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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | ................................................................. | 3 |
| LIST OF FIGURES | ................................................................. | 5 |
| ABSTRACT | ................................................................. | 6 |
| CHAPTER | ................................................................. |
| 1 INTRODUCTION | ................................................................. | 7 |
| 2 MISPRISIONS OF GERMAN IDEALISM AND EMERSON’S THREE FIGURES OF COMPLETION | ................................................................. | 19 |
| 3 MARGARET FULLER’S UNSYSTEMATIC ARCHITECTURE | ................................................................. | 42 |
| 4 THOREAU’S PROJECT OF RECOVERING THE IRRECOVERABLE: THE THING-IN-ITSELF AND THE THING-IN-ITS OPPOSITE | ................................................................. | 65 |
| 5 AN OUROBORIC UNDERSTANDING OF OPPOSITIONS IN WALT WHITMAN’S “SONG OF MYSELF” | ................................................................. | 95 |
| 6 [SELF] IDENTIFICATION WITH/OF THE OUROBORIC IN “SONG OF MYSELF”: A READING OF WHITMAN THROUGH HERBERT MARCUSE | ................................................................. | 119 |
| 7 HUMANIZATION THROUGH INTERPERSONAL OPPOSITIONS IN DRUM-TAPS | ................................................................. | 140 |
| 8 THE RHETORICAL OUROBORIC IN WHITMAN’S WAKE; OR, THE OUROBORIC INTERRELATION OF SPEAKER AND SUBJECT SINCE WHITMAN. PART ONE: SANDBURG, HUGHES, AND THE BEATS | ................................................................. | 166 |
| WORKS CITED | ................................................................. | 223 |
| BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH | ................................................................. | 232 |
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>Immanuel Kant Engraving Framed by an Ouroboros</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-1</td>
<td>The Ouroboros</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-2</td>
<td>American Indian Motif of Ouroboros</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-3</td>
<td>“Old Man” Series, Photographed by Thomas Eakins</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I trace American Transcendentalists’ concern with oppositions into the poetry of Walt Whitman. This trajectory begins with misprisions of Kant’s ideas about the oppositions of material and ideal, misprisions picked up and reinterpreted by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. Whereas the Transcendentalists prioritize one side of an oppositional relationship, based on their focus on the Ideal, Whitman reinterprets oppositions as defining each through the other. I use the symbol of the ouroboros, the serpent swallowing its tail, to illustrate Whitman’s reinterpretation. Whitman’s ouroboric understanding of oppositions works on a macrocosmic level with more abstract oppositions and on a microcosmic level to explain the self as always defined through the other. I use the theories of Herbert Marcuse to show how Whitman’s ouroboric of the self and other works to “humanize” the subject, to liberate the subject from objectification. Finally, I show how this microcosmic ouroboric influences twentieth-century poetry toward increased spokenness and toward an extension of the ouroboric of self and other to the poetic speaker and his or her subject.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In the 1984 Wolfgang Peterson fantasy film, *The NeverEnding Story*, a little boy named Bastian loses himself in a strange book, a book described as “not safe,” the story of which is the unending tale of human imagination. The hero of the story, Atreyu, the story-side version of the reader, wears an amulet called the Auryn around his neck. As long as he wears the amulet, he has the power to keep the story “neverending,” to fight off “the Nothing,” which threatens to destroy the psychogeographical realm of story and imagination that exists within the book.

When Bastian reads of the presentation of the Auryn to Atreyu by the representative of “the Childlike Empress,” he’s stunned to realize it’s the same symbol as the one on the cover of his strange book. It is, in fact, the symbol of two serpents, convoluted together and swallowing each other’s tails. The Auryn symbolizes the neverending nature of the story in the same way the lemniscate symbolizes infinity in mathematics, by showing a closed circuit with no end and no beginning. The Auryn is, in fact, a variation of the ouroboros, the symbol of the serpent swallowing its tail, which I use as a trope in the following study.

The ouroboros has had wide-ranging symbolic uses. Later in this study, I mention uses made of the symbol by Margaret Fuller, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jorge Louis Borges, Carl Gustav Jung, and French historian and archaeologist Louis Charbonneau-Lassay. The ouroboros appears in much older motifs as well, from ancient cultures worldwide. Even Quetzalcoatl, the plumed serpent in Aztec mythology, sometimes appears biting his tail.
The ouroboros became an especially common symbol in alchemy, and as an alchemical symbol has also found its way toward use as a philosophical and literary trope. In his 1656 *A Letter to a Friend*, English alchemist and physician Sir Thomas Browne writes,

that the first day should make the last, that the tail of the snake should return into its mouth precisely at that time, and they should wind up upon the day of their nativity, is indeed a remarkable coincidence, which, though astrology hath taken witty pains to salve [sic], yet hath it been very wary in making predictions of it. (93)

Randall Clack writes about how alchemical symbols become important tropes for writers of the American Renaissance. Concerns with such themes as opposition, reconciliation, and regeneration in alchemy yielded frequent use of concepts such as the philosopher’s stone and symbols such as the phoenix, the hermaphrodite, and the ouroboros, which Clack traces to Margaret Fuller (117). Indeed, I begin Chapter 5 with Fuller writing about the ouroboros. Meanwhile, an 1812 engraving by J. Chapman of Immanuel Kant

![Immanuel Kant Engraving Framed by an Ouroboros](image)

is framed with an ouroboros.

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1 Numerous popular culture texts use the ouroboros, including science fiction novels and television series. In 1994, composer Kay Gardner completed *Oratorio: Ouroboros: Seasons of Life*, a “neopagan oratorio.” In Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*, time is described as ouroboric and shown with a hand-drawn
Recently, the ouroboros has appeared in popular science books like Jeremy Narby’s *The Cosmic Serpent: DNA and the Origins of Knowledge* and Joel R. Primack’s and Nancy Ellen Abrams’s *The View from the Center of the Universe: Discovering our Extraordinary Place in the Cosmos*. Narby’s book, the interesting premise of which is a little hard to swallow (no ouroboric pun intended), argues that hallucinogenic medicinal plants used by indigenous peoples in such places as the Peruvian Amazon yield metaphoric imagery that may be directly tied to the inner workings of human health. Particularly, Narby thinks the widespread indigenous vision of the sacred snake may be directly connected to the DNA spiral. As he puts it, “the biosphere itself, which can be considered ‘as a more or less fully interlinked unit,’ is the source of the [shamanic] images” of spiral serpents with sacred healing knowledge (131). Primack and Abrams use the image of the ouroboros as a trope for connecting the two seemingly incompatible realms of physics: relativity and quantum theory:

But then a very strange thing happens. As we continue along the Cosmic Uroboros to the very tip of the tail, gravity becomes extremely powerful again. The reason is that gravity’s strength increases as objects get closer to each other, and at the tip of the tail distances between particles are almost unimaginably small. The Cosmic Serpent swallowing its tail represents the possibility that gravity links the largest and the smallest sizes and thereby unifies the universe. This actually happens in superstring theory, a mathematically beautiful idea that is our best hope for a theory that could unify quantum theory and

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illustration. Meanwhile, in Jack Kerouac’s personal mythology, most directly dealt with in the lesser known novel *Dr. Sax*, good is represented by Dr. Sax and evil by the “Great World Snake,” which lives underground. This imagery may also have influenced Jim Morrison’s rambling about a seven-mile long snake in the “ancient lake” in The Doors’ song, “The End.” Similarly, James Wright translates Pablo Neruda’s “Some Beasts,”

And deep in the huge waters
the enormous anaconda lies
like the circle around the earth,
covered with ceremonies of mud,
devouring, religious.
In string theory, sizes smaller than the Planck length get remapped into sizes larger than the Planck length. (163)

In using the ouroboros as a central symbol for their writings, Narby, Primack, and Abrams argue for the use of convenient symbols for tropes.

I use the ouroboros as a trope to describe Walt Whitman’s appropriation and evolution of American Transcendentalist concerns with oppositions. The use of such a trope makes sense in light of mid-nineteenth century European and American writers’ usage of alchemy and the occult. Any quick look at mid-nineteenth century science will indicate that the areas we now consider legitimate science and pseudoscience were intricately bound together. Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species* came onto a stage already occupied by more occult theories, such as phrenology. Also, Utopian ideals and experiments such as George Ripley’s Brook Farm, which lasted from 1841 to 1847 and along the way turned to Fourierist principles with the construction of the communal building known in Fourierist thinking as a phlanstery, competed with such trends as Sylvester Graham’s vegetarianism, touted as a cure for alcoholism and sexual urges.² Emanuel Swedenborg and Franz Mesmer led the way for the introduction of Spiritualism to America, the latter promoting his ideas of “animal magnetism,” or invisible physical influence between two people without touching. The progeny of such ideas can be seen in Margaret Fuller’s notion of woman having an “electrical, inspired, lyrical nature” (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 76). In this historical context, an alchemical symbol used to portray relationships of oppositions, as indeed Fuller briefly used it, should not seem inappropriate.

² Today we mostly remember Graham as the inventor of Graham crackers.
I use the ouroboros in a very particular way, not merely to symbolize infinity, or to represent any and every relationship of oppositions. Nor is my use of it mystical or spiritualist. I do not employ the ouroboros to describe the concerns American Transcendentalism *per se* held with oppositions. The ouroboros serves as a trope to describe Whitman’s understanding of oppositions, which I see as quite different from the understandings of the Transcendentalists. My first chapters will show how American Transcendentalists—particularly Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau—see the relations of oppositions. Their understandings, though each different, are central to explaining what the *transcendence* in Transcendentalism signifies. Crucial to my argument is the idea that different Transcendentalists prioritized particular sides of oppositional relationships, thus defining transcendence in varied ways from writer to writer. Whitman does something vastly different. Paradoxically, as is the way with the ourobos, Whitman’s refusal to prioritize a particular side of an oppositional relationship allows his understanding of oppositions to become personal and political.

The American Transcendentalists themselves initially became concerned with oppositions primarily for religious and theological reasons, as I point out in Chapter 2. The problem with the Transcendentalists in regard to their emphasis on the historical and the political cannot be that they never make social and political forays. Certainly, Emerson later writes about his abhorrence of slavery, Thoreau pens “Civil Disobedience” after his refusal to pay the poll tax in protest of slavery and the Mexican-American War, and Margaret Fuller becomes an early voice of feminism. In fact, in Fuller’s oft-overlooked travelogue, *Summer on the Lakes*, the American Indian becomes the site wherein several oppositions are, at the very least, brought into contact with each other.
its apparent ramble, the book is comprised of an architecture built of oppositions centering on the central polarity of male and female. Gender becomes linked directly with a desire to “see” those who had been made other, whether those who had moved out to the frontier, or the American Indian. She engages the politics of the mid-century frontier as well as the politics of gender.

Nor might there be any writer or thinker who justly claims exception from the historical and the political. But the Transcendentalists always undermine their steps toward the political with their own claims for transcendence, even though their forms of transcendence differ from one writer to the next. Those writers who align themselves most closely to Emerson’s definition of Transcendentalism as Idealism most greatly undermine their attempts at the political. Even Thoreau, who relies on the senses, relies on them in order to catch a glimpse of the ideal. When he has a problem with human law, it’s because he finds it out of accordance with “higher law.” Because Thoreau privileges the ideal, his thinking comes short of being ourobic. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the senses moves us further from Emerson and closer to Whitman. Whitman’s understanding of oppositions as creating themselves through each other means that the ideal cannot be privileged above the material. Each creates itself through the process of interacting with the other. Thus, this world matters entirely, and the political and historical are granted entry into Whitman’s worldview.

