friends and family over 575 copies of her poems, and given the number of letters that were lost or destroyed before her fame was secured, the total number is probably much higher than that. (2)

These readings emphasize that the circulation of the poems in the letters to friends and family was, however else it may be characterized, purposely directed toward a communal experience of and discourse on attitudes and orientations to a spiritual realm. The poems, furthermore, are not annexed to a project of communal religious experience through the happenstance of an appropriate topic or figure, but are constituted out of an ambition to engage in such an exchange. A careful reading of the poems, McIntosh assures us, reveals how “Dickinson's attempts to convey a religious feeling for the unknown are pitched to a community of readers invited to understand a mystery” (135). While the poems concern themselves with certain spiritual truths – or at the very least, the inability to assert prosaically a positive and stable spiritual truth, the implication of the religious



readings of poems would insist that they are not pitched to a universality of significance in terms of lyric's abstraction – but instead display an embeddedness in a community's network of concerns, sensations, and emotions, appear as a consequence of that community's sense of its own religious experience, and are directed toward an investigation and management of that experience on behalf of what Dickinson and her correspondents collectively, if not uniformly, imagine that community to be.

Dickinson is still best understood as a secular writer, yet that secularity does not preclude our insistence on reading in her work a sense of obligation to communal practices and orientations concerning the immaterial that retain a strong basis in religion. In so doing, I want to emphasize my shared interest with the critics that describe Dickinson as a religious writer in insisting on the communal orientation of her writing practice. Dickinson's relationship to the disenchantment of the world is more complex than a gesture of refusal or her Puritan heritage. While the retreat of the divine from the phenomenal world – as Dickinson, for instance, meditates on in “So much of Heaven has gone from Earth” (#1280) – meant less access to a stable metaphysical surety and expectation and made the significance of one's experience of the world potentially more uncertain, she still found a vast fund of resources for writing about the navigation of this impoverished existence in formal practices derived from and associated with specifically religious practices. That reliance is most concretely expressed in the close relationship of her work to American Protestant hymn-singing, something that has been frequently noted but receives little critical attention. Furthermore, I believe it is important to recognize that Dickinson's formal reliance on certain aspects of hymn-singing and other lay devotional practices is not to be viewed as the secularization of religious forms into a specifically

secular literary practice. Instead, just as we should view hymn-singing itself as a popular religious practice that increasingly acquired both artistic vitality and spiritual authority over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we should view Dickinson's formal reference to the practice as a conscious effort to sacralize to an important degree an already secular practice of literary poetry. Her refusal of print publication is perhaps best read not as an expression of a perceived distinction between the religious and the secular nor analogous to nor symptomatic of a refusal of religious and cultural authority, but as a refusal specifically of certain dimensions of secularity.

Several of Dickinson's poems did make it into print during her lifetime (one of which Dickinson seems to have offered herself),<sup>6</sup> but by and large as she indicates in the second letter to Higginson, she refused as a general principle to pursue print publication of her poetry that would allow it to be circulated out into the general reading public. And as Tate represents it above, there is a tendency in the biography to regard this as Dickinson's deliberate choice. I would instead suggest that the refusal, rather than being precipitated out of a reflection occasioned by her writing into a deliberate act, was so constitutive of her mature writing practice and her micropublication through correspondence that it developed along with her verse into a fully formed component of her writing without any conscious taking of a stand or making a vow. The conventional reading of the refusal to publish would have it as congruent with another prominent refusal, not the refusal of religious authority per se, but the refusal to write in strict conformation to meter and rhyming patterns or with a strong adherence to rules of grammar and sense. Her poems contain so many violations of traditional meter, straight rhyme, and standard grammar and punctuation that until her reputation was quite secured,

many readers considered her poems far too naive and representative of an unschooled talent to be deserving of attention. The conventional reading, then, of Dickinson as a lyric poet deeply invested in the authenticity of her private voice would have her refusing to publish if that meant – and it almost certainly would – normalizing her deviations from standard and traditional usage.

In the consideration of the poems' relation to possible publication, Higginson is generally called in to play the villainous representative of literary decorum. Sewall, for instance, reads his correspondence with Mabel Loomis Todd, who undertook the task of seeing the poems into print after Dickinson's death, as indicating only a gradually warming up to the idea that the poems were publishable (571). We generally read his opinions on Dickinson's productions in the negative, through the impress that they made on Dickinson in her letters to him, since his originals are not available. "You think my gait 'spasmodic' – I am in danger – Sir - / You think me 'uncontrolled' – I have no Tribunal," she writes in her third letter to him (2:409). Yet in the same letter, Dickinson confesses to Higginson, "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish' – that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin" (2:408). That may be read as sour grapes or as Dickinson smiling through the discomfort of a representative of the publishing and literary world declaring her work as not polished enough for publication, but despite the submissive pose of a humble student that Dickinson often adopts in the letter, her tone throughout the correspondence reflects someone comfortable in her capacity as a writer and one who requests criticism and advice, and thanks him for it when it is sent, and not one who seeks assistance or advice on publication. Another salient reference to publication in the correspondence with Higginson occurs after "A narrow fellow in the

grass" (#1096) is published in the *Springfield Republican*. Dickinson writes Higginson to head off any notion on his part that she has been dishonest in presenting herself as one uninterested in publication: "Lest you meet my Snake and suppose I deceive it was robbed of me," and continues, agitating against the unauthorized correction in its punctuation, "defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one – I had told you I did not print – I feared you might think me ostensible" (2:450). Dickinson's fear of being caught out in an inconsistency certainly speaks to the importance of a connection between authenticity and a private voice, though it is interesting to point out that here the concern is not the authenticity of the voice of the poem, but her voice as a letter writer.

Publishing one's poems through one's correspondence – one's letter-writing – is not quite the same as having them published in print with the presumable endorsement of the literary establishment. In what sense, one could ask, could letters even be considered a medium for publishing poems? Reading Dickinson produces even thornier challenges, such as whether or not one even distinguish in Dickinson's work between the ostensibly prose genre of a letter and that of a poem, since, as Cristanne Miller, observes, Dickinson, at the very least, elides in her practice any distinction between the language of everyday life and the language of poetry – there is no elevated style in Dickinson to mark a transition from prose to poetry (5). But a poem is not a letter. The distinction for Dickinson between the genres, or their lack of distinction, is a germane question of scholarship that often receives equivocal answers,<sup>7</sup> but as I will endeavor to make clear, the ability to make that distinction was central to Dickinson's poetic project and particularly in terms to her responses to what she perceived as the progressive

disenchantment of the world. There are thorny questions concerning the transition from prose to poetry within the body of the letter, but for the sake of my argument, it is sufficient to note that Dickinson often sent the poems on a separate sheet from the letter, and her recipients were quite capable of detecting the difference, and even implicitly understanding the significance of the difference. For instance, let us take the case of Dickinson's "Before you thought of Spring" (#1484) that was sent to four known recipients as part of a mutual correspondence. Jackson notes that at least one of the recipients, Helen Hunt Jackson, author and mutual friend of Dickinson and Higginson, "thought of the manuscript that Dickinson sent her as a lyric that could be detached from its address to her" (62). Helen Hunt Jackson responded to Dickinson with a request that she be able to pass a copy of the poem onto Higginson, and that the desire to pass the poem on to another representative of the print public sphere was a "testimonial to its merit" (Dickinson, *Poems* 3:15). As opposed to the letter as a purely private written utterance that could only properly be shared between the private individual who wrote and the private individual who received it, the poem can be separated and distributed to other individuals who experience its merit in a similar fashion. Virginia Jackson furthermore indicates that as Dickinson sent the poem with minor alterations in form to at least four people of whom we are aware, "Dickinson herself indicated that the lines were not intended for one reader – as, say, a personal letter might be – but could circulate independently of particular readers or a particular material context" (63). The poems circulated through intimate correspondence do not quite reach the general availability and mutual anonymity of the print public sphere – where any reader can ostensibly obtain a copy through the usual consumption of printed text and the reader and writer are mutually

unknown to each other as private individuals. But the poems nonetheless are separable from the intimate context that circulates them in a fashion that aspires toward full publicity, yet we should note Helen Hunt Jackson still perceives that the initial context does lay some ban on their complete abstraction from that context, as she does see the need to ask Dickinson's permission to send the poem onto another recipient, though she was not always so circumspect, nor should we assume that other recipients were always necessarily so.

It is not difficult to draw the connection between Dickinson's attitude towards poetry with the notion of a secular religion – a religion, that is, without any particular theory of a spiritual realm. Bracketing momentarily the themes of Dickinson's work, Dickinson's strictures on the proper behaviors with regard to poetry elevate those behaviors into something of a high ethical code. And although Dickinson on one level equated the pursuit of poetry with quotidian household tasks and other everyday activities, she also equated poetry with those everyday objects of the natural world – animals, plants, atmospheric phenomena – that her Romantic naturalism led her to regard as having a profound holy aspect. The profoundly plastic and creative power of poetry even led her to consider the poet at times to be a potential rival of God's for the primacy of creative power in the phenomenal world (Lundin 170). Much has been made of how the rigor and renunciation in both her life and as themes in her poetry reflect the Calvinism that is her cultural and religious heritage. Susan Howe suggestively links the refusal of print publication to the notion of poetry as a secular religion. Just as Calvinism felt it was arrogant to presume any person could seek salvation but could only hope that God had chosen him or her as one of God's elect, Howe sees Dickinson as refusing to

seek publication because she viewed it as an arrogant abrogation of the ethics of her secular faith: “Far from being a misguided modesty of an oppressed female ego, it is a consummate Calvinist gesture of self-assertion by a poet with faith to fling election loose across the incandescent shadows of futurity” (Howe 49). Publication here is equated with the immortality of the spirit, and to seek publication would be a violation of the disinterest with which one must wait and hope for the fame that will come posthumously. As Dickinson writes in her second letter to Higginson, justifying her refusal to publish, “If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her – if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase – and the approbation of my Dog, would forsake me – then – My Barefoot-Rank is better” (2:408).

The strong ethical directives that Dickinson felt were placed upon her craft as a poet certainly speak to a close relationship between her conception of poetry and her religious experience. Yet when we consign her religious impulses to poetry as a secularized version of the faith of her fathers, we lose Dickinson’s deep and personal connection with her community’s existing religion, particular that religion’s expression through popular culture. Although Dickinson’s inability to accept Christ as her personal savior and thereby gain membership in the Congregationalist church has been conventionally regarded as her refusal of the practice of Christianity, Dickinson was still variously engaged in communal religious practices in her home-life and through her contact and correspondence with family and friends. One of the more significant features of Christian religion in nineteenth-century American is the increasing importance of religious practice as popular culture. While religious authority remained largely vested in the clergy, the activities of congregants such as prayer, testimony, and the singing of

hymns began to draw considerable attention and become more prominently featured in and out of public worship. The common element to all three forms of lay worship is their rootedness, at least for American Protestantism, in the revivalism that early on in the nineteenth century the Second Great Awakening had made integral to religious practice. Dickinson refused to take the step to which the revivals were ostensibly meant to guide believers, that of conversion to and confession of a faith in Christ, and although much of New England regarded the often disruptive revivals with considerable suspicion, her active participation in local religious practices and behaviors would have been largely guided by the lay forms of worship that revivalism promoted.

Testimony, prayer, and hymn-singing share a common objective in the excitement and the management of intense religious emotion. One of the crucial doctrinal shifts of nineteenth-century Protestantism was the increasing emphasis on the emotional state of the believer: while the conservative interpretations of Calvinist doctrine held that a believer cannot seek redemption, the Second Great Awakening to a large extent was driven by the “common-sense” doctrine that an individual could and should be led to seek his or her own salvation.<sup>9</sup> This doctrinal shift was accompanied by a transformation in the discourse of salvation from the emphasis on the rationality of belief to the emotional nature of the conversion experience, and by the close of the Second Great Awakening in the 1830s, the emphasis on theology was largely abandoned in favor of emotional appeals based on one’s individual experience (McLoughlin 66-67). By the 1850s, and throughout Dickinson’s formative years, the emphasis on lay-centered worship, the religious experience of the individual, and the appeal to the intense emotions of the conversion experience meant the crisis of confidence in the clergy to bring about the pitch of



emotion necessary to do the work of the church. The result in the American northeast was a popularity for lay revivals, such as the Businessman's Revival in 1858, that were conducted by laypersons and featured their testimonial and prayers (Corrigan 117-120).<sup>10</sup> One consequence of this emphasis on lay worship and on the importance of basing it upon the emotional nature of religious experience was the increasing opportunity for women to display religious authority and leadership (Corrigan 119). Rather than a new phenomenon, this reflected a continuation of a trend of greater involvement of women in the leadership of lay worship begun with the First Great Awakening (Butler et al. 193). Martin Habegger in his biography of the poet notes that her maternal grandmother, Betsy Norcross, participated in one such opportunity for religious leadership as a member in Manson, Massachusetts of the First Female Praying Circle, "a female version of the male organizations that ran the town" (28). While the organization was not entirely a public institution – members, for one thing, were prohibited to speak to non-members about the club's activities – the organization did exercise some social pressure in promoting "the full evangelical agenda through prayer and devotion, discreetly administered pressure, and money-raising" (28-29).<sup>11</sup>

Dickinson herself participated in a version of lay-centered worship in her micro-publication of her poems through correspondence with friends, family, and literary associates. There are a number of qualifications that need to be made to that statement, of course, before it begins to yield insight into Dickinson's poems. There seems to be a tendency in the recent reassessments of Dickinson's relationship to religion to assert boldly that Dickinson conceived of her writing and correspondence as a specifically religious project – that she felt a "calling" to some form of spiritual ministry and that she

understood her writing as occurring within a certain religious tradition and framework.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is important to keep in mind that Dickinson quite explicitly thought of herself as a poet, and although the transcendentalism and Romantic nature-worship of her time and to which she largely subscribed could authorize the sacred nature of much that would not be holy under a conventional understanding of religion, she did not write what she or her contemporaries would have understood as sacred poetry. The secular poetry of her time was, of course, often only a slight remove from the church, as many notable poets also wrote hymns – and writers of whom Dickinson was fond, such as Longfellow, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Charlotte Brontë.<sup>13</sup> But what Dickinson did was somewhat more complicated than engage in a literary presentation of her religious culture for the benefit of her intimates and posterity. She sacralized a secular writing practice by drawing it away from the secularized print public sphere, and in doing so she explored, through communal practices largely dependent upon contemporary developments in popular religion, both secularism's transformation of the interior space of the individual and the disenchantment of the world.