I see the ourobic occurring on two different scales, a macrocosmic and a microcosmic scale. Politicization becomes possible through the macrocosmic because ourobic sustenance embodies the relationships of oppositions, making them fully physical. The particulars of this world cannot be made secondary to a universal or ideal
realm, because these opposites exist through each other. This move in itself simultaneously completes the Transcendentalist project beginning with Emerson by fully fleshing out oppositions, and undoes it by making the spiritual and physical depend on one another. In Whitman, relationships of oppositions then become ouroboric, and thereby Transcendentalism can be said to meet its death and its full flowering. Whitman’s greatest politicization, however, occurs through the microcosmic ouroboric, where his politics are those of the personal.

The first three chapters deal with the precursors to Whitman. Whitman was neither Transcendentalist, nor Idealist, but he does inherit his concern with oppositions from Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau, and the American Transcendentalists themselves from Coleridgean misprisions of Kant. These chapters show the differing prioritizations of oppositions leading up to Whitman. The important point is that all these precursors did prioritize. Emerson prioritizes the ideal over the material with no apology, even defining Transcendentalism as Idealism. Emerson’s ideas of Idealism are based on Coleridge’s misreadings of Kant, where Coleridge interprets Kant’s “reason” as “intuitive.” For Emerson, intuition can be seen as a way of knowing, even though Kant had said that “intuitions without concepts are blind” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 93). Emerson’s epistemology is entirely ungrounded. The senses are not even necessary. Fuller chastises and mocks Emerson for this tendency, claiming for herself the earth against Emerson’s heaven. Though Fuller claims the physical, she nevertheless idealizes it. Her feminism uses the paranormal qualities of the “electric” and “magnetic” to replace woman’s “fluids.” Her gender politics call for celibacy until marriage can be a union of equals and desexualizes the fluids of the body. Whereas Fuller brings us closer to Whitman in terms
of aligning herself toward the earth, Thoreau brings us closer by seeking to know the
ideal through the material. Though Thoreau sees truth as an essentialist and transcendent
property, he believes in employing the physical senses to catch a glimpse of it.

The next three chapters focus on Whitman’s use of oppositions. Chapter 5 uses
“Song of Myself” to establish what an ouroboric understanding generally means, whereas
Chapters 6 and 7 take Whitman’s ouroboric in a more personal direction. In order to do
that, we must move from Whitman’s macrocosmic ouroboric oppositions (life/death,
spiritual/physical, male/female, part/whole, etc.) to the microcosmic. The particular
microcosm with which his ouroboric concerns itself is the relationship between “I” and
“you.”

Chapter 6 zooms in on this microcosmic ouroboric by using the ideas of Herbert
Marcuse. The Oxford English Dictionary gives a definition for “reification” that is itself
based on Marcuse’s Reason and Revolution. The entry quotes Marcuse’s statement that
reification is a process through which “all personal relations between men take the form
of objective relations between things.” I argue that Whitman’s humanizing of the self by
defining it through the other works against reification, and that this very process
illustrates the political as defined through the personal. Because, in Marcuse’s view,
“affirmative culture” affirms the capitalist social structure by siphoning off and sealing
away the material complaints of individuals, it creates a contained space, a condensed
space, a reservoir, of dissatisfaction. “Song of Myself” can be seen as working against
“affirmative culture,” by emphasizing the material as necessary for the spiritual. With
that understanding, the individual as material being finds his existence through
interrelation with other individual human beings. Though I don’t intend to try to prove
whether these effects in Whitman’s poetry were intended, I do point out a number of instances of wordplay that indicate he was quite aware of the tendencies of a newly industrial economy to reduce human relationships to economic ones.

Moving through the Whitman chapters, the focus increasingly narrows, from his general understanding of oppositions relating to each other on a large scale to his very personal, and thereby political, understanding of the interrelations of self and other, finally analyzed concretely in close readings of several poems from *Drum-Taps*. Whitman’s emphasis on the oppositions of divine and human appears in the face of the injured whom the poet thinks is “the face of the Christ himself, / Dead and divine” (“A Sight in Camp”). The poet himself moves amongst the injured like a lustful Christ, dressing wounds, while “Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on [his] bearded lips” (“The Wound-Dresser”). Whitman’s direct Civil War poems in *Drum-Taps* are some of his most personal, where the macrocosmic always seems to come through the microcosmic and interpersonal. I argue that the idea of Whitman as national healer rings superheroic, giving us a heavy-handed cartoon of a giant who, having sounded his “barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (“Song of Myself, Sec. 52), now straddles the crevasse known as the Mason-Dixon line and brutally muscles the two halves of the nation back together. But to argue against this image of Whitman the national healer, in fact, allows me to argue for a more complicated political figure in Whitman, where the politics is personal and charged with eroticism. In this political Whitman, the humanizing effect of interpersonal sympathy belies the reification that folds human beings into banners and mass rallies, that makes them become one united cause for war. Chapter 7 serves as the final application of the ideas of the previous two chapters.
Chapters 8 and 9 swing my narrative arc to the increasingly political poetry that follows Whitman. In delineated Whitman’s influence, I could have focused on the High Modernist poetry of William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Hart Crane. In fact, in Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *Americus, Book I* (2004), a Homer speaking “wild demonic / demotic Greek” includes among “Whitman’s wild children” Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson in one trajectory (9-10). But that phrase, “Whitman’s wild children” comes from the title of a book by Neeli Cherkovski³ that offers “portraits” of several Beat poets. Similarly, in Ferlinghetti’s poem, Homer continues to chart a more countercultural direction. “Dare I say to you that poetry / ain't what it used to be” (11). This assertion works as an observation, not a complaint. After all, Homer speaks here in “demotic.” To prove his point, Homer makes an inventory of “pay-toilet poets groaning with graffiti,” “eyeless unrealists” and “self-occulting supersurrealists,” “Nuyorican slammers and gangsta rappers,” and “Zen brothers of poetry,” amongst many others. My concern in this study lies more with this second trajectory, one of counterculture, populism, and spokenness.

Alexis de Tocqueville had said that in a democratic society, the poet need not contemplate the ideal, the mythological, the heavenly and sublime, but instead, de Tocqueville says bitingly, “I need only contemplate myself” (564). The obvious counterpoint in Whitman would be his “I celebrate myself” at the beginning of “Song of Myself.” Yet in post-Whitman American poetry, the poet contemplating himself quite often comes to mean the poet contemplating the people, inasmuch as he sees himself as *vox populi*. The poetry of Carl Sandburg and Langston Hughes obviously fits the bill of populist poetry in the early twentieth century. Whitman’s influence on this poetry caused

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³ Cherkovski also wrote a biography of Ferlinghetti. See Chapter 8.
a simultaneous move toward spokenness and the microcosmic ouroboric in which the “I”
and “you” becomes extended to the poetic speaker and the subject of the poem. The
increased spokenness, the twentieth-century follow-through to Whitman’s “blab of the
pave” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 8), can be clearly mapped out.

More complicated, however, is how much the speaker truly interrelates with his
subject. Sandburg’s populism often comes across as too self-conscious, speaking more to
itself than to its subject, whereas Hughes’ musical conversations (or conversational
music) represents the speaker as part of the people. Hughes can be seen to speak not only
for and to the community of Harlem, but with the community in a truly interrelational
ouroboric. This tension, illustrated by Sandburg and Hughes, carries forward into the
oxymoronically avant-garde populism of Beat writers as well, especially Ginsberg and
Ferlinghetti, into the “antipoetry” of Nicanor Parra, and into the increasingly
performative poetry of the Black Arts and Spoken Word movements. Even in Black Arts
poems that would seem to represent the voices of the community, the same tension
persists. The poetry of Nikki Giovanni, for example, has been said not so much to exploit
the obvious us vs. them dichotomy of black vs. white, as a revolutionary I calling the you
of the black community toward it (Harper, 250). Meanwhile, in Sonia Sanchez’ later
“Song No. 2,” the speaker and subject(s) infuse one another in a clear extension of the
ouroboric relationship of self and other. The speaker speaks for the community, for these
“young girls,” by speaking with them, so that they have voices through her voice.

In Debbora Battaglia’s “Problematising the Self: A Thematic Introduction” to her
edited collection Rhetorics of Self-Making, she writes that

there is no selfhood apart from the collaborative practice of its
figuration. The “self” is a representational economy: a reification
continually defeated by mutable entanglements with other subjects’ histories, experiences, self-representations; with their texts, conduct, gestures, objectifications […] and so forth. (2)

The balance of this “representational economy” is precisely what’s at stake in Whitman’s microcosmic ouroboric and in the post-Whitman poetry I trace. Paradoxically, if the self can itself be called a “reification,” its “defeat” though the “entanglements” and interrelations with the other allows the “I” to reach its full human potential, in Marcusean terms. In the post-Whitman poetry that tends toward spokenness, the speaker must become fully entangled with the subject, so that representation means only speaking for and speaking to when it can convincingly mean speaking with.

Though I do not consider the American Transcendentalists to be ouroboric thinkers, it might be said that a certain ouroboric of the form of the writing I analyze works through my narrative. Though I treat the Transcendentalists predominantly as essayists and prose writers, it also makes sense to consider them as poets, and their prose as poetry, especially in the case of Emerson. Contrasted to the German Idealists, for example, their writing abstains from systematic thinking, and Emerson’s essays are impressionistic. Of course, Emerson always wanted to be a poet, and I do end the first chapter with a look at his poem, “Threnody.” Yet Whitman creates what I call an anti-Transcendentalist Transcendentalism in the form of poetry, ostensibly (if only ostensibly) a radical shift in form from Transcendentalist prose. Though I point out in my last two chapters that Transcendentalism still greatly influences American poetry, it is the lineage of Whitman’s anti-Transcendentalist Transcendentalism that primarily infuses today’s poetry of spokenness and of the microcosmic ouroboric of “I” and “you.”
CHAPTER 2
MISPRISIONS OF GERMAN IDEALISM AND EMERSON’S
THREE FIGURES OF COMPLETION

The connection between American Transcendentalism and German and British Romanticism has been well established. Ralph Waldo Emerson himself categorized the Transcendentalist, in the essay of the same name, as an idealist, linking the American writers to German Idealism. Yet American scholarship frequently downplays the transatlantic connection. Sacvan Bercovitch blames this blind spot partly on “the chronic resistance of Americanists, in their zealous search for National Character, to give due attention to ‘foreign’ influences” (4). Establishing an American literature was a major theme of mid-nineteenth century American writers, and scholars since them have often continued to emphasize their originality at the expense of received influence. As Patrick J. Keane says in his crucial study, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic “Light of All Our Day,”* “transmission necessarily precedes transformation. Not even Emerson is sui generis” (85).

Yet it would also be misleading to assume the influence from German Idealism on American Transcendentalism to be too direct or even well interpreted and understood by the Transcendentalists. Instead, German Idealist influence on the Emersonian and generally Transcendentalist obsession with oppositions obtains through the misreadings and misunderstandings of third parties. It’s also through these misreadings that Emerson points to three figures—Christ, the poet, and his departed son Waldo—as “complete” human beings in a kind of personal Trinity. Each exemplifies the “complete” human being by ordering, or having ordered, his central oppositions (each to be discussed in turn) in what Emerson understands as the requisite Idealist hierarchy.
Opposing Trajectories

Though my goal at the beginning of this chapter is to discuss the link from German Idealism to American Transcendentalism—and more precisely from Kant to Emerson—through Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I must first explain why this present goal is not as ambitious as it may seem. Mainly, it serves as a setting for my later and primary goal, which is to discuss Whitman’s use of oppositions. Here, I will discuss the primacy Emerson grants to the consideration of relationships of oppositions, and how he attains this concern from Coleridge’s reworking (some say bungling) of Kant. This chapter should not be seen as setting the scene for a larger argument about German Romanticism and Idealism or even for a discussion of the American Transcendentalists’ applications of their concerns with oppositions on the nineteenth-century political landscape.

Let me offer a brief explanation for the latter statement. As Gay Wilson Allen describes it in his biography of Emerson, the Unitarian minister’s ouster from the ministry came about from a central Emersonian (and later Whitmanic) concern about oppositions, specifically those of Christ’s divinity and his humanity. Emerson had decided he could not oversee the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, because he no longer considered Christ divine in the way he believed was expected of an ordained minister:

[H]is central theme, after proving to his own satisfaction that the Lord’s Supper had no clear authority in the New Testament, was that Christ came into the world to provide a living religion to take the place of the empty formalism of the Jewish religion, not to instigate new forms and rituals. (Allen, 192)

Emerson did not see Christ as the exclusive son of God, but, he later stated in his address to the Harvard Divinity School, as a teacher who said, in effect, “I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou
also thinkest as I now think’’ (Emerson, 67). As a result of this stance, the Second Church in Boston had voted him out of the pulpit (Allen, 192-193). The endurance and continued development of Emerson’s stance on Christ’s divinity are significant here, because they help to explain how the beginning concerns of Emerson and the Transcendentalists, of whom many had ties to the ministry of the Unitarian Church, were primarily religious and theological and not directly or consciously political.

The direction of Transcendentalist thought might be said to move from the consciously religious in such works as William Ellery Channing’s 1838 lecture, “Self-Culture,” enormously influential on Emerson’s own “Self-Reliance,” and Emerson’s Nature (1836) to the more overtly political through Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” (1849) and “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1860) and Emerson’s own later abolitionist stance. The direction of the British Romanticism, specifically of Wordsworth and Coleridge, through whom Emerson came to know Kant, moved in the opposite direction. As Keane explains in discussing “that movement of Wordsworth and Coleridge away from radical politics,”

their move to quietism [came] in consequence of a genuine revulsion (also motivated, at first and in part, by fear of a domestic repression) from the bloody course of the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath. (40)

What signifies most strongly for my purposes here are the particular points in the different religious and political trajectories of these writers in England and in America where their respective concerns with oppositions converge.

Emerson and the early American Transcendentalists take up their concerns with the relationships between oppositions not directly from German Idealism, but through Wordsworth and especially Coleridge, at a point when these British Romantic poets had
moved from a radical politics to quietism and when the American Transcendentalists had
not yet moved from primarily religious concerns to a more radical politics. We will not
see the full political import of these oppositional relationships until we look into
Whitman in later chapters. Though from this historical distance, one might at first guess
that the issue of slavery pushed the American Transcendentalists to think dialectically the
way the French Revolution spurred German Romantics, their initial concern with
oppositions was religious and theological and was taken over from Coleridge’s use of
Kant at a point when Coleridge had left any thought of radical politics behind.1

Standing Kant on His Head

Emerson avidly read Plato and neoplatonists such as Plotinus, but the German
philosopher most directly associated with the dialectic before Marx apparently never
made much of an impression on Emerson. In 1867, Emerson wrote William Torrey
Harris, the foremost American authority on Hegel, that he was trying to be patient, but
not having much luck with reading Hegel, who was not “engaging nor at second sight
satisfying. But his immense fame can not [sic] be mistaken, and I shall read and wait.” As
Allen says, “he would never be able to read Hegel with satisfaction. [Bronson] Alcott had
complained that Hegel made his head ache, and Emerson understood” (631). The largest
German Romantic influence on Emerson came indirectly, through what may have been

1 Thoreau’s later political consciousness surely stands out in contrast to Emerson’s sometimes maddeningly
apolitical stance, though even Emerson once provided lodging for John Brown. The story of Emerson’s
asking Thoreau, “What are you doing in there?” when the latter was in jail for non-payment of taxes, and
Thoreau’s reply, “What are you doing out there?” is probably apocryphal, but it nicely illustrates the
common perception of a major difference between the two men in regards to activism. However, Thoreau
seems to have gained his political consciousness almost in spite of his Idealist or Transcendentalist views.
The same Transcendentalism employed in “Civil Disobedience” to appeal to “higher law” also allows him
to see nature as a higher state than the State. Thus, released from jail, he can immediately join a
“huckleberry party,” where “the State was nowhere to be seen.” For both Emerson and Thoreau, the view
that the real reality lies outside or above the one we experience will always qualify any political efficacy in
this reality.
third-party misapprehension, though Keane prefers to think of it as “creative misprision” (57).

If, as Keane suggests, Kant meant to “salvage a new non-traditional metaphysics by limiting its range,” rejecting, in The Critique of Pure Reason, the idea that “reason can arrive at ultimate truths,” (54) Coleridge misrepresented that Kantian idea in his presentation of German Idealism to England and America. Keane calls that misrepresentation a creative form of misreading, whereas others have considered it bungling, and though this thesis might intrigue us, it’s not my concern to prove Coleridge’s presence or lack of intention here. More certain is that “the denial of metaphysical knowledge, even if it was a provisional preclusion in the effort to save philosophy, was intolerable to Coleridge” (57). What Coleridge does with Kant proves crucial to Emerson’s thinking and the beginnings of American Transcendentalism.

Though Kant restricts the possibilities of knowledge to the phenomenal realm, rejecting any possibility for knowledge of the noumenal, Coleridge stands Kant on his head by interpreting “Reason” solely as “intuition.” According to Keane, “It is not too much to say that Coleridge maintained a lifelong obsession with the lines Milton placed in the breathless mouth of his archangel” (51). Those lines, spoken by Raphael in *Paradise Lost* distinguish two kinds of reason:

> Fancy and understanding, whence the soul
> Reason receives, and reason is her being,
> *Discursive* or *intuitive*. (italics mine)
> (Book V, ll. 486-488)

In the final book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth, strongly influenced by Coleridge’s definitions of reason, writes,

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2 As Kant says in the “Preface to the Second Edition,” “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (29).
Through every image, and through every thought
And all affections, by communion raised
From earth to heaven, from human to divine;
Hence endless occupation for the Soul,
\textit{Whether discursive or intuitive}. (italics mine)

“Reason,” in both cases, is the “being” of the “soul,” and reason has two facets, the discursive, primarily used by humans, according to Milton’s Raphael, and the intuitive, the most commonly used form of reason for the angels. Coleridge interprets Kant’s use of reason as “intuitive,” even though Kant says, “Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (\textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, 93).

The paradox, as expressed by Keane, is that what for Kant (intuition without understanding) is “blind” […] became, for the British Romantics and American Transcendentalists, precisely Coleridge’s “seeing light,” Wordsworth’s “master light of all [their] seeing”: the faculty divine that in effect usurped what Kant meant by pure Reason. (59)

In a letter to his brother Edward, Emerson calls “Reason” “the soul itself” (Keane, 59), as if in apposition to Milton’s and Wordsworth’s lines quoted above.

This alignment of “Reason” with the soul brings us to the Harvard Divinity School Address, in which Emerson ties Intuition to the divinity of Christ, which all have inside them. If intuition, for Milton, brings human beings closer to the celestial, since it is the angelic side, as it were, of reason, for Emerson, intuition brings the soul into contact with its own divinity. Since “Reason” equates to “the soul itself,” and reason is interpreted as intuitive, “The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of [sic] the perfection of the laws of the soul” (59). In other words, intuition leads one to his spiritual nature, whereas mere understanding would only concern the physical. Furthermore, while
“the doors of the Temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition: this, namely; it is an intuition” (66). For Emerson, intuition, or intuitive reason, as opposed to discursive reason, leads us to the truth. Finally,

Historical Christianity […] has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love. (68)

If intuition, or intuitive reason, leads us to our spiritual nature and thus to the truth, then the soul, to which intuitive reason equates, leads us to truth in the “full circle of the universe.” Jesus realized and attained this possibility, and any individual can be Jesus, for all have equal access to divinity through intuitive reason.

Primary oppositions have been established for American Transcendentalism through the Coleridgean misreading or “creative misprision” of Kant’s thinking about intuition and reason. “Coleridgean Reason, always intuitive rather than discursive, is a transcendental progenitor occupying an obviously higher status than the sense-limited understanding” (Keane, 61). Indeed intuitive reason resides at the very core of Emerson’s idea of idealism, as the privileging of the ideal realm over the actual. Though for the most part Keane doesn’t raise the question of whether Emerson was aware of Coleridge’s reinterpretations of Kant’s ideas, he does ask if possibly “Emerson [was] aware that his mentor had not only revised but also reversed Kant on the elevation of Intuition over Understanding” (33f). In either case, the prioritizing of intuition over understanding, in Coleridgean terms, or of intuitive reason over discursive reason, in Miltonian terms, results in a privileging of the spiritual over the material and the ideal over the actual.
In Miltonian terms, the discursive represents the side of reason most used by human beings, and in Coleridgean terms, mere understanding, “that Faculty of the Soul which apprehends and retains the mere notices of Experience,” is a faculty that humans share with animals (Keane, 58). In both cases, intuitive reason, or intuition, must be aligned with the higher part of human nature, that which touches upon the angelic (in Milton’s Great Chain of Being), or the noumenal, in Coleridge’s revising of Kant. For Emerson, this means that the highest attainment of the human occurs through the spiritual, even the divine. Christ must be considered the most human of human beings for pointing the way for all humans, through intuitive reason as the soul itself, to the divine within each individual.

**Christ and the Poet**

Emerson’s privileging of the spiritual over the material and the divine over the merely human, as represented in Christ, strikingly parallels his privileging of the whole man over the partial man, as represented in that most representative of men, the poet. In “The Poet,” Emerson says, “The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man.” So Christ and the poet are two different types of the complete and representative man. The one can be called most human because he realizes his divinity; the other can be called most human because he figures as a kind of universal everyman. In the case of poets, “[t]hey receive of the soul as he [the partial man] also receives, but they more.” Since we have seen that the soul equates with intuitive reason, or intuition, which brings human beings closer to the spiritual realm, or even the divine, we could paraphrase Emerson to say that the poet
is a more complete man for more fully realizing his own soul, or even his own divinity. Either Christ was a poet, then, or the poet becomes a kind of Christ.

In fact, in looking from the Harvard Divinity School Address to “The Poet,” we can see that Emerson began searching for the poet before he even realized it. In the former, Emerson mentions a “preacher,” “a formalist,” who preached while a snowstorm encompassed the church. “The snow-storm was real, the preacher merely spectral,” he says, and because of this contrast, the preacher “had lived in vain.” It seems almost as though the church is Plato’s Cave from Book VII of *The Republic*, and against the formalism of the preacher, even the snowstorm outside seems a more real reality.

The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact from all his experience had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed and planted and talked and bought and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches, his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought. (72)

If Emerson seeks a level of completeness in the preacher, but the poet and Christ are both different kinds of complete and representative everyman, perhaps he never wanted a preacher so much as he did a poet. Indeed, he soon tells us that “[t]here is poetic truth concealed in all the commonplaces of prayer and of sermons, and though foolishly spoken, they may be wisely heard” (72). The difference between such a preacher and the poet seems to be that the poet must seize upon poetic truth through intuitive reason and speak it wisely, rather than foolishly.

What kind of comment upon Emerson’s own confidence in himself as poet was his focusing on an issue that resulted in his being voted out of the ministry? Could this
move, coupled with the predominance of his writing in essay form, rather than poetry, reflect a failure to see himself as the poet that Allen says he always wanted to be (Allen, 34-35)? Or could his move away from the ministry be seen as a necessary step from the “foolish” preacher to the poet? In a journal entry for June 2, 1832, he writes, “I have sometimes thought that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry” (Allen, 187). Was leaving the ministry also necessary in order to be a poet? In any case, in “The Poet,” he famously declares, “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe” (304).