The popular lay-worship practices did not have a monopoly on intense emotionality of course. As Lundin notes, both Dickinson's poems and her distribution of them to a circle of intimates as social peers was an experimental form of a pastoral communication but it also engaged a tradition for women's literature of consolation and support (3, 12-13). The consolation offered was a form of testimony to a deep and private pain as part of – not exactly feminine – but feminized condition of existence. As Jackson notes in reference to the performance of sorrow in Dickinson's poems, "since this burden is also the occasion for the poem, 'the secret sorrow' is an open secret," and while "pain

may define the experience of the sentimental subject, ... it is also the basis on which she becomes the subject of exchange – even, from our belated perspective, of tradition”

(210). Mabel Loomis Todd, Dickinson’s first editor and someone who also received poems from Dickinson as an intimate friend (though she never saw Dickinson in person), writes in her journal on the experience of putting together with Higginson the first volume of Dickinson’s poems:

The poems were having a wonderful effect on me, mentally and spiritually. They seemed to open the door into a wider universe than the little sphere surrounding me which so often hurt and compressed me – and they helped me nobly through a trying time. Their sadness and hopelessness, sometimes, was so much bitterer than mine that “I was helped / As if a Kingdom cared.” (Sewall 220)<sup>14</sup>

The sentimental subject as a private being and in thrall to powerful emotional forces was in the nineteenth-century necessarily also, as Todd recognizes when she links “mentally and spiritually,” a religious subject. In Corrigan’s account of revivalism in nearby Boston in the 1850s, the emotionality, gender roles, and issues of performance and authenticity as the site of tremendous contradictions were driving the development of popular religious culture. The domestic realm was conventionally viewed as an arena of self-denial and “virtuous grief” with women as the designated sufferers, raising a contradiction between the ideological affirmation of domesticity as the fullest expression of a woman’s being and its construction of her role as the bearer of the secret sorrow of sacrifice for the benefit of the family (Corrigan 142-143, 146). And while the domestic realm as a feminized sphere was also subject to this emotionality, there were attendant anxieties about the need to conceal emotional extremes, and therefore further anxieties concerning authenticity and performance in the display or the lack of display of emotion on the part of women (Corrigan 161-163, 253).

Social anxieties about the contradictions in the nature of private and domestic realms and the ambiguous nature of the emotion thus engendered meant that while popular forms of lay worship were ostensibly concerned with the excitement of emotion for the purpose of preparing the supplicant for the experience of conversion, they were also concerned with the exploration of the contours and limits of the experience of emotion and also with its management. Corrigan finds the revivals in the urban northeast were carefully regulated public displays of emotion intended for “the affirmation of collective identity, the assertion of white Protestant identity vis-à-vis other groups” (1), through practices of lay worship that “proceed from the midst of the ongoing reconstitution of gender categories and from altered experiences of public and private” (253). Outside of the revivals themselves, the related lay practices continued to respond to similar issues and anxieties and with a similar purpose, as Sandra Sizer notes in her sociology of nineteenth-century hymnody and revivals: “The rhetoric of the gospel hymns aimed at creating a community of feeling made up of individuals who had ‘put passion in its place’ who had domesticated their affections and thereby purified their lives” (138). The gospel hymn was a particularly revival-centric staple of sacred song and largely a creation of the Methodist camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening and therefore not as close to Dickinson’s heart and practice as her beloved Isaac Watts – who was downright old-fashioned in comparison, but the social dynamics of the lay practices of the period were fairly uniform in ambition: they allowed a sense of community among participants who felt “they were intimately tied to Jesus and on their way to heaven by virtue of the power of the home circle, and bound to one another and to God by the mutual ‘lines of influence’ generated from their common inner experience” (Sizer 138).

Both lay worship practices and Dickinson's micro-publication of her poetry were directed toward a like-minded community bound by "common inner experience" which were excited and managed by group practices – the sharing of poems in Dickinson's case – and directed toward the cultivation of a meaningful stance vis-à-vis an ideal and immaterial realm.

There are also many areas where Dickinson's poetry does take after the forms and concerns of lay worship, where the connection between the two is only the poems' parody or ironization of the rather straightforward communal beliefs expressed in prayers, hymns, and testimony. Although, as McIntosh notes, if we can assign to Dickinson a central and organizing theme the nature of belief in our fallen and now modern world, it is not belief as a steadfast and unwavering faith as would be celebrated in her hymnals. Instead, it is a "believing for intense moments in a spiritual life without permanently subscribing to any received system of belief" (1). Belief was no coming to rest upon a decided tenet for Dickinson, but a constant and passionate vacillation such as that described in a letter of Dickinson's to Judge Otis Lord: "On subjects of which we know nothing, or should I say *Beings* ... , we both believe, and disbelieve hundred times an Hour, which keeps Believing nimble" (Letters 3:728). Dickinson assiduously refused conventional rhyme, meter, grammar in writing, refused publication as a mode of circulation and legitimacy for her work, and refused the comforts of an orthodox faith. "Faith' is a fine invention," she writes sardonically in a single-stanza piece of doggerel sent to Samuel Bowles,

When Gentlemen can *see* –  
 But *Microscopes* are prudent  
 In an Emergency! (#202, Poems 1:234).

The joke is rather densely layered. Faith is a firm comfort for those who have the privilege, and the material basis of that privilege in sex and social status receives a pointed reference in her use of “Gentlemen” – which perhaps might be a friendly mockery of the poem’s recipient as well. In a crisis of confidence, faith cannot bolster itself but seems to require the additional support of empirical evidence, here figured in that most eminent of scientific devices for peering into unknown and invisible realms, the microscope. The microscope also inverts the scale of faith as a visionary instrument. Instead of looking out to a broader spiritual realm which sustains us, to what lies beyond, we are told to seek support for our understanding by investigation what lies between the observable features of the material world. The worldview of this poem is frankly secular – one in which science is comfortably enough the rhetoric of legitimate knowledge, comfortable enough to use it figuratively to mock those who assume that the old support of faith still sustains where nothing else might. Yet neither is the poem a dismissal of a religious worldview, as the target is not belief per se, but a worldly and presumptive faith that assumes both a secure position in this world and the next. The mockery also points to an inversion of power taking place in addition to the inversion of the scale of vision, in that the poem reveals itself to be a better arbiter of knowledge than the comfort and security of a privileged class who claim priority of vision. Dickinson furthermore uses the poem to point up a more fruitful alternative to a false certainty, the investigation of the invisible realm of the near-at-hand, the uncertainties of the realms too insignificant to draw the attention of the conventionally faithful.

Dickinson’s engagement with a secularizing world through her poetry links together the refusals of form, of certainty, and of publication into a positive spiritual

project. Although I am wary of making too strong an equation between Dickinson's notions of a spiritual world and an afterlife and her conception of publication as the circulation of her poems through a print public sphere, both the afterlife and publication are linked in her poems, as Howe notes above, as realms adjacent to our immediate material world upon which it was arrogant to presume but toward which the poems direct themselves and their readers. Publication as a full abstraction of the utterance and the readership into universalized abstractions and the afterlife as the final acquisition of a certain and eternal existence – whatever that existence might be – meant that one could only claim a right to either realm through a damning lack of authenticity. Desirable, because both would provide legitimacy for the struggles of the here and now, but to make a strong claim on them from a position made timorous through the unavailability of a stalwart faith would taint those efforts with a falsity that would prevent them from ever being reached. At the same time, though, Dickinson was working with an inherent opposition between things of the spirit – the creative emotional power of poetry being one such thing – and the fully disenchanting realm of world outside the relatively sanctified realms of the private and domestic spheres. This dichotomy is at the heart of “Publication is the auction” (#788, Poems 2:742). In this poem, writing takes on the kind of ethical considerations that within a religious or spiritual framework are generally associated with the conditions that constitute the possibility of being, considerations that therefore have a prior claim than any arising out of social and commercial interactions, i.e., the market. So Dickinson would have it that “Publication – is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man,” placing the spiritual and personal essence at the mercy of the market's most purest and most abstracted motivating force, the highest price. “Poverty – be

justifying / For so foul a thing,” she continues, claiming that poverty – the failure to accommodate one’s self well to the demands of the market and public life – is justified if the alternative is the moral taint of attempting to put one’s own being up for sale.

Dickinson’s moral opposition between the spiritual expression of mind and the marketplace’s acquisition of it infers a choice to be made, the consequence of the right choice being an honorable poverty, the wrong a foul perversion. The possibility that one might make the wrong choice, though, seems to persist throughout the poem, requiring Dickinson to continue to respond and elaborate, somewhat equivocally, on the necessary and inherent distinctions between the two poles of the dilemma.<sup>15</sup> The poverty, after all, is not justified in the poem: it is “justifying,” still trying to make its case as a reasonable response. And Dickinson begins the second stanza with an immediate equivocation of what she has just said in the first: “Possibly,” she writes. She continues,

but We – would rather  
From Our Garret go  
White – unto the White Creator –  
Than invest – Our Snow –

In this stanza, Dickinson registers the practical existence of these ethical encumbrances in subtle social pressures: the readers become implicated in the first-person plural pronoun and co-opted into the soft persuasion of “rather.” One catches what might have been the tones of disapproval coming from Betsy Norcross’s prayer circle. And yet the apparent choice between poverty or publication seems hardly a choice at all, if we are going to grant any weight to the paradoxical metaphor of investing one’s snow: snow cannot be entered into market exchange and circulated as a commodity – if it had any potential value, its very existence would still be contingent upon atmospheric conditions of time and place! Dickinson avers in the following stanza that “Thought belong to Him who



gave it” – that as divine or spirit it only has value in connection with the divine or with spirit.

There is a deep, immediate, and locally contingent intimacy between poem, the life of the mind, the divine, the essence of the person, and the social sphere that jealously segregates these elements of individual religious experience from the marketplace. In opposition we have

Him Who bear  
It's Corporeal illustration – sell  
The Royal Air –

In the Parcel –

This villain, unidentified and presumably legion, attempts to parlay the physical impression, the “Corporeal illustration,” of spiritual experience and understanding into a commodity, but what is being sold is the packaging that cannot hope to hold the elusive, immaterial, and desirable source of spiritual value, the “Royal Air.” In the final stanza we have the statement “Be the Merchant / Of the Heavenly Grace” expressed in an ambiguous mood: is it an imperative, her conditioned acceptance of the need to offer and exchange some signs of inspiration and emotional responses to heaven’s touch, or is it subjunctive, imposing conditions on one if one were in fact extravagant enough to attempt to parcel out grace? In either case, the poem ends with an ethical imperative made upon its central claim that one should not attempt to market matters of the spirit: “reduce no Human Spirit / To Disgrace of Price.” While earlier on in the poem Dickinson responds to her own uncertainty about the ethics of publication with a mild reproach, i.e. “We – would rather,” by the end she eludes to the most severe censure, disgrace – the

threat of an imposed isolation by and from one's own society, a disciplinary technique par excellence.

Although the poem sets up an ostensible moral dichotomy between poetry being exemplary of genuine individual spiritual experience and the materialistic and abstracted marketplace, in practice Dickinson cannot quite articulate the threat, since the way in which poetry is metaphorically conceived in the poem would not allow for it to acquire any value or substance as a commodity. Nor does the poem ever rest upon or relate to individual experience, not hers nor anyone else's: it is nearly entirely taken up with its indirect instantiation and management of social mores with regard to creative enterprises, what *we* would rather do in *our* garret with *our* snow, as opposed to the two singular entities, the "Him" of God, from whom the stuff of poetry proceeds, and the "Him" that merchandises texts to the reading public, abstracted from any singular identity as his wares are abstracted from their particular individual and social contexts. Never able to quite rest its case about the moral danger of publication, the poem concludes with a concession that the writer must, should, or perhaps just might parcel out God's grace. The ambiguity resulting from placing "In the Parcel" at the start of the final stanza and apart from the "Royal Air" it likely modifies gives additional force to the concession. It should be noted that although Dickinson assigns a moral taint to allowing one's personal self to be bought and sold in the marketplace in the form of literature, she does not attach any moral censure to the market itself, and metaphors taken from the market abound elsewhere in her poetry without negative implications.<sup>16</sup> The moral problem appears to be the full immersion into the print public sphere, whereby one's "Human Spirit" becomes entirely commodified, yet the poem does not conceive of a way to treat this fantasy as a

serious problem with poetry or the marketplace. Instead the poem is primarily concerned with filling out the space between the individual writer and the print public sphere with a thick layer of imagined moral condemnations that mark out the distance from the act of writing to that writing's publication and serve as a reminder that genuine poems are or should be rooted in private and therefore non-marketable experience.

Dickinson's ambivalence about publication reflects a similar ambivalence in nineteenth-century religious practice over publicizing one's own religious experience. "Thinking about public life was," Corrigan writes, "complex, and it called for a willingness to interweave a substantial amount of contradictory or near-contradictory ideas about men, women, emotion, intellect, power, character, and strength" (225). The profound and transforming encounter with God's grace, of which the conversion experience was the template and acme, was held to be a profoundly individual experience in which the heart of the penitent wrestled alone with sin until receiving the Holy Spirit's assistance. Lay worship practices and the exhortations of the minister were critical in establishing the readiness of a believer, but the final question was left to a solitary and interior struggle. Yet despite the necessarily private nature of spiritual experience, there was an element of it that seemed to insist upon its own publicity. Describing the attitudes toward publicity in the revivals occurring in the eastern part of the state of Massachusetts, Corrigan writes:

Bostonians thought that religious emotion both required public expression and was developed through it. To make public one's deepest religious feelings was not to expose the soul to a public machinery that would compromise those feelings, that would flatten and ultimately eviscerate them. Rather, as the *Observer* explained, religious feeling "must come out," and people "must assemble themselves together" in prayer meetings for that purpose. (225)

Once gathered together, as one contemporary writer describes, the audience would reinforce the experience of which the speaker gives an account, legitimize it, and make it meaningful: “The earnestness of the speaker, shown in the eyes, the gesture, the tones of the voice, arouses the audience to sympathy. Their eyes answer his eyes; their breathless attention show that every tone of his voice thrills them with emotion; their whole expression reacts upon him, and a mutual sympathy binds them together” (Corrigan 225-226). In this example, though, we should note the importance placed on contact – in the above context the speaker is physically present and, as they share breath and glances, is in some form of intimate contact with the audience, and not received anonymously and asynchronously as a circulated printed text would be. But at the same time we should not that despite the intimate social contact, the form and structure of prayer meetings in an urban context were quite anonymous and public in nature. The passage from individual experience to publication and public response was indeed complex.