In light of this connection of preacher and poet, Emerson’s direction for how to identify “[t]he true preacher” fits in between Wordsworth and Ginsberg in a long tradition of defining the poet. Compare Emerson’s statement that the true preacher “deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought” to Wordsworth’s comments about the poet in the famous 1802 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. First, “Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men” (608). Then, more famously, “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [taking] its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity” (611). The terms differ, but the parallels between the preacher’s dealt-out life and the poet’s “spontaneous overflow” on one hand, and the preacher’s passing his life “through the fire of thought” and the poet’s recollection of emotion “in tranquility,” seem striking. At the other end of the aforementioned long tradition, in “Howl,” Ginsberg famously calls the distillation of experience into poetry “the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.”³ In Ginsberg, the life passed “to the people” “through the fire of thought” has become physical, a “heart,” “butchered” and “good to eat.” Poetry has gone from the substanceless substance of a

³ See Chapter 8 for a discussion of Ginsberg’s Whitmanic lineage.
rarefied realm to an act of cannibalism. To anticipate later chapters, it might be said that Emerson aligns with Coleridge’s idealism and “misprision” of Kant, whereas Ginsberg aligns with Whitman’s anti-Transcendentalist Transcendentalism.

We might also briefly contrast Wordsworth’s opposition of “Poets” to “men” with Emerson’s opposition of the poet as “complete man” to “partial men.” Both of these oppositions rely on Coleridge’s reversal of Kant’s ranking Reason above Intuition. When Wordsworth says, “Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men,” he seems to imply that capital-P “Poets” are not only other than, but above “men,” thus undermining his own attempt at democratic sentiment. Poets have obligations to represent “men,” and ordinary people somehow require this poetic representation.\(^4\) For Emerson, the poet stands as the “complete man” for all the ordinary “partial men,” and thus, through his powers of intuition, represents the universal for ordinary people. In doing so, he becomes likewise representative of ordinary people themselves. Like Wordsworth, Emerson strains toward egalitarian sensibilities, but undermines himself before he can get there. Emerson’s poet is his preacher, and as such, always stands as the figure at the head of the congregation, someone at least a little above the rest, more whole, and in closer contact with the ideal realm.

Emerson’s self-undermining strains toward egalitarianism may be based directly in the Coleridgean reversal of Kant. According to Keane, Coleridge’s reversal of Kant’s ranking of reason over intuition is in line with the Miltonian hierarchy of intuitive reason over discursive reason, the former used more by the angels and the latter more by humans. Therefore, Emerson’s depiction of the poet as representative and complete by

\(^{4}\) The politics of poetic representation brings to mind Shelley’s famous statement from *Defence of Poetry* that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”
way of his intuitive capacities actually orients the poet away from human life and toward the ideal and universal, if not the angelic.

Yet Emerson wants to have things both ways. Four months before delivering the Harvard Divinity School Address, he wrote in his journals, “The belief in Christianity that now prevails is the Unbelief of men. They will have Christ for a lord & not for a brother. Christ preaches the greatness of Man but we hear only the greatness of Christ” (Keane, 343). To believe in Christ should not be to disbelieve (or to unbelieving) in human beings. To believe in Christ, Emerson thinks, should be to believe in the full potential of being human. It should be to believe in the completion of being human. To believe in Christ should be to believe in the poet. Yet, paradoxically, as Christ and the poet are figured above ordinary people, to believe in the full potential and completion of one’s humanity must be, in fact, to believe in becoming something more than human. In other words, to believe that the realization of one’s full potential as human is divinity, as exemplified in Christ and the poet, is to slight the humanity of ordinary people. The paradox in a nutshell is this: Christ and the poet are most fully human by realizing they are divine, so divinity is still required to redeem ordinary people from their mere humanity.

If Emerson has come far enough in his thinking to lose his pulpit and scandalize the audience with his Divinity School Address, his Coleridgean Romanticism has not brought him all that far from Unitarian prioritizations of the spiritual over the material, and as the way to access the spiritual, the intuitive over the discursive. Keane writes, “It is an old joke, unfair but telling, that the favorite prayer of Unitarians begins, ‘Paradoxical though it may seem, O Lord…”’ (348). Indeed, the paradoxes evolve, but
the same sides of oppositional relationships remain privileged. Not only is the spiritual
privileged over the material and the ideal over the actual, but the Kantian critique has
been inverted to the extent that “Reason,” “paradoxical as it may seem,” now means its
opposite. The way to become most fully human obtains through Reason, but “most fully
human” really means “divine,” and “Reason” really means “Intuition.”

“Oh That Beautiful Boy!”

The third figure of completion in Emerson, following Christ and the poet, can
only be Emerson’s son, Waldo. Contradictorily, Emerson remains famous both for his
supposed inability to grieve following the death of his young son in 1842 and for his own
last words four decades later, before dying of tuberculosis: “Oh that beautiful boy!”
(Allen, 662). Certainly, Emerson’s comments, in the essay “Experience,” about how little
Waldo’s death affected him continue to be shocking in their apparent coldness. “The only
thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is,” he says. And then, “In the death
of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate—no more.
I cannot get it nearer to me.” But most troubling of all,

[I]t does not touch me; something which I fancied was a part
of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me nor
enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me and leaves no
scar. It was caducous. (309)

It’s difficult to believe him, and the existence of the essay itself is part of the reason it’s
difficult, though we will primarily consider his poem, “Threnody,” rather than the essay
“Experience,” for the final part of this chapter.

If Emerson did not admit to grieving for his son, Margaret Fuller did. We will see
in further detail in the next chapter how Fuller opposed her prioritizations of oppositions
to Emerson’s, but her response to his *Essays: Second Series*, which contained "Experience," is telling here.

Conceding the “great gifts” he had given the world, she still thought her idealist and erect friend, whose “only aim is the discernment and interpretation of the spiritual law by which we live,” had “raised himself too early to the perpendicular and did not lie along the ground long enough to hear the secret whispers of our parent life. We could wish he might be thrown by conflicts on the lap of mother earth, to see if he would not rise again with added powers.” (Keane, 478)

Fuller’s response sounds characteristic of so many of her reactions to Emerson. She often points out his prioritizations of the spiritual, the heavens, the ideal, and in this case the perpendicular against her own prioritizations of the material, the earth, the actual, and in this case the horizontal as emblematic of a connection to the materiality of life in the world.

Yet if Emerson feels disconnected from the death of his son, it may be because the death of such a small child connects to the “Godhead,” to use Emerson’s word from “Threnody,” in a bizarre corollary to Christ’s and the poet’s connecting of humanity to God through intuition. For Emerson, the dead small child, Christ, and the poet are all figures that exist more fully in connection with the ideal, the universal, and the spiritual realm than they do in connection with the actual day-to-day world. Certainly, this is not so on the face of things. Ostensibly, as Christ becomes most human by realizing his divinity, as the poet is representative of ordinary people by realizing his universal humanity, and as Waldo has gone on to the “Godhead” by physically dying, it would seem that each of these three figures must be attached most directly to the world. Christ and the poet must be most directly attached to their humanity, and Waldo’s union with the “Godhead” must depend on his own mortality. Yet, as we have seen, the Emersonian
status of Christ and the poet privileges the divine, the spiritual, the ideal, and Waldo’s unity with God must similarly be seen as a higher thing than his death, or than Emerson’s loss. All three figures become articulations with the spiritual, the “Godhead.” All three achieve what mere Understanding cannot.

**The (Not) Fichte and the Not-Fichte**

An understanding of how the departed young Waldo serves as Emerson’s final figure of completion must do three things. First, it must take into account Emerson’s exposure to another German Idealist thinker, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, whose ideas were misinterpreted by Unitarian minister and American Transcendentalist Frederic Henry Hedge to his American audience in much the same way, though to a much lesser extent, that Kant’s ideas were misrepresented by Coleridge. Secondly, our understanding must apply this misunderstanding to a reading of Emerson’s “Threnody.” And finally, our understanding must compare Emerson’s account of his son’s being “Lost in God, in Godhead found” to the famous image of Emerson as “transparent eyeball” in *Nature*.

Whereas Emerson’s understanding of Kant came through Coleridge, and his understanding of Hegel was virtually nonexistent, his familiarity with Fichte’s ideas existed in between—not quite nonexistent, but at an even further remove than was the case with Kant. Frederic Henry Hedge, the Unitarian minister most known now for being an originating member of the Transcendental Club in 1836, translated small portions of Fichte and wrote (very) briefly of Fichte’s ideas in a review of Coleridge in 1833. Indeed, Hedge’s article-length review “form[ed] the principal source of Emerson’s knowledge of Fichte” for some time (Chai, 336), and “there is not, in the published record, conclusive assurance that Emerson read Fichte either in the original or in translation,” other than the
small segments of *The Destination of Man* published in 1847 in Hedge’s *Prose Writers of Germany* (Pochmann, 195-196).

In *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance*, Leon Chai asserts that Hedge’s principal misreading of Fichte is to “equat[e] the ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ with existence and nonexistence,” by which “Hedge implies in effect that the only possible form of being must be one contained within consciousness” (339). At this point, I depart from Chai’s reading of the influence on Emerson of Hedge’s misprision. Chai sees the influence as directly leading to Emerson’s definition of “Nature” as “the NOT ME” in *Nature*, even though Chai quotes Pochmann in a footnote that the “commonplaces” of “me” and “not-me” “need not be referred to any specific source.” Chai further states that “Hedge’s misprision of Fichte” can be seen “in his whole mode of developing the relation between Nature and self based upon the nature of consciousness” (337f). Chai argues that Nature, for Emerson, exists only “within consciousness,” though “Emerson differs somewhat from Hedge, since the ‘presencing’ of Nature in the mind is governed by an external force rather than the mind itself” (339). I don’t wish to take the time here to

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5 In parallel with Keane seeing Coleridge’s misreading of Kant as “creative misprision,” Chai says of Hedge’s misreading of Fichte:

> [T]he radical innovation embodied in Fichte’s identification of being with self-assertion and hence with consciousness is obscured and even reduced to the level of epistemology. In the history of Emerson’s development, such a lacuna or misprision must be judged significant.

(337)

He goes on to say that Hedge’s misinterpretation “is not creative but merely regressive,” but does allow for Emerson’s creative use of this misinterpretation. Hedge’s equating “the ‘I’ and ‘not-I’ with existence and nonexistence” differs from Fichte’s identification of consciousness with being, in which the self-assertion of consciousness is equivalent to the being of the “I.” Hedge’s summary opens up the possibility of Emerson’s creative misinterpretation of idealism in *Nature* by positing consciousness as the element that contains being, such that all things have being only by becoming objects of such a consciousness. Being is then equivalent to the formation of the object within consciousness, rather than the self-assertion of consciousness itself. (339)
argue extensively with Chai over this conception. Instead, let us look to the “Threnody,” where the loss of little Waldo from his father equates with the loss of the child from Nature, but unto the Godhead.

The falling away of his son as “caducous” in “Experience” appears in “Threnody” as something more tragic and less cold. The falling away of the son from the speaker obtains as the son’s falling away from the speaker’s experience of Nature.

    Returned this day, the South-wind searches,
    And finds young pines and budding birches;
    But finds not the budding man;
    Nature, who lost, cannot remake him;
    Nature, Fate, men, him seek in vain.

The speaker’s loss of his son is figured as Nature’s loss. Indeed, the speaker seems to understand that all experience of nature is subjective experience of nature, so that the inverse seems to him to be true: a subjective experience of nature becomes the experience of nature *per se*. “Night came, and Nature had not thee; / I said, ‘We are mates in misery.’”

But this relation of the “I” to the “not-I,” the soul to Nature, can no more be proven to be influenced by Fichte than it can be proven to be the lineage of Hedge’s misprision. Though the “I” of the speaker experiences the “not-I” of Nature as a part of itself, Chai’s interpretation of Emerson’s understanding of Nature as existing within the consciousness does not hold here. Chai seeks to prove his assertion by quoting *Nature*: “When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects.” Chai takes Emerson to mean that “nature” is the “integrity of impression” within “the mind,” rather than that the “poetical sense” of “speak[ing] of nature in this manner” is that
“integrity of impression” (339). In other words, Emerson (contra Chai) speaks of the “poetical sense” of “nature” in one’s mind, not of Nature itself as existing within the consciousness. In “Threnody,” the little boy is indeed lost to Nature, inasmuch as he no longer lives in it, but Nature’s mourning Waldo is clearly a representation of how the subjective experience of mourning seems to infuse the objective entirely and is not intended for an actual representation of objective nature.