The public expression of what was at its heart a solitary experience is a necessary part of the experience’s meaningfulness – that is, the goal to which the experience tends and to which the individual orients him or herself in finding the experience meaningful. Furthermore, to be in the grip of a fully realized spirituality was in itself to be in a condition structurally similar to full immersion in the public sphere. Samuel Hopkins, the Colonial-era New Divinity theologian, considered that holiness as a state “consists in disinterested, benevolent affection” toward God. He writes, “The law of God leads us to consider holiness as consisting in universal, disinterested good will, considered in all its genuine exercises and fruits and acted out in all its branches toward God and our neighbor” (McLoughlin 102). That universal and disinterested state is analogous to the

public sphere persona of a lack of particular or partisan attachment cultivated during the Colonial era in which Hopkins was writing. A crucial ideological precept of political liberalism, the public was becoming imagined as an ideal realm in which one's personal and accidental attachments were abstracted away. One disclaimed any interest in one's own affairs to have a voice in the disposition of everyone's. Charles Grandison Finney, the central and galvanizing figure of the Second Great Awakening and an exhaustive promoter of Hopkins's thought, made explicit the connection in Hopkinsianism between holiness and the disinterested good will of a virtuous public figure, to the point where in Finney's sermons Hopkins's "'disinterested benevolence' becomes strangely similar to 'enlightened self-interest,'" the ideological tag-phrase of Jacksonian-era commerce (McLoughlin 102). To be fully in the grace of God was to be living and working for the benefit of all of God's people, driven by the Holy Spirit rather than personal greed or ambition.

Poets are held to be immortal through their works, and it would be an odd poet that did not give some thought to posterity. Spiritual immortality – the survival of the individual consciousness after death, even its transformation into an eternal principle – has been the focus of Christian and non-Christian thinkers in the West for millennia. For Dickinson, the disenchantment of the world, the ideological complications of the domestic and public spheres, and the emergence of American popular religious practices rendered the connection between spiritual and literary immortality even more complex. The immortality of the spirit gave religion meaning, but the self-sustaining belief that religion insisted upon proved difficult to locate and maintain, and Romanticism's alternate religion of the deep spiritual nature of a literary text made the negotiations of

authenticity and the market conditions of the print public sphere difficult to manage. The spiritual dimension of both the literary realm and the private and domestic spheres required that they be held somewhat in opposition to the public sphere, but as we have seen, the actual relations were not really so stark. At points, the immaterial divine and the literary marketplace have elements in common. Both the spiritual realm and the print public sphere were representative of a nearly impossible or at the least inaccessible ideality, and both of these realms conferred legitimacy upon the religious and the secular practices associated with them. To understand the complexity of Dickinson's response to these conditions, though, we also need to recall that while the secular literary realm was being ideologically configured as a solitary realm of the individual at his or her most private, religious practices, despite the profound connection of redemption to a solitary struggle, were configured as necessarily social practices that were always in the process of moving accounts of individual experience into the public light.

While Dickinson takes on the nature of belief as her theme, and the nature of a belief in a spiritual realm that guarantees personal immortality was a particularly exemplary form of belief for her as it was for her contemporaries, her poems take on as their primary concern the cultivation of an audience and the orientation of that audience toward these powerful idealities. Dickinson wrote her poems with a complex communal interaction in mind, a shared outlook with her contemporaries and her correspondents in particular that privileged the emotional content of individual experience, that sought to share and explore the nature of that emotion, and who viewed the legitimacy of that emotion and its significance in terms of its orientation toward both of these idealities in turn. In many respects, despite the opposition between spiritual life and the public sphere,

the notions of spiritual immortality in Dickinson's poems are quite profoundly involved with notions of publication in the print public sphere. The poems situate Dickinson and her audience through their collective emotional experience in an imaginary relationship to a spiritual realm in which their existence may find its justification and to a public sphere in which the potential for publication or the reality of Dickinson's posthumous fame confers a secular legitimacy on that emotional experience. When Dickinson initially contacts Higginson to ask if "[her] Verse is alive" – and reminding him of his ethical obligation to be truthful and discreet (Letters 2:403), her reaching out to him as a representative of the literary establishment does not necessarily mean she sought out publication. Rather, taking her at word that publication was "foreign to [her] thought," the correspondence between them seems to be characteristic of her work's gestures toward the legitimacy of print public sphere publication while still restricted within a privacy sufficiently under her control. Anchored and rarely released from the networks of intimate correspondence during her life time, her verse could operate at a certain level of lyrical abstraction in their appeals to the spiritual and a larger reading public, but also remain in contact with their grounds of authenticity and genuine emotional striving.

## II. Internal difference – where the meanings are

When John Wesley published *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the People Known as Methodists* (1780), he described the collection in its Preface as being "not so large as to be either cumbersome or expensive" and yet capacious enough to "contain all the important truths of our most holy religion." He points out that its arrangement of hymns is systematic and "carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the

experience of real Christians. So that this book is, in effect, a little body of experimental and practical divinity.” In so doing, he writes, that he believes that he has thus produced a document unique in Christian hymnody, the first hymnal to attempt a comprehensive representation of Christian themes and attitudes. The picture of Christian practice that the collected hymns project, Wesley believes, is wholly in keeping with a Christian theology based upon scripture and reason, the conventional bases for preacherly authority for both dissenters and Anglicans in the eighteenth century. Yet Wesley distinguishes the hymnal’s own claim to divinity from the conventional bases of authority by its appeal to the “experience of real Christians” – that is, that the hymns have been tested through their application in the practice of worship and found to be sound. They are then “experimental,” as Wesley describes them, a term used to distinguish the pastoral application of teachings based on one’s own personal experience as opposed to that derived from more conventional authority.

The Protestant renaissance of English-language hymnody had its roots in the Reformation’s realignments of modes of religious authority that began to place increasing emphasis on individual moral introspection and spiritual striving and increasing suspicion on authority derived from ecclesiastical institutions. Vernacular hymns in England were part of the Puritan “expression of a fresh and democratic religious impulse” (Foote 6), and Wesley is able to claim for the benefit of his collection, coming roughly a century into the hymn-singing revival, the validity of the practical experience of the faithful as an emergent authority now at least theoretically equal in value to the traditional modes of scriptural exegesis and theology. This would not be the terminal point of these tendencies: both hymn-singing and the reliance upon experimental divinity, or a theology



of personal experience, continued to acquire authority strongly determinant of Christian practices and attitudes in England and America throughout the nineteenth century in both revivalist and more theologically conservative congregations. In the Finneyite revivalist tendencies evident in America as a fallout from the Second Great Awakening, “experience theology” became the dominant preacherly ideology. As Finney wrote, “Unless [a minister] can preach the gospel as an experience ... his speculations and theories will come far short of preaching the Gospel” (McLoughlin 66). This pietistic trend was implicit in American Protestantism throughout, but in particular came to characterize the nineteenth-century evangelical movement, as McLoughlin notes: “After 1835 churchgoers and ministers alike dropped their preoccupation with theology and based their religion on experience. ‘Experience religion’ or ‘heart religion’ was the essence of modern revivalism from its outset despite Finney’s (and Beecher’s) Lockean claims regarding the reasonableness of Christianity” (66-67). The transition was an important and powerful shift, and although primarily situated with the revivalist movement, the more conservative and established churches and congregations found themselves swept along, leading prominent mainstream theologians such as Horace Bushnell and Edwards Amasa Park to recognize and incorporate the importance of the shifts in the determination of spiritual authority and their practical consequences for devotion.<sup>17</sup>

An important corollary of this transition, of course, was the loss, at least ostensibly, of the minister’s power to determine the course of devotional practice in favor of the practical experience of the congregation. The emphasis on personal spiritual experience, and in particular its emotional rather than rational dimensions, was not to

relinquish spiritual authority to the individual members of the congregation, but to the congregation as a body. Nineteenth-century writings on the history and importance of hymn-singing were keenly aware of the potentially atomizing effect of the emphasis on personal experience and viewed hymn-singing as an expression of the necessary and inevitable communal impulse of spiritual experience, and ultimately as a communal encouragement to new individuals share in the experience. In *Times of Refreshing* (1877), a partisan history of the nineteenth-century revivalism, Charles L. Thompson writes that “the vital connection of religious music with awakened spiritual life” is evident in the natural enthusiasm for spiritual song in times of great religious emotion: “The awakened soul has spontaneously crave expression in lyrics of aspiration and praise; and these lyrics have in turn become the instruments of the church, to prepare for a new step of progress” (326). Throughout the church and revival literature of the time, references to hymn-singing share a conviction in a mutually determining bond between the a church’s spiritual growth and its hymn-singing:

A devoted and useful church is a singing church, and the broader and intenser the spiritual life, the heartier and more joyful the songs; and it is natural that the steadily increasing use of this powerful agency for teaching, arousing and persuading the soul, should culminate in the methods of our present revivals in which song becomes one of the most efficient aids to conversion. (331-332)

Hymns were predominantly associated with revivalism and its institutionalization in Protestant churches as evangelism, and therefore with the primary evangelical concern for the never-ending process of the conversion of new souls. Yet within the Christian worldview, hymns were seen to play an important role in sustaining the profound emotional pitch that kept conversion perpetually in mind and close to the heart and therefore renewing the religious spirit and devotion of the congregants.

The response of the mainstream churches to the growing importance of hymns as a form of devotion and the attendant insistence on their experimental divinity was not opposition, but, as it was with revivalism largely, absorption. After the Second Great Awakening, every denomination felt the need to produce its own hymnal and to continue to revisit and revise these hymnals to ensure they continued to reflect and respond to the spiritual needs of the congregations. In the case of the Congregationalist churches of New England, the hymnal was Park, Austin Phelps, and Lowell Mason's *Sabbath Day Hymn Book* (1858), of which the Dickinson family was known to have a copy.<sup>18</sup> Park and Phelps also produced a companion volume of hymn criticism and theory, both to justify their editorial selections for the hymnal and the role of hymn-singing in Christian devotion generally.<sup>19</sup> In that volume, Phelps describes a hymnal as “manual of religious experience” – “a perfect expression of the real life of the church” (5). Like Thompson, Phelps equates the quality of the practice of hymn-singing with the spiritual life of a church, distinguishing hymnody from literary history and secular literary production: great literary ages may produce excellent poetry, but only great religious enthusiasm will produce a correspondingly great body of hymns (6-8, 59). And yet as a consequence of the subsequent spiritual awakenings of the American populace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Phelps feels that American hymnody has become a “popular literature” that is also a far-reaching expression of American national character much in the same manner that the English and Scottish (secular) ballads have become regarded as literary expressions of their own respective and essential nation characters (20).

Hymnody in nineteenth-century America was an increasingly vital aspect of popular culture, and not just religious culture. Although the secularization thesis might

prompt us to consider how literary works, such as Dickinson's poems, were secularized out of a body of devotional work that was ceding its relevance along with the institutions of organized religion, it is more convincing, given Phelps and Park's assessment of the centrality of hymns to a conception of an American national literature, to consider how devotional genres were instead growing out of the religious colonization of secular literatures. To speak of Dickinson's relationship to hymnody, therefore, I argue we would need to speak not of her work as representing a secularization of a devotional literature but a secular literary practice that becomes caught up in and largely defined through a dramatic growth of and enthusiasm for hymns as vital form of popular culture.

Despite the atmosphere of skepticism in Dickinson's poems, there is no questioning the profound religiosity of the environment from which they emerge. The most telling sign of Dickinson's involvement in the culture of hymn-singing is the form of her poems: the majority are in four line stanzas with alternating rhymed lines of four and three stresses, a form known as Common Measure for its ubiquity and Hymn Meter, or Measure, for its use in the overwhelming majority of hymns, particularly the hymns collected in that century's omnipresent hymnal and standard of hymnody, *The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D., to which are added, Select Hymns, from other Authors; and Directions for Musical Expression* (1819), familiarly known as *Watts and Select*. Although Dickinson's reading was rich and various, she adopted her versification primarily from Watts – even her typical variants, Sixes and Sevens and Common Particular Meter (8.8.6.8.8.6, counting syllables) were Watts's common variants (England 130n30). These hymn forms, as literary and religious forms have a tendency to do, remained largely stable and conservative containers for shaping

devotional expression throughout the century,<sup>20</sup> and despite the proliferation of hymnals and the variety of theological approaches and justifications for their use, Watts's formal influence remained secure in the hymnody of the nineteenth century and in Dickinson's own work. In addition to Watts's metrical influence, Dickinson's reliance on hymn culture can also be viewed in terms of the thematic developments and transitions that defined the growing importance of hymn-singing and changes in Protestant America's religious experience, such as the trends toward lay involvement and emotionality, as I have discussed, and interiorization..

Interiorization – the increasing concern with psychological experience seen as interior to a person's individual psyche – is generally seen as a Romanticist literary tendency, and in fact a component of secularization's transformation of the topography of private life.<sup>21</sup> We find this in religious culture as well, since despite the apparent antinomy, religious institutions and ideologies have found themselves modernized at their interior, not simply at their boundaries. Therefore, it should not be surprising to find evidence of the increasing interest in the religious aspect of the psychological experience of the individual in hymns as well.<sup>22</sup> Stephen Marini in *Sacred Song in America* identifies this tendency as being bound up with the revival of English-language hymnody from the start: "To this doctrinal 'renovation' Watts brought a new poetic style of subjectivity and emotion. In hymns like 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,' Watts's voice broke down the distance between poet and singer and invested the text with personal spirituality" (76). Sizer notes that despite the devotional content and purpose of hymns, one of the significant changes in hymnography over its history from Watts to the late Victorian "gospel hymns" is the marked decline in explicit reference to the deity in

favor of the description of individual experience (45). This interiorization should not be taken to reflect necessarily a concentration of spiritual authority in terms of the individual, as the interiority of hymn-singing was everywhere concerned with the distribution and maintenance of authority as a communal phenomenon. As such, Marini sees Watts's interest in the interiority of subjective religious experience as in part concerned with developing "an 'axiomatic' quality in his verse that presented Christian doctrinal content with the explicit confidence that befits affirmation of faith" (76). Christ as directly and personally experienced was a version of Christ with the broadest Protestant acceptance and expressed in the simplest, most accessible language.

Sizer sees the communal tendency as expressed in terms of the hymn's implied audience as well. Most popular nineteenth century hymns, she writes, "are primarily descriptive, affirmative, addressed to no audience in particular" (45-46). In fact, the hymns of description are addressed to an implicitly intimate and human audience: "This form can best be understood as a 'testimony.' It is an eyewitness description, so to speak, of various dimensions of the revivalist drama of salvation" (Sizer 46-47). She continues, "It is clear from the available literature that prayer, testimony, and exhortation were employed to create a *community* of intense *feeling*, in which individuals underwent similar experiences (centering on conversion) and would thenceforth unite with others in matters of moral decision and social behavior" (52). It is important for a reconsideration of Dickinson's work in the context of both secularization and popular religious culture that we examine her work in light of similar concerns for a "community of intense feeling." We can find this concern in a number of formal elements that Dickinson and hymn-writers had in common. Certain features come quickly to mind: for one,

Dickinson's poems are, like Sizer's description of Victorian-era hymns, descriptive and addressed to no audience in particular, even if not particularly or primarily affirmative (45-46). Another formal feature Sizer identifies as distinctive is their intense reliance on metaphors, and in particular chains of metaphors absent a clear referent.<sup>23</sup> This intense and rather abstracted metaphoricity is also an identifiable feature of Dickinson's work, and for Dickinson as well as hymn-writers, is implicated in both the way in which the audience finds itself addressed by the works and in the way in which the works engage a specifically emotional register of experience.

To cite a popular example, let us turn to the perennial "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood," or "Praise for the Fountain Opened." The hymn was penned by William Cowper in 1780, quickly became a favorite Methodist camp meeting hymn the following century, and remains a favorite hymn for many. Although it has strong associations with the Western revivals that were viewed by New England Congregationalists with some suspicion and distaste, Dickinson was very likely familiar with it.<sup>24</sup> The hymn was originally written in common measure, though it now frequently appears in an expanded version intended for vocal performance with repetitions of the key phrase from each stanza. Those repetitions appear as a Short Measure (6.6.8.6) addition to the common measure stanza, and it is not unusual to see the hymn written out in long lines so that the common measure and short measure stanza are written out as two fourteeners couplets.<sup>24</sup> The poem opens with the matter-of-fact assertion that "There is a fountain fill'd with blood." The figure out of context would seem quite grotesque, and that grotesquery certainly adds to the hymn's power, but there is further work being done. The metaphor cultivates in the singers of the hymn a sense of involvement in a communal project of

interpretation. The declarative and aphoristic quality of the opening line gives the singers the sense of being brought into a community of like-minded congregants, and the self-evident nature of the assertion infers the existence of a truth and a communal understanding of it that exists before and outside the hymn. By giving voice to the hymn, one assents to this communal understanding. The sanguinity of the image being offered seems to assist this process both through its energizing outrageousness but also in the degree to which the singers find the outrageousness neutralized by the metaphor's commonplace referent.

As one works through each stanza in the hymn, one works through a series of striking figures related to the poem's conceit of the blood-filled fountain. Rather than leading to any exposition of the conceit – saying, for example, that the blood means the redeeming power of Christ's sacrifice, the fountain the Gospel that collects and distributes that power, etc., the hymn simply piles figure on figure. Hymns, and in particular these hymns valued or written in the nineteenth century's excited interest in the genre, characteristically did not instruct on doctrinal matters. Instead they offered a broad figurative canvas identifying different points of religious emphasis on which the singers could come together as communally defining their orientation toward the experience of grace or conversion. And rather than baldly identifying these points or their significance, the hymn offers metaphors that, while their referents are never made explicit, are part of a large repertoire of known and available figures. So, for instance, Cowper's hymn refers in the third stanza to the "Dear dying Lamb [whose] precious blood / Will never lose its power," a common metaphor for Christ in his sacrificial character that is added onto the figures of the blood and the fountain without further exploring the significance of those



earlier figures. And then in the fourth stanza, the hymn describes the experience of conversion as the sudden gift of the ability to see “the stream / [the Lamb’s] flowing wounds supply.” To a degree, the rhetorical strategy is here itself doctrinal, as the mysteries of faith are held to be ultimately ineffable, and to speak too boldly of divine truths is to risk arrogant presumption, so the indirect and figurative registers as more devout, but the stronger purpose of the strategy is found in its appeal to the communal nature of hymn singing. That the singers hold in common an understanding of what these metaphors refer to defines them as a community.<sup>26</sup>

Both of these formal features, the declarative, aphoristic nature of the statements being made and the reliance on a chain of metaphors without a clear referent, are features commonly remarked on in Dickinson’s poetry, though her use of them has not to my knowledge ever been linked to her familiarity of hymns or her use of common measure. Sharon Cameron does perceptively link what she refers to as Dickinson’s “poems of definition” to social strategies of meaning, looking in particular at Dickinson’s poems describing experiences of personal suffering, such as “A wounded deer leaps highest” (#181). She describes this marked tendency in Dickinson toward aphoristic description as a metaphoric naming, claiming that the names “are restorative in nature in that they bring one back to one’s senses by acknowledging that what has been perceived by them can be familiarized through language.” Quoting Kenneth Burke on “Literature as Equipment for Living,” Cameron continues: “A work of art ‘singles out a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative of our social structure, that recurs sufficiently often *mutatis mutandis* for people to “need a word for it” and to adopt an attitude toward it. Each work of art is the addition of a word to an informal directory” (28-29). It is important to note

that Cameron and Burke both link the production of a literary work of art to the need for a new name to describe a previously unnamed or unnamable experience, in contrast to the hymn's effort to name a common, identified, and describable experience that pre-exists any given hymn-singer's own personal experience. Cameron singles out, I think rightly, the ambivalence toward the social structure inherent in the providing of a new name for personal experience, "for on the one hand by the very insistence upon its necessity, the invention of a new name defies the social matrix. On the other hand, since articulation is a matter of social coherence, it must make reference to that matrix" (29).

The emphasis on the felt social need for an articulation of personal experience is, of course, where we would find the emphasis in the hymn's quest for their experimental efficacy in inspiring and sustaining spiritual experience. This is not where Cameron's interest lies, though. She is instead interested in how both "feeling and experience are abstracted from the context that prompted them and from temporal considerations," noting the impersonal quality of Dickinson's statements but also the telegraphic style that eliminates from the poems many grammatical markers that serve to convey contextual information (30). Robert Weisbuch views Dickinson's tendency toward hymn-like chains of metaphor in a similar fashion. Most poems, he observes, gesture through their figurative language toward some kind of "referential reality," even poems on metaphysical themes, and even when that reality may be a richly imagined texture of fiction. Dickinson's metaphors, on the other hand, seem to usher in at their boundaries not the real world nor even a recognizable imagined world but a further metaphor. Weisbuch therefore prefers the term analogy for Dickinson's use of metaphor, as in the analogy the tenor of the figure becomes suppressed in favor of the development of the

vehicle through an extended figuration. However, Dickinson's use of figurative language is distinguished from analogies proper in its lack of an experiential reference. Weisbuch describes this quality of Dickinson's figuration as its "scenelessness" (16). Weisbuch writes that Dickinson's poems have no "'outer' situations" that would ground them in an experiential world (18): rather than investigate the relationship between the outer world and its inner, psychical representation, Dickinson's poems repeat through their figures a series of conceptual patterns abstracted from the initial experience into a commentary on meaning-making. What Dickinson says through her poems, according to Weisbuch, is this: "I was somewhere – the exact place doesn't matter – and this analogy will constitute the meaning of that experience, minus the experiential trimmings. As such, the analogical will be a new experience of its own" (19).

While Dickinson shares with nineteenth-century hymnody several recognizable formal strategies such as common metrical schemes, rhetorical strategies of address, and chains of metaphor in which we might identify a rhetoric of community, critics have tended to see these strategies in Dickinson's work as indicating the erasure of context. And so Weisbuch sees the sceneless quality of Dickinson's analogical poetics as the censorship of "irrelevant particularities" of her private experience (38), and like Cameron he views the abstraction from the context of experience as the effacement of the social from the experience of the poem. It is not so much the abstraction of the personal in favor of a impersonal and universal statement, Weisbuch finds. He equates Dickinson's erasure of the particular with the desire to produce a poem without admixture of the conventional or social that would "limit the scope and obscure the outline of an individual thought" (12). So, for Weisbuch at least, the formal strategies of the poems place Dickinson at the

furthest remove from social dimensions of experience possible. I argue instead that we should consider the work of Dickinson within the context of nineteenth-century hymnody and popular religious culture to rediscover Dickinson's appeal to and engagement with her audience as a shared community. And yet it is important to remember that while Dickinson's poetry resembles devotional verse and especially hymns in a number of ways, her poems are emphatically not hymns. There are formal differences, for instance. Despite the strong reliance on hymn meter, Dickinson's poems contain frequent metrical irregularities, and her lines are often enjambed, traits that would not be acceptable in hymns, whose primary criterion is that they be singable by groups in unison. The ambiguity in her figures would disturb a congregation bent on unanimity of interpretation, and while hymns and devotional literature are no strangers to paradox, Dickinson's frequent reliance on irresolvable, and even perhaps impenetrable, paradox would rattle the congregation's efforts to achieve orthodoxy of belief. Then there is, of course, the nature of the subject matter, which does, as Lundin and Doriani observe, take on religious themes, but does so often from a skeptical or secular perspective with which hymnody would not be sympathetic. And then there is also Dickinson's tendency toward syntactically unmarked grammar, which would be far too eccentric to gain widespread acceptance from editors of hymnals or their consumers.

Although I do indeed wish to rework the conception of Dickinson's relationship to the social, I do not want to deny what should be fairly apparent to even a cursory examination of Dickinson's verse: Dickinson's output as a secular literary enterprise takes on as its primary theme the interior, psychological experience of the individual person and not the primary themes of hymns, that is, neither the glory of God, the saving

love of Christ, nor the exaltation of the sinner finding him or herself embraced by the Holy Spirit. Dickinson's religious themes, such as the difficulty of attaining an unshakeable faith in the nature of the beyond or the conviction that signs of divinity in the material world are in retreat, are primarily secular themes. That Dickinson further privileges the introspective experience of the solitary individual as a lens through which to examine the significance of these themes places her solidly within the larger socio-political movements of the secularization of modern Western societies, even if she would not have explicitly identified herself with an intellectual project of secularism. Her poems, furthermore, are not intended for choral voicing, even if they consistently foreground their formal debts to works that are. Although the twentieth century and now the twenty-first abounds with stirring vocal settings for certain of her poems, I wonder if we should not find it significant that none of her poems have entered into hymn repertoire as have so many of her contemporaries who also wrote on religious themes. Certainly they were widely available in print at a time when many women poets writing on religious themes had or would find their work included in hymnals for church or social singing.

Then what are we to make of the profound connections between hymnody and Dickinson's work? Given that the formal strategies of the work are read as emphasizing the experience of the individual over that of the communal, the explicit reference to hymns and their social setting in the formal environment of the poems has been read as what David Porter calls "the constant occasion for irony" (74). As Porter and England point out, there is often in Dickinson's writing at its most hymn-like a strong streak of the whimsical and irreverent, even a "scandalous frivolity" (England 135). One of the

frequent targets of this sensibility is the pious and decidedly non-whimsical moral instruction of children as represented by the inescapable didactic verse of Watts. England notes how Watts's best known emblem, the industrious bee from the didactic poem "Against Idleness and Mischief" that begins "How doth the busy bee," provides Dickinson, from her early juvenilia through her late, mature work, with her own "counter-emblem" of irresponsibility and rebellion (121-124): Dickinson's bees are not hard-working and self-sacrificing Protestant exemplars, but "seducers, traitors, buccaneers, given over to apostasy and heresies" (England 122).<sup>28</sup> England and Porter also note how the metrical form common to Watts's didactic verse and his hymns function for Dickinson as both an enabling worldview and as a constraint against which she could display her desire for intellectual freedom and metrical improvisation (England 124, Porter 71-74)<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, though, England and Porter connect the parodic stance and the violence against the meter as expressing a solitary ironization of the individual against the worldview of the hymn. The hymn presents us with modes of aspiration and consummation, according to Porter, that Dickinson adopted but not without transforming them into a private and domestic frame of reference that necessarily introduced both skeptical outlook and a desire for liberty unconstrained by orthodoxy (62-63, 66-68). England, in a less favorable reading of Dickinson's skills and talents as a poet, sees her as the "Puritan iconoclast *par excellence*, or at least *in extremis*" because she ultimately rejects any stable idea or emotion as suspect if it could not be made to conform to the data of personal experience (143-144).

For Porter, Dickinson's secularization entails a retreat from a doctrinal position into a self aloof from the social which it views in an ironic regard. This abstraction is

accomplished, though, without the loss of certain tropes or themes inherent in the hymn as genre. In his reading of the hymn-like poem “Going to heaven” (#128A), for instance, Porter notes how Dickinson takes “liberties with the metrical form as she does with the devotional tone” (64). While the poem ostensibly takes on the theme of faith in a redemption and heavenly reward as its analogous hymns do, the poem revolves around the speaker’s irreverent takes on belief in the afterlife and the skepticism that entails. While the poem is built about a freer and somewhat more sophisticated and literary stanza than that allowed for by common measure, Porter finds a “*general adherence*” to the hymn form persists in that one still feels the organizing force of common meter in the arrangement of stresses and the syllable count (64-66). In this fashion, the poem conveys throughout an “impulse of aspiration” to a heavenly reward (68), even though the position of the speaker becomes increasingly skeptical as the poem moves into the second and third stanzas, from the irreverent omission of the divine implicit in “Perhaps you’re going too! / Who knows?” to the overt disavowal of belief in the final stanza:

I’m glad I dont believe it.  
 For it would stop my breath,  
 And I’d like to look a little more  
 At such a curious earth.