Whereas Emerson claims in “Experience” that his son was caducous, and that the loss of his son was like the loss of property and “does not touch me,” in “Threnody” he says that Waldo never belonged to his father in the first place. In fact, he belonged to Nature, the not-Emerson, all along.

Not mine—I never called thee mine,
But Nature’s heir—if I repine,
And seeing rashly torn and moved
Not what I made, but what I loved,
Grow early old with grief that thou
Must to the wastes of Nature go—
’T is because a general hope
Was quenched, and all must doubt and grope.
For flattering planets seemed to say
This child should ills of ages stay,
By wondrous tongue, and guided pen,
Bring the flown Muses back to men.
Perchance not he but Nature ailed,
The world and not the infant failed.

Little Waldo was never so much a part of his father as he was a part of Nature. The speaker, the father, only loved him. In this way, all human beings belong to Nature and not to one another; they cannot own, but only love each other. Certainly, this all-possessing Nature exists outside of the speaker’s consciousness, although in the next breath, the speaker speaks for Nature. Indeed, Nature seems to have willed Waldo to
restore the Muses to the world, a hope more in line with the hopes Emerson placed in
Christ and in the poet than anything Nature could will.

If Nature, with its seizure of such potential, is spoken of as “wastes,” here, the
speaker soon comes to understand that nothing is wasted in Nature. Nature is a circular
process of oppositions, and it’s only we who wish to arrest the process in the points to
which we attach ourselves.

\[
\text{Wilt thou freeze love’s tidal flow,}
\text{Whose streams through Nature circling go?}
\text{Nail the wild star to its track}
\text{On the half-climbed zodiac?}
\text{Light is light which radiates,}
\text{Blood is blood which circulates,}
\text{Life is life which generates,}
\text{And many-seeming life is one—}
\text{Wilt thou transfix and make it none?}
\text{Its onward force too starkly pent}
\text{In figure, bone and lineament?}
\]

The descriptions of this circular process prefigure Whitman’s understandings of the
relationships of oppositions, yet unlike Whitman, Emerson sees a positive harmony as
the end of the process, as expressed in the “many-seeming” becoming “one.”

Though he says that Nature exists as a “circling” process of oppositions, the lines
directly preceding these show that he still privileges one side of these oppositional
relationships.

\[
\text{When frail Nature can no more,}
\text{Then the Spirit strikes the hour:}
\text{My servant Death, with solving rite,}
\text{Pours finite into infinite.}
\]

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6 See Chapters 5 through 7 for my central argument of what I call Whitman’s ouroboric understanding of
oppositions.
7 See Chapter 3 for Fuller’s jocular ridicule of Emerson’s mystical “All is One” stance.
Now all the Fichtean or not-Fichtean categories are even further confused. Rather than merely opposing the soul to Nature, now something called “the Spirit” steps in to take over from Nature. And rather than merely opposing the “I” to the “not-I,” someone or something called “Death” steps in. We would assume Death to be the ultimate “NOT ME,” and we would assume Death, as the taker of the child, to receive the speaker’s fury. But he calls Death “My servant.” If we were to take this title literally, this line would be more disturbing than Emerson’s statements in “Experience” about Waldo’s death not touching him. In what capacity is Death, the taker of the speaker’s child, the speaker’s servant? In the same capacity that Death can be called little Waldo’s servant. Death is an alchemist, and his “rite” is one of solvency, the dissolution of the “finite into [the] infinite,” the individual into the all, the many into the one. Emerson’s neoplatonism waxes cold again.

Oddly, “Threnody” ends with highly material metaphors to express the triumph of the ideal and the universal. He sounds almost Whitmanic when he says,

Not of adamant and gold
Built he heaven stark and cold;
No, but a nest of bending reeds,
Flowering grass and scented weeds[
]

Because Nature endlessly circulates, it must be endlessly restorative. Here, Emerson seems to approach the Whitman of poems like “This Compost.” Yet the Spirit remains privileged.

Silent rushes the swift Lord
Through ruined systems still restored,
Broadsowing, bleak and void to bless,
Plants with worlds the wilderness;
Waters with tears of ancient sorrow
Apples of Eden ripe to-morrow.
It is still the Spirit which constantly reanimates the material world, so that the poem may end with the oppositional crescendo: “House and tenant go to ground, / Lost in God, in Godhead found.” The return to the earth of the “house and tenant,” of the flesh and blood, results in the exit from Nature the speaker expresses at the beginning of the poem, an exit which exists as a return to universal Nature (in its circulatory process), then expressed at the end of the poem. Says Keane,

In one sense, the whole paradoxical, even pleonastic, dialectic is epitomized in the final line of “Threnody.” “Lost in God, in Godhead found!” rhetorically restores the boy repeatedly lamented as “lost” in the first part of the elegy, but, philosophically or “Transcendentally,” Emerson could finish the poem, after long delay, only by imagining his son’s finite individuality somehow caught up in and merged with an infinite Godhead. (348)

The punctuating chiasmus, “Lost in God, in Godhead found,” compares to Emerson’s own experience of himself as “transparent eyeball” in Nature.

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. (6)

The self exists most fully when fully lost in the “NOT ME,” “transparent” and without “egotism.” How else can one truly see, but by losing the self, the center from which to see? How else can Emerson’s son really exist, but by losing himself in God through the dissolution of the self? If the son is “lost in God,” then the father can find him again in God. The son is to be worshipped in his solvency. Indeed, most disturbingly, “to be brothers, to be acquaintances,” even to be a father or a son, “is then a trifle and a disturbance.”
What I’m calling Emerson’s figures of completion, his “complete” human beings, come to their fullness, their wholeness, by losing themselves in their opposites. Little Waldo comes to full and universal existence through the death of his individual self. The poet stands in as “complete” and universal representative for all the “partial” and ordinary people. Christ obtains as most fully and completely human through the realization of his divinity. In each of these figures, fullness and completion come about through the raising of one’s lower self (one’s humanity, one’s individuality, one’s materiality) up to one’s higher self (one’s divinity, one’s universality, one’s spirituality). This raising implies an attainment of the higher self at the expense of the lower self. In Emerson’s Idealist hierarchies, the lower self must always fall away as caducous.

That ideas developed by German Idealists played an enormous role in Emerson’s own thinking and the beginnings of American Transcendentalism cannot be doubted, yet they did so indirectly and after much alteration. In particular, Fichte’s dialectics of the “I” and the “not-I” may indeed foreshadow Emerson’s oppositions of the soul and Nature, the self and the “NOT ME,” but Fichte’s systematic thinking cannot be made to match up with Emerson’s distrust of and purposeful avoidance of systematic thinking. As might initially be expected, Kant has greater stature with the American Transcendentalists than does any other German Idealist, but it is Coleridge’s thinking, not Kant’s, that most directly influences Emerson. Furthermore, in reverse order from European Romanticism, American Transcendentalism was born in theology and only became more directly political later, in what I’ve called the “death and flowering of Transcendentalism in Walt Whitman.” And finally, in Coleridge’s reversal of Kant’s ranking reason above intuition,
Emerson finds Reason to be Intuition itself, synonymous with the soul, toward which the “complete” figures of Christ, the poet, and Emerson’s deceased child point his readers.
CHAPTER 3
MARGARET FULLER’S UNSYSTEMATIC ARCHITECTURE

Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* is a travelogue and is not a travelogue. Certainly it bears the non-systematic imprint of Transcendentalist thinking, bears it to the extent that the book has been far more overlooked, and was overlooked for longer, than *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. In short, it rambles. Chapter Five begins with the promise of telling the reader about Milwaukee, but quickly dispenses with Milwaukee to discuss *The Seeress of Prevorst*, by Justinus Andreas Christian Kerner. Fuller uses the seeress, Frederica Hauffe, to gloss her ideas of the oppositions of female and male and soul and body, and Milwaukee seems to serve her purpose far less.

Though *Summer of the Lakes* has so often been dismissed for its lack of focus, Fuller explains that this lack is a large part of her design.

> I have not been particularly anxious to give the geography of the scene, inasmuch as it seemed to me no route, nor series of stations, but a garden interspersed with cottages, groves and flowery lawns, through which a stately river ran. I had no guide-book, kept no diary, do not know how many miles we traveled each day; nor how many in all. What I got from the journey was the poetic impression of the country at large; it is all I have aimed to communicate. (41-42)

The record of her journey, that is, cannot serve as a guidebook to the land, but must necessarily include physical descriptions, reflections, and even thoughts on books read. Nevertheless, as purpose obtains through this lack of purpose, so an architecture appears even within Fuller’s unsystematic ramble.

This architecture has everything to do with Fuller’s handling of oppositions. The figure of Emerson, sometimes less veiled than other times, appears in many places through the book, and occasions a series of oppositions between the ideal and the
material or the heavens and the earth. Likewise, a tension between text and nature as object-of-text recurs frequently, in many ways similar to such instances in *Walden* or “Song of Myself.” In Fuller, these oppositions all relate to that tension so central to her writing, the one between men and women. Meanwhile, even as she calls for a fairer representation (perhaps itself a contradiction in terms) of the Indian, the American Indian becomes the site wherein these oppositions are, at the very least, brought into contact with each other. In its apparent ramble, then, Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* is comprised of an architecture built of oppositions centering on the central polarity of male and female. Essential to this architecture will be Fuller’s critique that Emerson fuses opposites within the realm of the ideal or spiritual, while she seeks largely, though not entirely, to fuse opposites within the realm of the physical or earthly.

The need to pursue oppositions leads to a frequent swinging from one polarity to the other, a frequent sketchiness, for which the form of travelogue makes sense.¹ Travel writing in the mid-nineteenth century inhabited very loose forms. They were often casual, even conversational, taking the reader along with the traveler in the latter’s thoughts and impressions, more than in the geography.

Travel books were more casual than novels, with no necessary form other than that of the journey they purported to describe and no necessary single purpose more important than the various purposes of their various parts and voices. (Stowe, 243)

Travel writing might combine “anecdotes, quotations, and guide-book copy with personal observations” (Stowe, 244).² But Fuller doesn’t limit this “polyvocality” to travel writing.

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¹ Thoreau’s *Cape Cod*, discussed in Chapter 4, might also be said to fit this description.
² Though Stowe acknowledges the gender concerns in *Summer on the Lakes*, he sees no general shape to the book. He calls it “conventionally eclectic,” full of travel details, “Transcendental musings, Wordsworthian ambitions,” etc. (251). He sees no central goal or design, only what he calls “a number of alternative modes available to Fuller as a writer of travel narratives” (255), a “polyvocality” (254).
The journey at the source of *Summer on the Lakes* occurred right after Fuller finished “The Great Lawsuit: Man versus Men. Woman versus Women,” the essay that would become the polyvocal *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. In fact, it might be argued that Fuller’s travel writing doesn’t differ all that much in kind from her other writing, itself highly conversational.

Jeffrey Steele goes so far as to say that *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* and Fuller’s later essays were extensions of travel writing, themselves “excursions” (introduction, xxiii). The excursionary form is an “encyclopedic” one, tending “to focus on the changing responses of a narrator as (s)he confronts a wide range of events, both external and internal” (*Transfiguring*, 136). This excursional form of writing also directly relates to Fuller’s interest in gendered oppositions.

While white male American writers were able to boast of the ways in which they felt “at home,” Fuller was learning to see those people who were prevented from achieving such an entitlement. (introduction, xxiii)

Gender becomes linked directly with an ability to “see” those who had moved out to the frontier, as well as the American Indian. We will see later just how troubled and troubling such seeing can be. Susan Rosowski argues that *Summer on the Lakes* is a kind of anti-response to Emerson’s call for an American poet to truly birth the American nation. In her travels, Fuller finds “the West is forever closed to her,” and increasingly understanding “the role gender was playing in her journey to the West,” Fuller speaks more and more “as a woman to other women” (23).