Central to Porter’s reading of the poem is that at this moment in the third and final stanza the speaker achieves a realization “that aspiration may exist *without* faith.” Here Porter distinguishes between a whimsical irreverence toward an orthodox position that results in parody and a poem like this that displays a more serious intent by ironizing a statement of belief into “a profound insight into the personal dilemma of faith.” The triumph of the poem for Porter is its secularization from a public, communal, and orthodox position into one that is private, ambiguous, and worldly. “The poetry, in the end,” he writes, “re-

enacts a testing of received faith by the experience of the actual" (68).

Porter's understanding of secularization and his reading of Dickinson as a heroic and solitary experimenter and empiricist typify the secular reading of Dickinson and a commonplace literary understanding of the pressures of secularism on poetry, but I can see two main problems with Porter's account. The first involves a return to Cameron's invocation of the felt need on the part of a social matrix for the announcement of and the investigation into personal dilemmas such as what Dickinson explores in "Going to heaven." We need to read the poem and ask for whom might this dilemma be significant and why. While Porter acknowledges the direct and informal address of the poem to another who may or may not be going to heaven ("Who knows?"), he does so only as a sign of the poem's parodic or ironic qualities. Porter treats the poem as an interior monologue of Dickinson's and not as a work written "to the world." The second problem is that a claim that Dickinson's formal references to poems are meant as an index of their thematic secularization oversimplifies the complex historical situation. At the time Dickinson begins writing her poems, revival hymns have already long demonstrated the forces of secularization on lay religious practices. The qualities that gave hymns their broad currency and social relevance were the consequence of a transformation of religious practice that interiorized spiritual struggle within the confines of the individual psyche and removed the public authentication and management of the conversion experience and its continued influence upon a person's religious attitudes to an intimate social sphere characterized by an intense emotionality. In nineteenth-century religious practices, hymns did not belong so much to the interiority of a personal struggle with the promise of salvation against one's worldly recalcitrance as they did to the social networks



that incited and contained the emotions attached to that struggle, yet it is their appeal to these personal experiences that underlay their appeal to religious practices, particularly those outside the ostensibly public worship within a church.

Conversion did not occur as a direct consequence of hymn singing, but particularly in the revival experience of the Second Great Awakening that for American Protestantism fixed by and large the respective roles of the preacher, the hymn, and the state of rebirth, hymn singing served to bring the penitent to a pitch of religious excitement and desire that would be brought to its culmination through the sermon of the preacher. The preacher, through his office and his capacity in consequence of that office for divine inspiration, had a semi-sacred status that allowed him to function as a surrogate for God's presence, and it was the preacher that was generally regarded as responsible, before God, for the souls that had been saved in his presence, but ultimately salvation was becoming understood as an intensely individual experience, a private agon between one's sinful existence and God's grace. Hymns set the stage for conversion, but they were understood primarily as social, so they could bring a person to the brink, but then they released the sinner to the ministrations of the preacher, the deliberations of his or her own soul, and the Holy Spirit. A profound and infamous physical manifestation of the topography of salvation was Finney's anxious seat or anxious bench reserved for those attendees that felt themselves at the brink of conversion. The immersion in the hymn singing that was a revival constant outside the tent, and inside the tent when preaching was not taking place, would serve to remove the individual from his or her routine self and bring that individual to an emotional pitch through an awareness of a community oriented toward and profoundly invested in both God and that individual's salvation.

Joining in the hymns indicated one's willingness to consider preparing oneself for conversion, and it also allowed that individual a provisional membership in that community of the saved. Once that emotional pitch had been reached, the individual could be delivered to the anxious seat in a state of readiness to receive the grace of God and be admitted fully into the community.

Congregations, we can presume, were conscious of the social nature of hymn-singing. There is very little written, though, on the theory or criticism of hymns during the nineteenth century. Henry Foote, the preeminent hymnologist, lists Park and Phelps's *Hymns and Choirs* as "the only American treatise on hymnody" (218), giving us, luckily enough, an account of hymn theory geographically and temporally close to Dickinson, and in the person of Park, a sermonizer close to her heart (Habegger 311-313). Park's responsibility in *Hymns and Choirs* was to defend the editorial decisions regarding the texts of the expansive list of hymns chosen for *The Sabbath Hymn Book*, leaving the discussion broader questions of the relationship of hymns to Christian worship to his co-editor Austin Phelps and to Daniel Furber. While Phelps writes about hymns as a representative and popular literature, he is at pains to distinguish hymnody from literature per se: while literature may flourish during a era particularly advantageous to literary production, he claims that great literary ages do not necessarily produce great hymns (59). Hymns, as expressions of religious life, flourish instead during great spiritual ages when there is a reinvigoration of religious spirit, Phelps avers, and the health of an age's hymn-singing serves to indicate the spiritual strength of the age (6, 8, 21). Rather than reflective of individual genius or the presence of great poets devoted to the cause, he writes, "church song, as an expression of religious life, requires that a hymn-book be vital

with the life of a church *collectively*” (66).

Phelps is aware of a marketplace for published literary products, and he contrasts hymns and hymn writing against such an economy. A new poem must “contend for its existence” among other works if it is going to find an audience, Phelps implies. But a “true” hymn need not: “it has come into being because Christian hearts require *it*” (59). A hymn is purposive, responding to a collective need, and its ultimate validity and utility is founded not upon its literary qualities, but its ability to express the emotional quality of that collective sentiment and its truthfulness and accuracy in presenting the emotional quality of the religious experience. According to the writers of *Hymns and Choirs*, emotion is not primarily an individual experience. Although it begins as an interior psychological experience, it is seen as necessarily involving some kind of personal expression, public or private, and which becomes taken up as a collective expression if it rings true. Furber writes,

To speak what we feel is natural. We do this in our closets; not because it is necessary that God should hear our words, nor because we wish others to hear us when we pray in secret; but because speech is, both by necessity and by habit, our ordinary medium of communication with the mind. Strong emotions *demand* utterance. (Phelps 312-313).

To restrict emotional utterance to one’s own private circumstance and refuse it a social outlet does violence to that expression. “We are social beings,” Furber continues, “and freedom of vocal utterance, is one of the prime demands of our social natures. The chief object of public worship is *united worship*” (Phelps 313-314). In order to recontextualizing Dickinson’s work into a culture for which hymnody was an important and vital map of communal feeling, we need to move beyond reading her work as the ironization of an increasingly unavailable and unsure religious experience. Although her

poems are profoundly abstract and take on interior states of mind, and in particular the emotional quality of those states, her poems also continually reference a devotional genre that considered individual emotional experience as a precursor to a social mediation of its significance.

Dickinson's poems' take on individual experience, like that of hymns, is that it should form the basis for a purposive, socially oriented expression. One of the characteristics of that purposive quality in her work is its insistence on the ethical responsibility of the poem to the truth of the experience. A poem, like a hymn, must be true to the experience it represents: poems must tell the truth. Hence the imperative of "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" (#1263), a familiar statement of Dickinson's poetics and formal strategies. The poem can furthermore be read as a paradigmatic statement of secularity – as an moral attitude and felt sensibility of living in a universe that has no immediate access to its foundational truths. "Tell the truth, but tell it slant - / Success in Circuit lies" (1-2), the poem begins. The skepticism at the heart of the poem – that one cannot approach the truth head on but must approach truth obliquely to locate and convey it – nearly obscures the ethical imperative with which the poem begins: "Tell the truth." And despite the skeptical viewpoint, the poem demonstrates a high degree of epistemological confidence: there are truths, and they can and should be told. Dickinson figuratively represents the truths as partaking of the overwhelming essence of the divine, a classical and Biblical tradition: "the Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind –" (7-8), with "moderately" as a substitution for "gradually," meaning that the truth like the divine presence would annihilate any worldly attempts to apprehend it fully and without adulteration.

The problem for Dickinson is not truth, but its telling. There is no questioning for her of the onus to convey truth, or its existence, only the manner in which it is best conveyed. The unenlightened are as if children in the poem, unable to receive the truth without sufficient preparation to ameliorate its shock – “As Lightning to the Children eased / With explanation kind” (5-6). Dickinson deliberately misrepresents the situation somewhat: we recast the truth when telling children about lightning because of their incomprehension, not because the truth of the lightning is a knowledge that would threaten or harm. In the poem, though, the telling of the lightning and lightning’s explosive force have become somehow equated. The lack of logical consistency does not trouble a reading of the poem, though, because the implications about the nature of truth and truth-telling that sustain the poem are, like the truth, deeper than the manifest or direct conveyance of it. Language in the poem is relegated to the social world – that of “circuit” which in the poem is allowed a range of its possible meanings: a perimeter route, the area contained within that perimeter, the sequence of regular stops or events along the way, etc. The poem conceives of the telling as being handed from one point to another in an familiar sequence of means or within a network of truth-tellers. The realm of truth where its meaning might be felt directly and without a deviation into the social – where the understanding of lightening is no different than its power – is foundational and divine. In the realm of its telling, meaning and actual force become necessarily separated, though it would seem that some force of the divine remains as the ethical imperative to convey the truth into the social world. Where the truth remains untroubled by its telling, and where its meaning and force are undiluted and undivorced, is in that realm of interior and personal experience prior to the social.

The similarities between “Tell the truth but tell it slant” and an actual hymn are admittedly slight. The poem is in common measure, but its theme and tone bear little resemblance to the hymn’s devotional character. At best we might say that the poem resembles the hymn’s schoolroom cousin, didactic verse for children. Yet what I want to point out is the close affinity between the attitudes toward communal exchange and language that are the subject of the poem and those that represent the accepted and authoritative theories of expression governing the dissemination and use of hymn texts. Furthermore, I want to detour briefly to point out the similarities of both to Bushnell’s theory of language as it relates to religious experience and the divine. Bushnell was a major New England Trinitarian theologian contemporary with Dickinson, and while his views were somewhat controversial for the time, he was highly regarded and widely read in the liberal Christian circles known to Dickinson. There is no indication that Dickinson read or was aware of Bushnell’s theories on language and the divine, yet there was no large degree of separation between their personal lives nor their cultural and intellectual milieus. Bushnell’s ideas were very much of the religion-saturated post-Romantic literary outlook in which Dickinson thought, spoke, and corresponded.

Both Bushnell and Dickinson felt that direct expression of spiritual truth and religious experience was not possible, and both therefore agitated for an emotional and aesthetic understanding of spiritual truth. *God in Christ* (1848), Bushnell’s early summation of his theological outlook, begins with a “Preliminary Dissertation on the Nature of Language” as he thought it necessary before speaking on the nature of spiritual truth to write about the “power and capacity” of utterances in language to act “as vehicles of thought and of spiritual truth.” The central argument of that dissertation is that

language is incapable of conveying “a real and proper system of dogmatic truth” – and not only language: “Our logical or deductive processes under it, are more likely, in general, to be false than true” (12). One of the purposes to which his theory of expression was put was perhaps his most unorthodox claim, that the Trinity does not represent an essential spiritual truth but a dogmatic truth – that is, the Trinity is an analogy of the actual personhood of God, which, as a spiritual truth, cannot be conveyed directly through language. His linguistic skepticism regarding the conveyance of any spiritual truth was seen, though, as itself controversial and potentially subversive of the institution of Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Bushnell thought spiritual truths could be conveyed, but, like Dickinson thought, imprecisely and indirectly conveyed through the use of figurative language. In particular, the emotion-laden figurative language of literary works could through analogy and careful attention to formal properties encapsulate the nature of the divine: “Words of thought or spirit ... are related to the truth, only as form to spirit – earthen vessels in which the truth is borne, yet always offering their mere pottery as being the truth itself” (48). Internal consistency and logic cannot themselves be trusted in a linguistic performance. “Since all words ... are inexact representations of thought,” he writes, “it follows that language will be ever trying to mend its own deficiencies by multiplying its forms of representation” (55).<sup>32</sup> Thus the piling on of figure after figure, even if contradictory or at times puzzling, is the inevitable result of an attempt to convey

the thought out of one mind into another, as we commonly speak of doing. They are only hints, or images, held up before the mind of another, to put *him* on generating or reproducing the same thought; which he can do only as he has the same personal contents, or the generative power out of which to bring the thought required. (46)

One necessary deduction is that scripture, and any attempt to convey authentic religious truth, has much more in common with poetry than rational discourse. “Poets, then” he writes, “are the true metaphysicians, and if there be any complete science of man to come, they must bring it” (73). Another is that although there may be a strong correlation between personal experience and direct knowledge of a spiritual truth, social communication of any such experience runs a circuitous approach through a variety of attempts to describe a formal relationship to the truth in order to bring the auditor to a similar experience, and is successful only to the degree that the auditor has had access to a similar fund of analogies or metaphors or possesses similar emotional investments.

We can see the determining influence of linguistic skepticism of the kind Bushnell promotes in Dickinson’s poem “Faith is the pierless bridge” (#978), a poem that is very much like a hymn. In the poem, as we find in “Tell the truth but tell it slant,” spiritual truth is unavailable to language and apprehension, for which the believer compensates with a confidence in the revealed nature of scriptural teaching, that is, with faith:

Faith – is the Pierless Bridge  
Supporting what We see  
Unto the Scene that We do not –  
Too slender for the eye. (1-4)

The final line of that stanza does not have a clear referent: what we do not see may be too slender to be perceived, or it may be faith as bridge that is the poem’s conceit, the “it” of the following stanza.

It bears the Soul as bold  
As it were rocked in Steel  
With Arms of steel at either side – (5-7)



The ambiguity opens into a rather straightforward paradox: despite faith's intangibility and lack of material support, it is unshakeable in its support of the soul. It also leads us "behind the Vail" to the deeper paradox that defines the poem. Faith joins us

To what, could We presume  
 The Bridge would cease to be  
 To Our far, vascillating Feet  
 A first Necessity. (9-12)

That is, if we could presume the existence of the place beyond the veil where faith brings us, we would not need faith to sustain us. Yet without the need for and reliance on faith, our access to that other realm would then be uncertain – the poem leaves us with that possibility and leaves our "far, vascillating Feet" distant from their goal and wandering.

The poem ends on a moderately difficult stanza in an ambivalent tone, thus not making for a particularly good hymn. A good hymn – according to sources both nineteenth-century and more contemporary - must not trip the singing voice up with complex grammar or metrics. It must also be uniform in sentiment and transparent in its adherence to accepted and understood doctrine.<sup>33</sup> Despite its fundamental unsuitability, the poem's similarities to a hymn are quite apparent. While it is not written in common measure, it is written in short measure, another common hymn meter. And like the formal structure of the hymns favored by the revivalist climate of American Protestantism of the time, the poem begins in with a aphoristic definition that defines a central analogy, and it follows with a series of figures leaving the referent left largely implicit, with the primary exception of the bridge that begins the poem. While the rhymes of the first and second stanzas (see/eye, Steel/Vail) are off-rhymes – one of Dickinson's frequent and signature metrical irregularities, the final stanza progresses to full rhymes, a progression not unusual in conventional hymns. On the other hand are the qualities that mark the poem as

being of a literary and not devotional nature. One important feature would be the series of enjambed lines that begins with the final line of the second stanza that enjambes unto the first of the next (“It joins – behind the Vail // To what” etc.). Enjambment interferes with ease in choral singing, so few hymns feature enjambment as a formal property. The movement in this poem, furthermore, from the end-stopped lines in the more hymn-like opening stanzas toward the marked enjambment and difficulty of the final stanzas underscores the thematic development from a uniform sentiment at the start into the rather complex and emotionally conflicted final stanza.

The poem calls into attention through its reference to and deviations from formal convention to dramatize the movement from a socially oriented frame of reference to that of the individual, and so, ironically or not, the relative proximity or distance of Dickinson’s work from hymnody is a crucial component of its formal environment. The poem’s opening aligns it thematically as well as formally with hymns by invoking the concern of going to heaven, placing that opening well within a social frame, particularly within the efforts of hymns to cultivate and manage at a social level attitudes toward conversion or, more accurately, the reinvigoration of the experience and memory of the act of conversion and a sense of the assuredness of salvation. Singing hymns is the social expression of going to heaven, let us say,<sup>34</sup> and yet the struggle for the surety of salvation is a personal struggle, according to the exact same soteriology that sustains the nineteenth-century hymn, and the actual event to which this all tends, the progress from the shuffling off the mortal coil to the assumption of one’s eternal reward is thought to be a solitary and individual progress. In the relationship between language and Christian doxology as Bushnell would have it, the social expression of this purely solitary and

individual experience is necessarily highly figurative, and would be more effective in its aim of orienting the social group toward this experience the greater the variety and number of metaphorical “analogies” for the experience and its facets it provided, thus assuring a broader social relevance. The poem introduces its irregularities of tone and meter as it begins to probe “behind the Vail” into where we can only presume, the realm of individual experience where direct communication, in Bushnell’s scheme, communicates primarily with itself in an individualized dialect, an idiolect, until it can adopt a figurative expression far enough from the actual experience that it can begin to gain some currency in social exchanges.

What is remarkable and distinctive about form in Dickinson’s poetry is not after all her use of hymn measures, except in that her dogged persistence in their use throughout her massive oeuvre recalls no contemporary’s effort so much as it does Fanny Crosby’s, the blind hymnist and author of “Blessed Assurance” and “Safe in the Arms of Jesus” who it is popularly claimed wrote 8,000 to 9,000 hymns in her lifetime. What is remarkable and innovative in Dickinson’s poems is her assumption of a license to deviate from standard grammar and formal conventions so pervasively. In that deviation she addresses formally the contradiction between the social and the impossible and inexpressible individual and divine registers of signification. Style, and a style of unmarked and frequently ambiguous grammar in particular, become in the poems an assertion of a distinctive individual presence imprinted upon the fabric of social exchange. This does not necessarily annex new territories of significance onto her readers’ experience of hymn-singing, as hymns themselves in the nineteenth century were offered as exemplary expressions of self-definition for singers to experience and adopt.

Mary De Jong writes of the omnipresent “I” in the nineteenth-century hymn as a index of self-fashioning in Protestant religious communities: “Hymns shaped performers’ identities by instilling and reinforcing culturally sanctioned schemata, defining ‘self’ relationally, and creating a store of emotionally charged memories” (“Burden” 185). Singers did not carry out these operations unconsciously. De Jong notes that Lowell Mason, the period’s chief church music authority, writes in the *New-York Evangelist* that in singing the hymn “each individual should adopt the language as his own, and seek for that spiritual intercourse with his Maker which they imply” (“Burden” 200).<sup>35</sup> De Jong further notes that while “authoritative precepts are not always put into practice, ... laypeople as well as clergymen did understand the sung text as testimony and the ‘I’ of hymnody as a self-representation” (“Burden” 202). Dickinson’s efforts were not to secularize the hymns or their grammars of representation if by secularization we mean their removal from a religious context. Instead, her assertion of the persistence of the experience of the individual upon the framework of the hymn forces the hymn to make good on its claim to offer access to a truer, more authentic, and therefore more religious account of that experience.

The question remains one of audience. Dickinson’s poems respond to a social need by identifying an emotional stance – and these stances are often specifically oriented to a perceived loss of divinity from the world – and supplying an articulation of that stance as a mode of subjectivity for the reader to adopt provisionally and to attach to it his or her own personal affective associations. It is not necessary for the poem to have been one know to circulate among Dickinson’s intimates for us to read it in this fashion: this describes the grammar of subjectivity and the mode of signification that enable

Dickinson's approach to poetry overall. So how does Dickinson's work, her deviations from standard grammar and meter and her ironies and paradoxes of individuality and authenticity engage an audience differently than a hymn? Not, as I have indicated, by the romantic ironization of the self out of a community of auditors. Although many of Dickinson's poems concern themselves with an irreducibly individual experience, analogous to the solitary conversion at the heart of nineteenth-century Protestant soteriology, they address themselves toward a communal management of the experience of solitude and abandonment by the divine in the wake of the world's disenchantment. But while the poems are different than hymns, they are also different than much of the rest of nineteenth-century literary efforts in their efforts to convey the impress of the irreducibly individual upon the social medium of language, and that I would suggest is an important marker of the literature of secularism and the significance of innovation for Dickinson and the poets who follow her example. A useful work to consider in this context is "There's a certain slant of light" (#320), as it is one of Dickinson's most severe and abstract works, and yet despite its ostensible thematics of solitude and individual experience is concerned throughout with a communal management of disenchantment.

As a statement on a faith that is paradoxically both necessary and implausible, "There's a certain slant of light" is more vexed than "Faith is a pierless bridge." Here secularity is a burdensome condition, but religion as well emerges as a oppressive affliction upon the experience of the individual.

There's a certain Slant of light,  
 Winter Afternoons –  
 That oppresses, like the Heft  
 Of Cathedral Tunes –

The light that is the poem's ostensible topic and its main conceit has no clear referent. More than just a formal gesture to the rhetoric of audience that we have seen above, its absence is also thematic. What in a hymn would be absent because commonly available is missing here because what it signifies is absent, and it is that real, felt absence as a commonly available experience Dickinson explores in the poem. The light illuminates a realm then from which the divine has retreated completely, yet it remains a social realm bound by a common experience of language. The season and the time of day both indicate the withdrawal of a previous familiar plenitude, as the sharpened angle of the afternoon light in winter recalls the earth's tilt away from the sun at the time of year and its shortened day. Yet religion, here solemnized on the grandiose scale of a cathedral mass, does not redress that situation but oppresses through its reminder of our comparative insignificance. Meaningfulness has withdrawn from the landscape, and we found ourselves diminished as well in its retreat.

Heavenly Hurt it gives us –  
 We can find no scar,  
 But internal difference –  
 Where the Meanings, are –

The poem's grammar of subjectivity more closely adheres to hymns than lyric poems, as Dickinson here does not speak from an exclusively individual position with which readers are implicitly meant to identify, but as "us." In keeping with the somber mood of the poem, though, and despite the common experience of the poem, it is the social realm more so than individual expression that this poem finds problematic. The "internal difference," a split or division in the wake of plenitude's retreat, refers to the breakdown in communication between a personal idiolect and the communal currency of speech, as in Bushnell's case for the impossibility of a single doctrine true for all. We experience

modernity, Dickinson's poems suggest, as a division in language that bisects communication and therefore sunders meaning.

The poem turns inward at this point to examine the interior and personal effect of the crisis in socially valid meaningfulness. Given that the schema for hymns as a literature of strong spiritual and emotional experiences requires that those experiences be given some sort of publicly oriented expression, that the experience described here thwarts the impulse to speak out and share.

None may teach it – Any –  
 'Tis the Seal Despair –  
 An imperial affliction  
 Sent us of the Air –

Despair in Christian soteriology is classically the darkest of the sins as it involves the sinner's absolute denial of God's ability or willingness to intercede. The soul in the grip of despair is cut off from God and isolated furthermore from the religious community, though here one could not say it was the despair or the isolation that came first. To describe the affliction as the "Seal Despair," though, raises an ambiguity of whether the affliction described is the representation of some kind of inexpressible despair, or whether the despair is itself representative of some other condition or affliction. In addition, of course, to being a representative mark, a seal is also a means of closure, and so the polyvalence renders the ambiguity irresolvable: the representation – the attempt at some kind of figurative communication into a larger social frame – seals the actual condition away. "None may teach it." The "any" that follows at the end of that line gives that line considerable charge. It is the only grammatical deviation in the poem, and occurs near the midpoint, focuses the reader's attention about its paradox and further ambiguity: to what does it refer? Some of its impact may be found in its apparent contradiction of the

sense of the line – that none may teach it, or any may teach it. That contradiction may be resolved into the contention that the affliction is something of which anyone could speak but that no one is able to speak, yet that does not fix the “any” into a definitive reading. It works best grammatically as an adverb – that none may teach it *anymore* or that none may teach it *at all*, but it also works as an intensifier for the subject: that *not any* may teach the affliction. Regardless, the poem registers the breakdown in communication through a grammatical peculiarity which also works as an emblem of personal style: not only does the first line of the stanza communicate variously and ambiguously, it does so through a strikingly individual fashion.

The meter as well displays some idiosyncrasies at the formal level as the poem explores the painful awareness of solitude in a diminished word in the second and third stanzas. At first blush, the poem would seem entirely of a type, as either hymn or a poem of Dickinson’s, as it is written in the common measure, with the full rhymes falling as expected at the end of the short or trimeter lines. In the second and third stanzas, however, the long or tetrameter lines – the first and third line of each stanza – are all shortened. The poem’s lines as a whole are acephalous, that is, they drop the initial unstressed syllable of their first iamb to begin on the stressed latter syllable, giving the poem a rapid, emphatic feel. An acephalous iambic line flips easily into a trochaic line, as happens in the first line of the second stanza – “Heavenly Hurt, it gives us.” The first word and foot is a dactyl followed by a couple trochees, and while the dactyl gives the impression of a longer line, there are three rather than the expected four stresses in the line, as if the poem were restricting the reader’s breath. Moving to the first line of the next stanza, “None may teach it – Any –,” the unstressed second syllable of the enigmatic



“any” flips that line into the trochaic as well. Personal preference would likely determine whether the third line – what should be the second long line in each stanza – in stanza two and three opens with an anapest or single stressed syllable. Allowing the “but” and “an” of those lines the stress would allow these lines their regular, if somewhat weakened and artificial, four stresses, but my tendency is to leave them unstressed, and the lines at three stresses like all the other lines of those two central stanzas. Given the association of hymn-singing and hymn form with a open fullness and freedom of communication, the effect of the crippled or shortened lines is to throw into relief an image of that fullness of which the poem falls short. And given the embodied nature of poetic rhythm, there is the accompanying sensation of a stiffening and shortness of breath suggests fear, and even death.

As the poem moves from the painful solitude and constriction of its third stanza into the final stanza, Dickinson shifts the point of view from the individual into a larger context – one that would be social if it were peopled. But instead of people, we return to an empty but now anthropomorphized landscape of the first stanza: “When it comes, the Landscape listens – / Shadows – hold their breath.” Dickinson does not render a communal experience here, restricting the language instead to a personal and difficult expression of the necessarily individual experience of God’s absence, yet she does render the presence of others into the landscape as that which listens and holds its breath in sympathy. Neither the nobody/everybody of the previous stanza nor the recipients of the implicit gesture to fellow sufferers in the second stanza, Dickinson presents these shadows as signs of those who while they cannot be fully represented in the are proximate enough to have their presence felt – that is, like the shadow that is not the

person but a sign necessarily indicating the nearby presence of the person who casts it. If anyone can be said to be fully present in the landscape it would be Dickinson as the sufferer, and perhaps also after a fashion the reader to whom she offers this experience as a mode of subjectivity to adopt as his or her own and to which the reader might attach the emotional freight born out of experiences the poem recalls. And yet the presence of those just outside the scene is quite palpable: the reader is witness to how their sympathy for the suffering causes them to stiffen and take in and hold their breath. The reader has done much the same in the previous two stanzas, and has done so as a price of admittance into the scene of the poem, we could say, through the reader's participation in the metrical constriction about those lines. So while Dickinson ostensibly pushes the accounts of others away to dwell more intently on a deeply interior conflict, the poem presents a host of others pressing in on the scene who are themselves but one remove from the reader.