Because Fuller’s excursion leads through a host of oppositions, and because gender issues are her central concern, the oppositions that proliferate throughout her work
are usually gendered. As Stephanie Smith notes in *Conceived by Liberty: Maternal Figures and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Fuller’s writing is replete with gendered polarities. Her work is shaped by the very traditional metaphysical categories with which she (and Emerson) struggled: soul/flesh, idea/form, art/nature—which enact a split between (masculinized) conceptions of abstracted spirit and (feminized) conceptions of material form. (71)

To infer from this emphasis on binaries that Fuller takes one side of an opposition and Emerson the other would be too simplistic. A look into how Fuller opposes the heavens to the earth in *Summer on the Lakes*, followed with a couple of Fuller parodies of Emerson, should help the distinction between her representations of them become more obvious.

Fuller’s idea of a “double vibration” illustrates her concept of how to reconcile the spiritual and the physical, or the ideal and the real. Chapter One begins with Fuller at Niagara. Listening to the falls, she describes what she calls “a secondary music”: “The cataract seems to seize its own rhythm and sing it over again, so that the ear and the soul are roused by a double vibration.” The effect is not one of the physical reality alone, but that of the soul’s reaction to the physical reality. Nevertheless, the effect seems to emanate entirely from the falls themselves, as it is they who “sing” their “own rhythm […] over again.” Fuller describes the effect as “sublime, giving the effect of a spiritual repetition through all the spheres” (4). Yet the physical reality cannot achieve the effect of the “sublime” of Burke or Kant.

But in the place of such aesthetic empowerment, Fuller’s conflicted responses to Niagara Falls remind us that the aesthetic of sublimity was culturally conflicted for the woman writer. (*Transfiguring*, 141)
We might view this as the failure to achieve a kind of Burkean sublimity, but we might also see the embodied experience of the sublime as Fuller’s particular achievement. The “double vibration” then is that of the spiritual reverberating through the physical.

This “double vibration” occurs in several other places among her travels as well. Aboard ship, about to leave Buffalo, Fuller has a discussion with fellow travelers about how water, earth, and the “spirit of man” relate to each other. One co-traveler describes Fuller’s viewpoint as one of “Bacchic energy,” when she says, “The earth is spirit made fruitful,—life” (11). Fuller hints at these particular terms for the reconciliation between earth and spirit in other places. The “sensation of vastness” is “sought in vain among high mountains,” whereas she has “always had an attachment for a plain” (50). Elsewhere, there is a particular danger when “the trees [are] grown […] up into heaven […] Let not the tree forget its root” (80). The earth and spirit, then, should not exist in isolation from each other. They will remain oppositions, earth and spirit, but there is a particular close relationship they should inhabit in the “double vibration.”

If the idealist forgets the root in favor of the tree, and the realist does the inverse in forgetting the tree in favor of the root, then neither will do. What is needed is the individual who will understand and act upon the “double vibration” of the spirit made fruitful in the earth.

When will this country have such a man? It is what she needs; no thin Idealist, no coarse Realist, but a man whose eye reads the heavens while his feet step firmly upon the ground, and his hands are strong and dexterous for the use of human implements. A man religious, virtuous and sagacious; a man of universal sympathies, but self-possessed; a man who knows the region of emotion, though he is not its slave; a man to whom this world is no mere spectacle, or fleeting shadow, but a great solemn game to be played with good heed, for its stakes are of eternal value […] (64)
The heavens should be read while the foot steps upon the ground, and “universal sympathies” must obtain through the possession of the self. To attempt to seek a universality without recognition of one’s own particularities can mean nothing.

These tensions can easily be read in light of Fuller’s relationship with Emerson, and of a comparison of her ideas of these oppositions with his. For Emerson, the body “caricatured and satirized” the mind, so that “Emerson defines embodiment as mere encumbrance” (Davis, 33). Meanwhile, Fuller wishes some trouble might throw him at “the lap of mother earth,” from which he would attain less ethereal abilities (Davis, 37). As Smith says, speaking particularly of Woman in the Nineteenth Century, but also pertaining to Fuller’s writing in general, “The mother’s electric gaze may universalize, fusing difference into sameness, and yet for Fuller it also particularizes. The desired fusion that both Emerson and Fuller celebrate is always, in Fuller’s writings, an incomplete Unity […]”

Oppositions never entirely fuse, “never become entirely one, as they do in Emerson’s writings” (Smith, 83). Whereas Smith talks directly of the relationship between mother and child here, that opposition can be extrapolated to the relationship between opposites in general. So it is that Poe can lambaste Fuller by saying the three types of people are “‘men, women, and Margaret Fuller” (Davis, 37). This refusal to fuse opposites means that Fuller’s ideal woman in Woman in the Nineteenth Century is “not actually ‘woman,’ man’s binary opposite, but ‘soul,’ man’s essential equal” (Davis, 38). Yet they don’t become merely “soul,” either, but soul with its “feet on the ground” (Fuller, 64).
Here Fuller sees an innate contradiction, which her parodies of Emerson can help illustrate. In Fuller’s critiques of Emerson, opposites are fused, but in so doing, their fusion becomes a universal and spiritual thing, the contradiction being that the particular and material still exist in opposition to the universal and spiritual realms wherein the fusion can be said to have happened. Contradictorily, Emerson’s fusion of oppositions into an ideal realm leaves the heavens split from the earth, the spirit from the body, the trees from their roots. Fuller was not afraid to challenge Emerson on this contradiction. In a letter she wrote him concerning the completion of his Second Series, she included a poem that parodied him outright.

Earth and Fire, hell and heaven,  
Hate and love, black and white,  
Life and death, dark and bright,  
All are One  
One alone  
All else is seeming  
I who think am nought  
But the One a-dreaming  
To and fro its thought:  
All is well,  
For all is one;  
The fluid spell  
is the cold stone;  
However voluble  
All life is soluble  
Into my thought;  
All that is nought,  
But self-discovering  
self-recovering  
Of the One  
One Alone. (Zwarg, 138)

The fusion of all oppositions, thereafter contained in the idealist, universalist realm, cancels all conflict and cancels all agency. Everything’s okay, because all things are one.
We can look at Emerson’s own words to see how on the mark Fuller was and how problematic such an attitude might be. In his journals, Emerson wrote that the problems of “earthly marriage” matter less to “a strong mind,” with its “resource of the all-creating, all obliterating spirit; retreating on its grand essence the nearest persons become pictures merely. The Universe is his bride” (Zwarg, 140). The great contradiction is that on one hand, all tensions and oppositions have been resolved into the universal, whereas this fusion enables the opposing category of everything not ideal, everything not universal. In a marriage, one of Fuller’s central themes, a wife herself comes to constitute an opposing category.

An early example of woman as opposing category comes at the end of the story of Mariana. After Mariana is mocked by the other schoolgirls, who mimic her by wearing similar theatrical makeup at the “mealtime ceremonial” (53), she endures a “sense of universal perfidy,” and “born for love, [she] now hated all the world” (54). Whereas Emerson’s universal bride isolates him from the opposite sex, Mariana’s melodrama in isolation from the opposite sex is experienced as a “universal perfidy.” Her escape from this situation arrives in the form of Sylvain, with whom she falls in love, and Mariana becomes an occasion for Fuller’s call for celibacy.

But, oh! It is a curse to woman to love first, or most. In so doing she reverses the natural relations, and her heart can never, never be satisfied with what ensues. (58)

What ensues is the male partner steadily abiding by “the natural relations.” After only “[a] few months of domestic life,” Sylvain wants “business and the world.”

He wanted in her the head of his house; she to make her heart his home. No compromise was possible between natures of such unequal poise, and which had met only on one or two points. (59)
Mariana falls sick and dies, of what we aren’t told, but her sickness presages that of Frederica Hauffe later in the book. Ironically, Fuller says that had Mariana “known more of God and the universe,” she would perhaps have survived (61). Recalling Emerson’s universal bride, the statement indicates that in an unequal marriage, isolation with the universe, away from the opposite sex, may be the best option for a woman, though it is because men so often take this option that women should ever have to choose “celibacy.”

Something like the first third of Summer on the Lakes is scattered with oppositions of physicality to spirit, and though these oppositions don’t cease, a major shift in the text begins with a discussion carried on by allegorical characters, and will continue in a second stage centered on the seeress. Through each shift, Fuller continues to ground the spiritual in the physical. The allegorical characters are named “Good Sense,” “Free Hope,” “Old Church,” and “Self-Poise,” with Fuller’s position best expressed by “Free Hope” and Emerson’s position often almost parodically expressed by “Self-Poise.” Here, “Self-Poise” speaks lines quite similar to those Fuller parodied Emerson with in letters.

Far-sought is dear-bought. When we know that all is in each, and that the ordinary contains the extraordinary, why should we play the baby, and insist upon having the moon for a toy when a tin dish will do as well […] [T]he commonest rubbish will help us as well as shred silk. (81)

The urge to content oneself with any grief when the “Universe” is one’s “bride” can distinctly be heard here. The response of “Free Hope” takes direct aim. To bring physicality to the realm of thought is to bring in the “double vibration,” the spiritual within the earth(l)y. Thus she (if we may so gender “Free Hope”) says, “Every fact is impure, but every fact contains in it the juices of life. Every fact is a clod, from which
may grow an amaranth or a palm” (81). The fact must bear some kind of fruit, as the physical embodying (impregnated with?) the spiritual.

Likewise, “Free Hope”’s response brings in the polarities of heaven and earth and bears with it an experiential dimension entirely lacking in the idealized realm of “Self-Poise.”

Do you climb the snowy peaks from whence come the streams, where the atmosphere is rare, where you can see the sky nearer, from which you can get a commanding view of the landscape. I see great disadvantages as well as advantages in this dignified position. I had rather walk myself through all kinds of places, even at the risk of being robbed in the forest, half drowned at the ford, and covered with dust in the street. (81-82)

The ideal realm is one of rarefied air, one of a view from afar. The physical realm is dangerous, where everything may not always be safe in the arms of a universal bride.

Here something strange happens with the gendering between these two. The male view, the apparently Emersonian view, moves through the world with a security that Fuller’s female view cannot quite afford. Whereas the male voice might typically set itself up as protector of the female, it is the female who is willing to be “robbed,” “half drowned” and “covered with dust” for the freedom of walking through the earth, rather than hovering above it. The male voice has bought its security through the comfort of its bride.

If, then, Fuller has critiqued Emerson as fusing opposites within the realm of the ideal or spiritual, Fuller seeks largely to fuse opposites within the realm of the physical or earthly. That is, “Free Hope,” in Fulleresque response to the Emersonian voice of “Self-Poise,” seeks to incorporate the spiritual and the universal within the realm of the material and particular, or, we might say, the experiential. She seeks to “beat with the
living heart of the world,” and includes within that very physical image the desire to “understand all the moods, even the fancies or fantasies, of nature.” Furthermore, it is the incorporation of the spirit in the physical that brings her through to “truth”: “I dare to trust to the interpreting spirit to bring me out all right at last—to establish truth through error” (82). The job of the spirit in the physical here is one of interpretation, and if “truth” can indeed be found, that can apparently happen only through interpretation. This idea of interpretive truth culminates in a statement almost Emersonian, but more than Emersonian. “Whatever is, is right,” “Free Hope” tells us in tone. If she stops here, she may as well agree with Emerson in his statement about his universal bride (or Candide’s Pangloss: “All is for the best in this, the best of all possible words.”). But she qualifies this statement with the dynamic of agency, adding, “if only men are steadily bent to make it so, by comprehending and fulfilling its design” (82).