The poem ends with two of Dickinson's bleakest lines: "When it goes, 'tis like the Distance / On the look of Death." In these lines the internal experience of the retreat of the divine and its incommunicability become likened to death and the final extinguishing of the possibility for any meaningfulness. As one looking into the eyes of the dead cannot find any affirming spark, the poem describes the inability to locate any sanctifying presence in the wake of one's encounter with despair. Yet despite this bleakness and despite the ostensibly solitary nature of the suffering described in the poem, the lines also console. The "Distance / On the Look of Death" is a measure of that incommensurability of experience and communication, but while the retreat of the divine closes off that experience from expression, it also displaces the scene of suffering from the poem. As the experience recedes, the poem presents itself as left in its wake, and it also presents

Dickinson as herself cut off from any privileged individual perspective on the suffering: she is left looking into the eyes of the dead just as her readers are. What the poem holds out to the reader to participate in is participation itself – the recognition of those nearby with whom we can share through the poem accounts of despair while still recognizing that the particularities and peculiarities of the experience evade our full understanding.

The appeal of the poem is to a social frame of reference, and yet the experience that it so poignantly renders is that of a profound existential loneliness. Part of the lesson of the poem, and Dickinson's work in general, may be that in discussing respective religiosity and secularity, there are no clear distinctions. Even the most worldly claim entails some management of religious orientations, and in the case where one discusses a work of that takes on religious sentiments and expression as a theme, even if that work emerges in an ostensibly secular context, one is bound to find a number of cross-currents and reversals. Whatever benefit would we expect to obtain by comparing a poem written in a literary, secular mode to a work such a hymn that emerges out of a particular religious practice would depend on the kinds of answers we are willing to accept. While Dickinson's poem takes on religious themes and concerns, it does not devotional, nor is it part of institution of religious practice. And yet formally it does reference the specifically religious practice of hymn-singing, and it alludes in its structure and figurative language to an ad hoc social group of spiritual consolation and instruction of the kind brought into being by the singing of hymns, the kind of ad hoc network of intimacy and affective attachment that defined her micro-publication. There is no evidence that Dickinson included "There's a certain slant of light" as part of her correspondence with her literary confidants, but neither is there anything that would rule out her having done so. It is after

all her entire project, not individual poems, that we must consider as participating in a simultaneous orientation toward and refusal of print publication in favor of a circulation defined by a tightly controlled version of a public. There is much then about this work, and by extension Dickinson's work as a whole, that participates in a quasi-religious communal practice orienting and managing one's emotional attachments toward the unseen and unknown. But then we have to take into account what is actually being managed in "There's a certain slant of light": the poem takes on what might be described as an existential condition, the withdrawal of the force of divine from the phenomenal world, within a cultural context that gave that condition some historical specificity, a confidence in a scientific outlook that deliberately eschewed a rhetoric of faith, as we find in "Faith is a fine invention." The ad hoc social network of readers of poetry imagined in this particular poem comes together in this vision not so much to contemplate the nature of an attachment to a divine or an afterlife but to the management of the emotional shock born out of a growing sense that both are no longer available.

On the other side of our dichotomy, we find that the hymn manifested in the mid-nineteenth century also has a complicated relationship to both religiosity and secularity. Although its genre status as devotional literature should be fairly self-evident, it should not be considered as untouched from the forces of secularization that were transforming Protestant religious practice overall. After all, the emergence of hymn-singing as the predominant evangelical practice in the latter half of the century was largely due to the transformations wrought by secularization, such as increasing emphasis on an interior psychological struggle as the heart of the conversion experience and the reconfiguration of the account of grace from orthodox Calvinism's predetermination to feature the willful

seeking of a volitional self capable of responding to rationality entreaties and persuasion. One feature of hymnody that would indicate some degree of secularization of the genre would be the fairly porous boundary between hymns and literary poems with a devotional theme. The traffic moved in one direction only – literary poems, from writers well known and unknown, might be, and often were, adopted by hymnal editors for the use of religious congregations, but there seems to be no works written specifically as a hymn being printed or collected for consideration as a literary work. Once accepted as a hymn, different editorial conventions applied, as hymnal editors did not question their authority to condense and rewrite the poem without consulting the author to make it suitable for congregational singing.<sup>36</sup> Important considerations included the length of the poem, as most literary works were longer than hymns, which tend to be fairly uniform in length; doctrinal regularity, since, as discussed above, hymns needed to be both correct and fairly uncontroversial in terms of what they said about the immaterial; and metrical regularity so they could be easily sung in unison.

Editors took particular interest the way in which hymn would present its subject position, as we can see in the case of Phoebe Brown's well known hymn "I love to steal awhile away." The original poem, "My Apology for My Twilight Rambles," when it was adapted by Nettleton for his influential collection, was shortened from its original length and edited to seem less feminine by removing references to the origin of the poem's pensiveness in domestic turmoil (De Jong, "Burden" 150). This particular case gets picked up by Phelps and Park as part of their explanation of how hymns are edited, in general and in particular for the *Sabbath Hymn Book*. Their brief discussion of "I love to steal awhile away" occurs alongside a number of other examples chosen to illustrate the

section entitled “Alterations in the Text, as affecting its Dignity” (212-216). Park writes, “A change so insignificant as that of the familiar, for the solemn style, will often elevate a domestic song into a sacred hymn, a stirring lyric into a solemn prayer,” and offers as an initial example a change from familiar usage represented by “To what a stubborn frame / *Has* sin reduced our mind” to the more solemn and stirring “*Hath* reduced our mind.” He turns then to the Brown example to demonstrate the shift in the domestic and familiar into the dignified, saying: “A mother, retiring from her household for twilight devotion, may well sing, ‘I love to steal awhile away, From *little ones* and care;’” but when she prepares these lines for the sanctuary, she may exalt them by saying, “From *every cumbering* care.”

Park’s other examples, it should be noted, are taken not from adaptations of literary works, but revisions made of Watts’s own hymns to make them more suitable for use in singing. He reflects that “many a hymn composed for the seclusion of private thought, has admitted commonplaces which need to be transformed into more select idioms, when that same hymn is transferred from the closet to the temple” (213). One such example Park gives is a revision of one of Watts’s hymns by Wesley, where he removes the perhaps too intimate “Heavenly Lover” in favor of “Friend of sinners” and modifies the sense of personal affliction and grief at the crucifixion – “The tidings strike a doleful sound / On my poor heart strings” to a more public scene of strife expressed by the world about: “A solemn darkness veils the skies; / A sudden trembling shakes the ground” (214). There is an explicit message here that modification may be necessary to bring individual effusions into broad acceptance by the faithful, and that even the acknowledged masters might “in the heat of first composition . . . neglect[] the elevated

manner” and need revision from a personal frame of mind to a grander and more universal tone in order to find their work sustained by the faithful. There is also an implicit lesson about an historical shift from the early work in the renaissance of English-language hymnody to a more sophisticated and competent understanding of the use and effectiveness of hymns in producing and managing the appropriate emotional character of faithful devotion.

While the new theological tendencies gaining acceptance in New England were assisted to a large degree by the historical currents of secularization and modernity in bringing about a new emphasis in the hymn on modeling affective orientations toward the afterlife through representations of individual experience and subjectivity, those same historical currents also pressured a variety of literary and editorial contexts to valorize a particular mode of representing subjectivity, one that favors a rhetoric of universality, dignity, and disinterestedness but that also whittles out what it perceives as accidental particularities bound to local intimacies and circumstances. In “I love to steal awhile away,” we can see the ease in which a lyric centered about the pensive reflections of a solitary individual becomes a popular hymn, the better, we could say, to respond to a society increasingly concerned about the emotional state of the individual, and in particular the passionate individual absent the discipline and direction provided by ties and restraints of that individual’s belonging to others. One of the advantages to religion, certainly, nineteenth-century Americans felt, was its ability to contain overweening egotism and bind emotional energies ostensibly to salvation, but also implicitly to the congregation as a social environment. There is a certain paradox, and some irony, that we find nineteenth-century hymnody also conforming to that tendency in secularism to

displace from representation or display in the public realm affective ties and other particularities of the individual's sentimental education. And much of the affective valence of one's religious experience as expressed through private devotions would therefore be rejected as not entirely suitable for communal displays of religious emotionality, as the hymnologists above recognized without expressing any alarm. Emotional life as structured by hymn-singing split religious sensibility, infusing one's sense of the emotional currents of public life with hymn-singing's sweet sentimentality while turning away from public consideration and expression of the emotional character of the intimate, the domestic, and personal struggle and triumph – the ideological basis of religion's claim to emotional commitment on the part of its congregation.

Dickinson's poems also deal with these issues of religion, private life, and emotion. The difference that Dickinson's poems offer is an unflinching focus on the individual psychology as an arena of religious conflict and struggle. Whereas the hymns manifestly orient their experience toward the individual's spiritual encounter with sin and salvation, they largely and implicitly manage the hymn-singing community's emotional investment in such an orientation as a mode of social interaction and as a genre close off representation of individual experience as unavailable and ultimately insignificant for a deeply meaningful religious activity. And yet for Dickinson what is not representable in terms of a broad socially circulated meaningfulness is what forms the basis of a legitimate expression of individual experience and therefore spiritual truth. Adopting the hymn form largely – not merely its meter but its figurative processes and investments, and its pragmatics of audience as well, she commits her poems to a mode of social interaction that insists on a broad social relevance yet refuses to render itself as fully



public. To a degree, that insistence jibes well with a religious sensibility, and coupled with the persistent thematic of a world in which the hand of the divine is increasingly difficult to perceive, Dickinson's poems are understandably seen as works that ask to be read in a religious fashion, but such a reading only gets us to the suggestion that religious genres are a way to sidestep perceived limitations on meaningfulness and the representations of spiritual experience in a more conventional published poetry.

Dickinson's uniqueness consists of her determination to pursue the premises and the promises of both religion and secularism in terms of representation and meaningfulness. Accepting the means to explore an emotionality borne out of intimate personal contacts from hymnody, she uses it to pursue rigorously the emotional quality experience of the secular self – the self bereft of any confidence in the availability of the divine. Accepting that figurative representation of that experience would vacillate between inauthentic and hopelessly obscure, Dickinson registers that individual experience in her experimentation on the layers of formal expression borrowed from the religious literary genres.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Higginson published the letters in an *Atlantic Monthly* article on Dickinson after the publication of the 1890 *Poems*, *Atlantic Monthly* 68 (October 1891) 444.

<sup>2</sup> Sewall perhaps describes the relationship between Higginson and Dickinson best (532-576).

<sup>3</sup> To a certain extent, Dickinson did stand apart from the rest of her family in terms of religious practice. Everyone in her family was a member of the church except for her, having nearly all been swept up in the 1850 revival in Amherst. But it would be inaccurate to consider the entire family as uniform in their outlook and practice, as it would be inaccurate to portray the populations of Amherst, Massachusetts, or nineteenth-century North American descendants of Europeans as uniform in their religious outlook and practice. Austin Dickinson, the brother, for instance, apparently shared some of Dickinson's skepticism about the literalness of biblical pronouncements and the assurance of an afterlife for one's individual consciousness, claiming to Dickinson that "there was no such person as Elijah" and discussing with her the feasibility of "the Extension of Consciousness, after Death," according to Dickinson's July 1880 letter to Elizabeth Holland (Letters 3:666-667). See also Lundin 209, 244.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson continues, in reference to the use of the masculine pronoun: "The fact that it was *her* own seems in effect to have made Dickinson a clearer mirror for the poetics of the single ego. Already consigned to the private sphere by reason of gender (and kept comfortably there by benefit of class), Dickinson could represent in person and in poem (the two so quickly becoming indistinguishable) the prerogative of the private individual – namely, the privilege to gain public power by means of a well-protected self-sufficiency" (128-129).

<sup>5</sup> Jackson notes this tendency merely continues in the contemporary fetishism with the holograph manuscripts as being a superior medium for reading Dickinson's lyricism. That fetishism is perhaps now best manifested by the project to disseminate digital images of the manuscripts to further Dickinson study at the Dickinson Electronic Archives <<http://www.emilydickinson.org/>>. "The print, facsimile, and web editions of Dickinson – that is, *all* editions of Dickinson – turn Dickinson's private writing practices public, whether they do so in the medium of print, photographic reproduction, or digital hypertext. The exposure of Dickinson's private hand to the public gaze as thrilled readers since the nineteenth century, and though new Web technologies may provide more spectacular means for such exposure, it is not technology itself that determines interpretation" (51).

<sup>6</sup> See Sewall 580-586 for a discussion of the publication of Dickinson's "Success is counted sweetest" (#112).

<sup>7</sup> See Domnhall Mitchell, "'The Way I read a Letter's – this': Dickinson and Genre," 131-190.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Hunt Jackson importuned Dickinson repeatedly to submit a poem to *A Masque of Poets* (1878), an anonymous compendium of contemporary American poets. The volume did include Dickinson's "Success is counted sweetest," though it is not clear whether Jackson actually obtained Dickinson's permission. Dickinson, in any case, does not seem to have born Jackson or the editor any ill will (Sewall 582-584).

<sup>9</sup> See McLoughlin 11-64 for a description of the gradual acceptance of the so-called New Divinity over the Old School Calvinist conception of redemption in American revivalism in the first decades of the nineteenth century, particularly as it concerns the central figure of the Second Great Awakening, the itinerant evangelical preacher Charles Grandison Finney. McLoughlin relates the transformation to a residual impact of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, “particularly to the belief in the dignity of man and the benevolence of nature and of nature’s God” that could not help but alleviate the pessimism of the strict Calvinist doctrine (12). The shift was also playing upon some of the inherent tendencies, though, of American Christianity, as Butler et al. note that Colonial era revivalism of the First Great Awakening was itself “a distant expression of the European ‘pietist’ movement that stressed personal religious introspection and individual transformation” (128).

<sup>10</sup> The crisis of confidence in the leadership of the clergy was not in the character of a popular revolt against them. Corrigan notes that much of the discourse surrounding experience and emotionality was driven by the writing and oratory of the ministers themselves, who both proclaimed the need for it, looked back to Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield for inspiration and example in conducting it, and worried about its disruptive effects on their congregations (Corrigan 117-118).