There are obviously contradictions in these handlings of gendered oppositions. Not least obvious among them is that she uses the proper term “men” as metonym for “people,” in such passages as the foregoing and in asking when the feminized country (“she”) will have the “man” she needs (the one who reads the heavens while his feet are on the ground). Some of these contradictions may be Fuller’s way of exploiting the inherent contradictions that already obtain in traditional gendered polarities. For one, the male is rhetorically identified with the spirit, the female with the body, yet the public sphere was thought to be the place of action, and in such a sphere women had limited access. Woman’s sphere was supposed to be the private, the home, just as the body was a thing to hide. The inherent contradiction here occurs in not having seen the body as the means to action. Therefore, if Fuller can legitimize the body, she can tilt the power
balance toward women, and at the same time give them agency. What appear to be contradictions in Fuller’s handling of gendered oppositions are, in fact, matters of her own agency in manipulating already-existing contradictions in gendered polarities.

These manipulations of inherent contradictions can be represented as gender reversals. According to Zwarg, “[Emerson] frustrates [Fuller] with his passive or percipient stance toward the world, and with her intuitive and spontaneous powers, she taunts him for his failure to achieve an active realization of his thought in the text of the world” (34). Indeed, the male role becoming passive and the female active certainly seems to constitute a role reversal, but the possibility for the reversal lies in the separation of masculine and feminine into the realms of spirit and body. A fully idealized or spiritualized stance hovers sublimated above action, and a fully materialized or chthonicized stance carries the possibility of agency in the physical world.

Fuller’s understanding of truth as interpretive also serves as a particular balance of gendered oppositions throughout the text. Fuller does not seem to see truth as some absolute that exists outside human understanding, an ontology standing outside epistemology. Nor can truth, then, have any kind of empirical certainty, since one interpretation can always be trumped by another. An outside, absolute truth might be entirely physical, a thing that could never be known, because it stands outside the reach of the human mind. Instead, Fuller sees the world as knowable and therefore interpretive and, in fact, textual, something that can be read. The idea of the textual world or textual nature is not rare in Transcendentalist writing. Thoreau talks about “making the earth say beans instead of grass” (Walden, 130-140), and Whitman subsumes the ideas in his words to the elements of nature as “The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to the
eddies of the wind” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 2). Fuller says, “All woods suggest pictures” (73). The woods suggest texts to be read and interpreted. This statement differs from saying either that you will make the earth say something, or that whatever you say is automatically subsumed in the earth.

In fact, Fuller often writes of how nature or the Indian could be or should be textually represented, how they should be presented for reading and interpretation. Strangely, some of the dullest writing in Summer on the Lakes occurs where Fuller keeps on topic, prosaically describing prairies, trees, plains, etc., as in the early pages of chapter four (46-47). What kind of comment on the polarity of nature and text does any nature writer make by creating prosaic textual representations of nature, since the actual cannot be had within a book? Though Fuller often wanders away from representations of nature, she offers us several. The only place where she represents nature as representing itself as text may give us clues to her thinking:

> In the little waterfall beyond, nature seems, as she often does, to have made a study for some larger design. She delights in this,—a sketch within a sketch, a dream within a dream. Wherever we see it, the lines of the great buttress in the fragment of stone, the hues of the waterfall, copied in the flowers that star its bordering mosses, we are delighted; for all the lineaments become fluent, and we mould the scene in congenial thought with its genius. (5)

If nature speaks as text here, it speaks as a Transcendentalist text, not itself fixed, but “fluent,” rambling. The problem of how to represent nature becomes one of how nature represents itself to the human mind, and expands into the larger question of how to represent truth in writing. If nature cannot be represented outside the human mind, then empirical truth is a falsehood. Truth rambles and is “fluent.” It should, therefore, be
written that way, always as “the poetic impression of the country at large,” rather than a
guidebook through empirical or absolute truth.

With this understanding of truth as interpretive, and thus more likely to ramble in
conversational form than to be fixed, it makes sense that Fuller’s writing might swerve
out of focus as extensively as it does. Excursionary writing need not be limited to the
topic of geographical excursion itself, and anything taken within Fuller’s excursionary
range offers itself for discussion of gender polarities. In fact, where Fuller goes most
directly at her central subject, the relationship between male and female, she departs most
entirely from the ostensible purpose of her book. Chapter Five is headed “Wisconsin,”
but the greatest part of the chapter is given to a discussion of a book by a German author,
Justinus Andreas Christian Kerner, called *The Seeress of Prevorst*. We may have taken
warning of such a swerve from early on in the chapter. Fuller says, “The town
[Milwaukee] promises to be, some time, a fine one,” and goes on to talk about “the
thickets of oak and wild roses.” The roses, she says, are red, and the thought of this color
launches her into talking about the rosebushes which caught Venus to keep her in the
proximity of Adonis. Suddenly she is describing Titian’s painting of Venus and Adonis.

Before we know it, Fuller has thrown us into another case for celibacy.

> Why must women always try to detain and restrain what they
> love? Foolish beauty; let him go; it is thy tenderness that has
> spoiled him. Be less lovely—less feminine; abandon thy fancy
> for giving thyself wholly; cease to love so well, and any Hercules
> will spin among thy maids, if thou wilt. But let him go this time;
> thou canst not keep him. Sit there, by thyself, on that bank, and,
> instead of thinking how soon he will come back, think how thou
> may’st love him no better than he does thee, for the time has
> come. (70)
This situation is a familiar theme in Fuller’s writing. The woman who will not be “less feminine” will remain passive in love relationships. She will seize no agency for herself, although as we have seen in Mariana’s case, such agency can be dangerous if the man proves less willing to move out of traditional gender roles. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Fuller says that a marriage must be a fair marriage, that “Union is only possible to those who are units” (71). When that is not possible, women must choose celibacy.

The strange story of the seeress, Frederica Hauffe, dramatizes a woman whose spiritual powers developed out of normal proportion due to a kind of atrophy of material possibilities. So we are brought to see through a gendered lens another distortion of the polarities of spiritual and material, in many ways a fuller development of these issues foreshadowed in the story of Mariana. She quotes the author to the effect that Hauffe’s “‘solemn, unhappy gift […] was probably a sign of the development of the spiritual in the fleshly eye’” (84). Hauffe becomes sick, bedridden, but this physical suffering increases the power of “her inward life.” In fact, Hauffe often speaks and prophesies from a “somnambulic state” (85). Furthermore, her sickness and her powers directly relate to mountains and valleys. Her move with her husband from the hills precipitates her worst sickness. “Later, it appeared, that the lower she came down from the hills, the more she suffered from spasms, but on the heights her tendency to the magnetic state was the greatest” (85). This scenario demands a difficult tracing, but it appears that in the hills, her spiritual powers first manifest themselves. The lower altitudes help bring on sickness, and as she retreats inwardly from her sickness, her spiritual powers, also called electric and magnetic, become a matter of compensation. The hills clearly parallel Emersonian idealized heights, and the depths Fuller’s dangerous being-in-the-world. The further
difficulty comes in seeing the result of Fulleresque experiential depths as a sickness, which directly aids in increasing spiritual powers. But in Fuller’s continuing the story, she shows us another parallel to better explain this one: the story of Hauffe’s servitude to men.

Hauffe’s sickness exactly coincides with the physical demands of servitude to men to push her inward, away from the sickness, but also away from serving men, and toward increased electric and magnetic powers.

Already withdrawn from the outward life, she was placed, where, as consort and housekeeper to a laboring man, the calls on her care and attention were incessant. She was obliged hourly to forsake her inner home, to provide for an outer, which did not correspond with it. (86)

The denial of the inner life, the electric or magnetic, comes through serving the outer life of a male stranger. The result will be a kind of implosion of the body upon the spirit. After seven months of this servitude, “it was not possible to conceal the inward verity by an outward action, ‘the body sank beneath the attempt, and the spirit took refuge in the inner circle.’” This inward turn begins a seven-year period of “bodily suffering and mental exhaustion,” and also of somnambulic prophesying. The ultimate nadir of her exhaustion, Fuller says, had her “so devoid of power in herself, that her life seemed entirely dependent on artificial means and the influence of other men” (86). If the metonymic use of “man” for “people” seems strange at other times in Fuller’s text, it seems perhaps strangest here. Though this phrase “other men” likely means other doctors, men other than her husband, its vagueness leaves open the possibility that it could imply Hauffe herself as the “less feminine” Fuller earlier tells women to be, even while Hauffe
depends entirely on men. Does her ultimate paranormal strength in lieu of any physical strength whatsoever make her perversely or inversely masculine?

Hauffe’s paranormal powers become “electric” and “magnetic,” instead of merely spiritual, the former connoting material or earth(l)y rather than spiritual powers. Fuller has also written of the physical properties of electricity and magnetism in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, of woman having an “electrical, inspired, lyrical nature” (76). In part, seeing electricity as the fluid, physical property of woman aligns itself with Fuller’s call for celibacy, desexualizing the fluids of the body into a kind of earth(l)y ichor. Yet it does more.

Fuller’s image of electricity to displace muck and mire does more than simply displace the “disagreeable appearances” of a female reproductive cycle. It also begins to reanimate the corpse that the mother had become in the tradition reworked and popularized in Emerson. (Smith, 78)

The electricity of woman reanimates the denied physicality. Furthermore, its channeling becomes a further instance of danger. Smith says, “Now the electric fluid does more than simply magnetize Woman. Now, it threatens” (82). For Hauffe became “more in the magnetic and clairvoyant than in the natural human state,” and indeed she lived “an almost disembodied life” (Fuller, 89).

The two possibilities for woman as electrified corpse here seem to be a kind of Frankenstein’s monster and a sylph. Kerner says that Hauffe was “never rightly awake, even when she seemed to be” (90). He says, “From her eyes flowed a peculiar spiritual light” and that she was “more spirit than human” (91). If these strange descriptions seem to signify someone living in a kind of epileptic or constant trance state, Hauffe
nevertheless describes something further in one of the poems she is said to have
apparently composed while in a somnambulic state:

   Dead lies my bodily frame,
       But in the inmost mind a light burns up,
       Such as none knows in the waking life.
       Is it a light? no! but a sun of grace! (92)

Her own supposed description of herself is as a corpse with a light burning in its mind. If
this image seems closer to a saintly version of Frankenstein’s monster, Fuller quotes
Kerner as describing Hauffe’s as “the life of a sylph” (89). The word has a strange double
meaning, denoting either “a graceful woman or girl,” or, in the company of other
alchemical beings such as gnomes, salamanders, lemurs, and nymphs, “One of a race of
beings or spirits supposed to inhabit the air (orig. in the system of Paracelsus)” (OED).
The word then describes either a woman or a being of the air, such as Fuller might have
used to parody Emerson. This double meaning begs the question: is Hauffe symbolic of
woman disembodied by marriage, or the prototype for Fuller’s electric woman?

   Strangely, the answer to this question and the solution to Fuller’s other problems
of polarity come closest to fulfillment in her representation of the American Indian.

Fuller desires a kind of justice to the positions of Indians that has been lacking, to say the
very least, in American culture. But representing the Indian differs entirely from hearing
the Indian speak. At one moment she expresses the sincere desire that Indians be thought
of “fairly,” that is, neither as “noble savages,” nor “savage” peoples. The next moment,
she wishes Sir Walter Scott were with her to see and thus represent the Indians himself
(108). She seems to think the Indians deserve Euro-American cultural representation, and
that it won’t happen any other way.

   I have no hope of liberalizing the missionary, or humanizing the
sharks of trade, of infusing the conscientious drop into the flinty bosom of policy, of saving the Indian from immediate degradation, and speedy death [...] Yet, ere they depart, I wish there might be some masterly attempt to reproduce, in art or literature, what is proper to them, a kind of beauty and grandeur, which few of the every-day crowd have hearts to feel. (121)

Fuller’s idea of fairness is certainly disturbing. She doesn’t think she can hope for Indian survival, so representation is the next best thing. In seeking to give a fair illustration of the American Indian, Fuller does not humanize the Indian so much as make the Indian the site of her own problems with polarities. She uses the otherness of the American Indian as the site to work out her own otherings.