<sup>11</sup> Habegger notes that one of the other members of Betsy Norcross’s prayer group was Phoebe H. Brown, author of “I love to steal awhile,” perhaps the favorite contemporary hymn of the nineteenth century (29-30). The hymn was initially collected in Asahel Nettleton’s *Village Hymns for Social Worship* (1824), a groundbreaking hymnal collected primarily to meet the demand for tasteful and appropriate hymns to be sung at revivals and other evangelical gatherings. Nettleton also, in a bold innovation, published a companion volume, *Zion’s Harp*, that contained all of the tunes recommended for singing the hymns in the hymnal, instead of leaving the music up to the memory of the congregation or the instruction of their singing master (Foote 188-191). Printing the tune with the hymn would not happen for a few more years, not until Joshua Levitt’s *The Christian Lyre* in 1831 (Foote 203).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to Lundin’s claim quoted above that Dickinson was “one of the major religious thinkers of her age,” Doriani and McIntosh prefer to see Dickinson as working explicitly within the framework of a religious tradition. Doriani: “By assuming the voice and stance of the prophet as she drew on biblical and homilectical rhetorical techniques, Dickinson as a woman poet spoke to her culture with a sense of authority and justification, despite that culture’s patriarchal slant. Her religious tradition and her innovations upon it were precisely what enabled her to write her distinctive, unforgettable poetry” (2). McIntosh, likewise, although he acknowledges that her “idea of election is idiosyncratic and poetic,” the central presence in her work of “‘Irresistible Grace,’ the doctrine that when God calls a person the experience is so powerful that even sinful human beings cannot reject it,” make Dickinson “a poet with a sacred calling” (5-6).

<sup>13</sup> Higginson wrote hymns, as did Emerson, Bryant, and Longfellow, among many prominent American poets. Elizabeth Barrett Browning had five hymns in Henry Ward Beecher’s *Plymouth Collection* (1850) (England 128). Beecher’s *Plymouth Collection* is also notable for being the first American hymnal to print the music by which to sing the hymn in a staff running across the top of the lyrics – that is, the first hymnal in the contemporary style (Foote 215). Martha England notes that none of Brontë’s hymns

appeared in American hymnals before 1870, so Dickinson may not have been aware of them (128).

<sup>14</sup> The lines Todd quotes are from “Read – Sweet – how others strove” (#323), one of Dickinson’s poems about the Bible. Todd and Higginson gave the poem the title “The Book of Martyrs” when they published it in the 1890 *Poems*.

<sup>15</sup> Dickinson’s early editors seemed to have recognized or responded to the poem’s equivocation in some manner. Franklin notes that until the poem’s publication in the 1929 *Further Poems*, only the poem’s first two lines had been published, both times as epigraphs, in the 1894 and the 1931 editions of the *Letters*.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, this first stanza of “Satisfaction is the agent” (#984, *Poems* 2:890):

Satisfaction – is the Agent  
Of Satiety –  
Want – a quiet commissary  
For Infinity –

<sup>17</sup> The centerpiece of Finney’s rejection of orthodox Calvinism was his 1831 “New Heart” sermon that preached the “common-sense” doctrine that all that was required to put salvation in motion was a change of heart on the part of the sinner (McLoughlin 65-73). The change of heart was akin to conviction on the basis of reasonableness, but as an emotional transformation went further to a person’s core. We find the appeal to the heart over the head in matters of Christ carried forward into the rather more staid and mainstream – though still controversial – work of New England theologians as represented by Park’s best-known sermon, first delivered in 1850, *The Theology of the Intellect and That of the Feelings*. Park in this sermon carries forward Bushnell’s recently published notions about an aesthetic apprehension of spiritual truth and associates that aesthetic apprehension in all its variable attempts to convey and impress truth with the warmth of human emotion. He contrasts the emotional apprehension of truth with an intellectual theology, “strict and severe,” that prefers exact terms, “general to individual statements, the abstract to the concrete, the literal to the figurative” (4). The theology of feeling is, on the other hand, works through the particular and the figurative, emphasizing the concrete and immediate, and while satisfied with “vague, indefinite representations,” is nonetheless more effective in inspiring one toward the truth (6). While Park and Bushnell’s emotional approach to Christ was certainly less fervent and excited than a Finneyite preacher’s manic exhortations beneath the tent to reject sin and love Jesus, their embrace of the validity of an emotional and aesthetic basis for spiritual truth is more thoroughgoing than Finney’s own rather clinical and pragmatic view of the necessity of appealing to the emotions as a means to conversion. Finney’s *Lectures on Revivals* (1835) attempts to translate the lessons meant for the congregation in “The New Heart” into a machinery of conversion for the ministry and ends up sounding very much like Park’s theology of the intellect, advocating an applied science of revivalism and stating quite emphatically that revivals are not miracles but the consequence of the correct application of an exact natural philosophy (12). He writes, “The connection between the right use of means for a revival and a revival is as philosophically sure as between the right use of means to raise grain and a crop of wheat. I believe, in fact, it is more certain and that there are fewer instances of failure” (29).

<sup>18</sup> Following are the hymnals known to be in Dickinson household, all of which had broad currency throughout nineteenth-century New England: *The Psalms, Hymns, and*

*Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D., to which are added, Select Hymns, from other Authors; and Directions for Musical Expression*, Samuel Worcester, ed. (known colloquially as *Watts & Select*) (1819), *Church Psalmody ... Selected from Dr. Watts and Other Authors*, Lowell Mason and David Green, eds. (1831), *Village Hymns for Social Worship ... a Supplement to Dr. Watts Psalms and Hymns*, Asahel Nettleton, ed. (1824), Henry Ward Beecher's *Plymouth Collection* (1850) (which includes 5 hymns by E.B. Browning), and Edward A. Park's *Sabbath Hymn Book* (1858) (England 126, 128).

<sup>19</sup> Park was also a popular and well-regarded preacher. Dickinson greatly admired Park as a sermonizer, having heard him speak in Amherst in 1853 (Habegger 311-312).

<sup>20</sup> We generally speak of religious ritual and form as being very conservative modes of social practice – a legacy perhaps of Durkheim and functional anthropology's insistence on these rituals and practices as being the core modes in which social cohesion in itself is both imagined and through which it acquires the facticity of experience. Marini notes that in the American religious experience, hymns tend to be the most conservative formal element: "Hymns have a textual fixity not open to the sort of multivocality that a scripture passage possesses through preaching and theological writing" (207).

<sup>21</sup> The emergence of Romantic poetry out a secularization as an interiorization of religious and devotional attitudes is, for instance, an important part of the argument of M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*.

<sup>22</sup> According to Sizer, this interiorization was primarily expressed through nineteenth-century Protestantism's paradigmatic genres of testimony and hymnody. Sermons, as representing perhaps the legacy of earlier centuries, resisted a personal mode of relating interior experience until the close of the century (52).

<sup>23</sup> Sizer's diagnosis of the rhetoric of hymn form of nineteenth-century hymn signing identifies a strong reliance on a series of metaphors to structure the hymn, specific thematics related to certain linked oppositions such as strong versus weak or redeemed versus sinful, and a limited set of forms of address (24-48, 161-173). She identifies these forms with changes in the nature of religious practice, from the sharp distinction between public and private exercises in Puritan practice to revival evangelisms development of a variety of lay practices that Sizer identifies as occupying an intermediary, or "social" space between private devotion and church worship. She argues that the rhetorical forms she identifies develop as an effort to control and manage the sociality and intense emotionality of revival lay worship (50-52). Her analysis specifically excludes hymns written before 1820, and yet the Cowper hymn taken up by the Methodist camp meeting so neatly embodies the kind of rhetoric Sizer identifies that we should consider its appeal to nineteenth-century hymn-singers as taking part of the same shift in tastes that determined the production of the post-1820 hymns from which Sizer draws her observations. I should also note that the social milieu that produced and valued the "gospel hymns" that Sizer examines was worlds apart from Dickinson's own – the world Methodist camp-meeting was peopled by those at the opposite end of the economic and social spectrum from the privileged and influential Dickinson clan, and the defining revivals also took place at what were at the time the western and southern peripheries of European settlement in the North American continent. As the same movements transforming Methodist and other denominations associated with the less advantaged were also having a profound affect on Congregationalist and Presbyterian congregations, and others, the inclusion of this hymn in Nettleton's collection that was intended for

Congregationalist use outside the church indicates that the changes in hymnody were also following along similar lines in a wide variety of denominations.

<sup>24</sup> “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood” is collected in Nettleton’s *Village Hymns*, for instance (92-93). The text I will use for the hymn is the version in that collection.

<sup>25</sup> In the original:

There is a fountain fill’d with blood,  
Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;  
And sinners, plung’d beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.

And as it is now frequently represented as sung:

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.  
Lose all their guilty stains, lose all their guilty stains;  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. (Cyber Hymnal)

The hymn also seems to have been expanded from its original five stanzas to six with the addition of a stanza placing the singer’s hopes on the heaven.

<sup>26</sup> That same dynamic is in evidence today. The following passage is an exegesis on the hymn from a Christian blog:

The first stanza of this hymn immediately draws us to the central theme of the work, namely the “fountain.” First of all, Cowper writes that this fountain “is.” Preempting all that may read the hymn, this fountain existed from the time of the crucifixion, and has been ready to cleanse in all its power ever since. We are then told that this fountain is “filled” up. No meager volume exists in this most precious of fountains, no drops reserved for only a handful of congregants, but enough flowing mass is in this fountain to save a “multitude that no man can number,” and could save all the sinners of ten thousand worlds if it were purposed to do so. The fountain “is” and it is “filled.” And what this glorious fountain is filled with meets us next: its [sic] filled with “blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins.” That line is so sweet it sends chills down my spine every time it comes across my heart. We know where that blood has come from...and from whose veins it was drawn. It was Christ. Oh, it was Christ! (The Journeyman)

The writer notes that the central metaphor infers a community sustained by their awareness of the grace to which it refers. “Preempting all that may read the hymn,” the writer avers, the cleansing fountain creates its community as its members become aware of what the fountain signifies rather than having the community itself define or explain the nature of the fountain. And the writer describes as “thrilling” the sensation of locating the referent as part of a communal reading experience: “We know where that blood has come from.”

<sup>28</sup> We should not forget that Lewis Carroll also parodied “Against Idleness and Mischief” in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) with “How doth the little crocodile,” perhaps the best known parody of Watts. England also reminds us how much of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789, 1794) is built about parodies of hymns for children such as those produced by Watts and Wesley (44-62)

<sup>29</sup> England also reminds us that some apparent deviations from regular form in Dickinson, such as her famous slant rhymes, were not distinctive innovations but a conventional

aspect of Watts's hymnody. The movement within a hymn from off to true rhyme would have been a musical strategy familiar to Dickinson at least at a visceral and kinesthetic level if not one she deliberately studied and practiced. Though she exceeded Watts, it was in a direction authorized by him.

Emily Dickinson, beginning her career with a large vocabulary of rhyme-words learned by ear from hymns, including a large vocabulary of false rhyme learned from Watts, went as far beyond his liberties as he went beyond the conventions of English verse. About 50% of his rhyme is false. He felt, however, a need for true rhyme at the close of a hymn. His half-rhymed stanzas often change to full rhyme in the last stanza, and about 77% of his final rhyme is true, even when one counts as false those rhymes allowed by convention (come-home, abroad-God, word-Lord, etc.) Years of usage had accustomed her to expect a hymn to close in a true rhyme on a simple major chord (called in her hymnbooks the "flat key") or minor chord ("the sharp key"). The ear, anticipating the norm, will be lulled only by the expected sound. (England 129)

Anglo-American hymnody overall insists upon a certain innovative flexibility in the writing of hymns. Hymns do not have the absolute ecclesiastical authority that might be found in the more formal and more highly regulated devotional practices of a church service. Dependent upon their practical effects upon affective states of congregants, their development and dissemination depended upon a deliberate experimental attitude in producing and sustaining certain effects, and so Wesley's "experimental" sobriquet applies very well to their formal elements.

<sup>30</sup> See Crosby, "Language and the Trinity: Three Views" (179-228) for a discussion of Bushnell's theory of language as part of an apology for belief in the Trinity in the context of American Puritan theology.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Hodge, reviewing *God in Christ* in the *Princeton Review* felt that if Bushnell's point of view were adopted, "no dependence" could be placed on human speech, with the end result that "there can be no such thing as scientific theology; no definite doctrine of prepositions; creeds are catechisms are not to be trusted; no author can be properly judged by his words; ... as creeds mean nothing any and all of them can be subscribed to." Not only would Bushnell's ideas if accepted erode religious institutions, all civil society would be in jeopardy: "There can, on this plan, be no treaties between nations, no binding contracts between individuals; for 'the chemistry' which can make all creeds alike will soon get what results it pleases out of any form of words that can be framed" (Crosby 251).

<sup>32</sup> Charles S. Peirce will come to a very similar theory of language half a century later.

<sup>33</sup> As Phelps puts it: "Genuineness of religious emotion, refinement of poetic taste, and fitness to musical cadence – these three are essential to a faultless hymn" (5-6).

<sup>34</sup> One nineteenth-century narrative of pious hymn-singing has a Christian on his deathbed – at the threshold between earth and the heavenly reward, and a setting both didactic and social – exclaim that more Christian families should "devote more time to singing [hymns], for 'it is the beginning of heaven – it is heaven on earth'" (De Jong, "Burden" 185-186).

<sup>35</sup> Lowell Mason was the most publicly recognizable leader in the mid-century efforts to refine and improve the practice of hymn-singing, and Foote describes him "the foremost American musician of the period" as well (205). He was co-editor of a number of

important and popular hymnals and known for his role in setting a high standard of taste for the composition of hymn melody and accompaniment (Foote 204-210).

<sup>36</sup> See De Jong, "Sweetest Song" for a discussion of hymnal editorial practices as it pertains to women's writing. Hymnal publishing, like its more secular variant, was a largely male enterprise and obsessed with controlling the supposedly inherent feminine tendency toward literary effusion. Editors wielded license to edit to adapt a poem to "universal" standards of subjectivity as well as concerns such as length and doctrinal or metrical irregularity in regards to all works collected, regardless of whether or not the writer was male or female, but De Jong finds that poems by women were subject to even more surgery to remove elements of feminine particularity that would interfere the desired ostensibly universal subjectivity offered: poems from a clearly male subject position were deemed as already universal in distinction to the female speaking subject and were allowed to remain as such. "Though hymnologists idealized universality," she writes, "editorial practice was actually ethnocentric and androcentric" (164).



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