Having earlier said that nature speaking as text in *Summer on the Lakes* speaks as a Transcendentalist text, not fixed, but interpretive and “fluent,” we can now see how Fuller uses the American Indian as the site where nature and text meet. When Fuller sees an Indian at a Wisconsin encampment, “looking up to the heavens” in the rain, she calls him “[a]n old theatrical looking Indian” (74). A page later, she says, “I like the effect of the paint on them; it reminds of the gay fantasies of nature” (75). What in the first mention makes the old Indian look theatrical? Is he indeed striving for stage presence, or does Fuller ascribe the theatricality? Contradictorily, this theatricality serves as a part of white America’s idea of Indian authenticity.³

The second citation ascribes this theatricality to nature’s own fantasies. Fuller has made herself transparent. The old Indian man is theatrical in and of himself, but this theatricality is akin somehow to nature’s own textual imagination. There is a kind of double inscription here that takes us back to the waterfall that “seems to seize its own

³ In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford writes, “Indians were lovingly remembered in Edward Curtis’ sepia photographs as proud, beautiful, and ‘vanishing.’ But Curtis, we now know, carried props, costumes, and wigs, frequently dressing up his models. The image he recorded was carefully staged” (284).
rhythm and sing it over again” in a double vibration rousing both “the ear and the soul” (4). The Indian seems to exist at a romantic nexus of human and nature, himself the human text of nature. Of course, it is to Fuller, or the white American, that the double vibration or double inscription of the Indian speaks. Inhabiting the borderland of human and nature, the Indian serves as reconciliation of those polarities. By seeing the Indian as humanized text of nature, Fuller frees herself to make him the interpretive site of the balancing of other oppositions as well.

This use of the Indian as a kind of trope was far from uncommon in nineteenth century American writing. Lora Romero refers to the “cult of the vanishing American” as having a kind of “ethnographic and pedagogic overlap” (387). Whereas some desire for a kind of ethnography, though the term here is anachronistic, can be credited to writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, the focus on the American Indian usually has a pedagogic, if not downright didactic, intent. In Cooper, the pedagogic occurs through such Romanticizing of the Indian as natural “prodigy,” whereas Fuller abhors the inclination to see the Indian as “noble savage.” Nevertheless, Fuller employs her own “ethnographic and pedagogic overlap” in writing about Indians.

Fuller uses the American Indian as a site to work out her program for righting gender discrepancies. The society of the American Indian serves as a parallel universe in which to imagine fairer relations between the sexes. Steele points out that “Fuller was able to detach herself from destructive stereotypes far enough to allow her feminist analysis to be shaped by American Indian culture” (Transfiguring, 159). To imagine Indian society as more just, she must ask for more just representation. Even as she asks, “Why will people look only on one side? They either exalt the Red man into a Demigod
or degrade him into a beast.” (109) she proceeds to use the Indian as trope for her own purposes as well. To imagine Indian society as entirely egalitarian would be perhaps to “exalt the Red man into a Demigod.” Indian women still occupy an “inferior position,” but their position obtains more by social function and allots them more respect. She accuses the Indian’s accusers of saying that the husband “compels his wife to do all the drudgery, while he does nothing but hunt and amuse himself.” She says these accusers ignore the fact that the family’s survival depends on his hunting, and as the family is supported by his role, they further domestically support his role. Older women achieve higher station, though only as mother of a son old enough to become a warrior. “From that date she held a superior rank in society; was allowed to live at ease, and even called to consultations on national affairs” (109).

If Fuller could not call Indian society egalitarian, she does see the Indian husband and wife as achieving a kind of “union” of “units” (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, 71). She moves from discussing marriage in this Indian parallel universe to discussing it in the abstract. Her representation is contradictory.

Wherever man is a mere hunter, woman is a mere slave. It is domestic intercourse that softens man, and elevates woman; and of that there can be but little, where the employments or amusements are not in common. (110)

Mirroring Melville’s use of Polynesian natives to comment on Western society in *Typee* (1846), or any number of later anthropological texts that do much the same thing, Fuller’s representation of Indians has served as a different lens to imagine Western society, and marriage in particular.
Finally, Fuller sees in the Indian a site where, through a matrilineal social structure, spirit and body establish a fuller conciliation. Fuller quotes another text on the naming of Indian children:

The children of the Indians are always distinguished by the name of the mother, and, if a woman marries several husbands, and has issue by each of them, they are called after her. The reason they give for this is, that, ‘as their offspring are indebted to the father for the soul, the invisible part of their essence, and to the mother for their corporeal and apparent part, it is most rational that they should be distinguished by the name of the latter, from whom they indubitably derive their present being’ (source not given). (135)

Does Fuller’s earlier wondering when “this country” might “have such a man” presage this representation of what was then thought to be a dying race? The Indian, seen as imminently passing away and mostly inhabiting a mythic past, can become the site of an imagined future ideal—the “double vibration” of spirit reverberating through the physical. The physical, as that which bears the spirit forth, remains privileged. “[M]an,” she says, again with the ironic metonym, “has two natures.” The first of these is “like that of the plants and animals, adapted to the uses and enjoyments of this planet,” and the other “presages and demands a higher sphere” (135). As “man” proceeds mentally, “he loses in harmony what he gains in height and extension.” Therefore, “the civilized man is a larger mind, but a more imperfect nature than the savage” (136). The American Indian, then, is none other than he (gender intended, to keep with Fuller’s metonym) “whose eye reads the heavens while his feet step firmly upon the ground” (64).

In *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller offers us a confusing read. It rambles through the countryside with no attempt at cartography. Near the end, she says, “I wish I had a thread long enough to string on it all these beads that take my fancy,” but tells us she doesn’t, and refers us instead to certain books in “the library of Harvard College” (148). It’s a
strange recommendation to end a book that advocates feet on the ground, spirit fulfilled in body, and harmony of “mind” with “planet.” Similarly strange, however, seems the apparent incompatibility of a travel book that stakes its claim for a focus on the earth(l)y and corporeal, while it quotes numerous poems and speeches and concerns itself disproportionately with glossing a *prima facie* irrelevant German occult biography. But perhaps by now, we should be used to apparent incompatibilities in Fuller’s writing, so that we can see this one as a further relationship of oppositions.

These incompatibilities, these relations of polarities, become the architecture of her text, as odd as it may seem to describe strings of beads as architectural. The relationships of heights to depths, of ideal to real, of spirit to body come about through the *agency* of the body. The relationship of nature to its own reading as text allows for any other text to be freely interpretative, a ramble through a countryside. The American Indian becomes the humanized text of nature, an other in which to explore Fuller’s othered-ness, a trope in which to interpret the relationships of polarities Fuller concerns herself with the most. And all of these relationships exist through the principal polarity of gender. Fuller builds the architecture of her strings of beads as a meandering through a series of gendered oppositions, throughout asking for the “double vibration” of the spiritual in the physical, “[t]he earth [as] spirit made fruitful,—life” (11).
Knowing the Unknowable through the Ocean as Metaphor

Henry David Thoreau stands at odds with himself. The contradictory sense of much of his writing frequently seems to stem as much from the sheer contrariness of his personality as from any oscillations in his own thinking. Thoreau the cabin-maker and wanderer distances himself from society that he may more loudly criticize it. At the heart of his paradoxes we find two seemingly opposed ways of viewing the world, a tension at the heart of Transcendentalism itself. On the one hand, we find Thoreau the naturalist, seeking to chronicle backwoods experience, mapping the flora and fauna, surveying and taking measurements. On the other hand, there’s Thoreau the neoplatonic doubter of the thing before him, noting the visible as only the less real form of the invisible.

David Robinson sees the naturalist as the figure who unifies the different polarities of Thoreau’s approaches. “The naturalist is a figure of reconciliation who can bring together superficially opposed modes of intellectual endeavor and satisfy Thoreau’s conflicting inner demands” (74). The naturalist must be some kind of bridge between the scientist and the moralist, according to Robinson’s positioning of the term. Nevertheless, the tension remains between Thoreau as the measurer, relying on the senses, and Thoreau as the idealist, paradoxically using the senses only to see beyond them. Robinson writes,

This is a call to a kind of nature study that emphasizes close personal observation of phenomena in the field and a general disposition to search for the underlying patterns and natural systems. (75)

Yet Thoreau’s law and higher law, nature and higher nature can never quite be reconciled, due to the limits of the senses.
Though this dichotomy obtains within his individual works, it nevertheless obtains just as noticeably between works. *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* both seem more self-consciously philosophical, more Transcendentalist, than other works not intended for direct publication, such as *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*. The latter works bear much more in common with Thoreau’s journals, bearing record in greater proportion to reflection than in the two former. As a result, fewer scholars have analyzed *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*. Though I will refer to each of these works, I focus here primarily on *Cape Cod*.

This small and frequently overlooked book captures Thoreau’s—and Transcendentalism’s—central tensions much more directly and less self-consciously than most of his other writings. Thoreau’s writing often appeals least at its sniffiest, and most when it comes across as a sincere form of seeking. His is largely an epistemological seeking, the writer wandering somewhere between what can be known and what cannot. Paradoxically, when he recovers a thing for itself, he comes to know it in its unknowableness. In this effort, through these works, he shows the artifice of our human measures—what we measure with the senses, language as symbol, language as claim for possession, language as law, the constructs of time, of commerce, and of history in order to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond them. These oppositions between a constructedness and an unknowable, because unreachable, truth extend from Thoreau’s driving opposition of knowing and not being able to know. His use of the senses in opposition to the ideal brings him close what I will later call Whitman’s ouroboric understanding of the ideal and material both existing through their interrelation with each other, but Thoreau stops short of such an understanding by maintaining his prioritization
of the ideal over the material. Finally, we will see how *Cape Cod* offers us a moment when Thoreau forgets to be self-conscious, and tries to give us a Cape Cod that he cannot give us, the Cape Cod-in-itself.

Yet even as he illustrates the constructedness of all sense-based measures, he does not disdain using them; indeed, he depends on them. Thoreau seeks throughout *The Maine Woods* to lose himself, wandering further away from settlement and from mapped territory, yet even as he does so he performs his own cartography in the constant journal entries of the scientific names of plants he finds along the way. Meanwhile, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, we find our thesis for his posthumously published *Cape Cod*:

> I have but few companions on the shore,  
> They scorn the strand who sail upon the sea,  
> Yet oft I think the ocean they’ve sailed o’er  
> Is deeper known upon the strand to me. (194)

*Cape Cod* resolves its central paradox with a new paradox. If, as Thoreau believes, true reality cannot be directly experienced, since he sees the ideal as the real essence of a thing, he nonetheless constantly experiments, attempting to indicate the contours, if not the essence, of what can never be directly experienced. The resolution of this paradox arrives in his experiential knowing of the primordial and protean, the oceanic, through his not knowing it categorically and factually. In *Cape Cod*, the ocean becomes the ultimate Transcendentalist metaphor for unknowability, and he will come to know the unknowable ocean from its opposite, the shore.

**Relying on the Unreliable: Thoreau’s Senses**

Thoreau’s sense of Transcendentalist oppositions differs from Emerson’s, not in the favoring of the ideal as the real, but in his faith in the necessity of experimentation,
despite the impossibility of direct experience with the *true* real—that is, the ideal—behind the real. In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson writes,

> What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, The senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. (81)

Emerson gives us several of Transcendentalism’s oppositional tensions: experience and consciousness, representations and “the things themselves,” circumstance and self-reliance, visible nature and higher nature. In the same lecture, Emerson calls Transcendentalism a “double consciousness,” and says that we lead “two lives,” the “understanding” and “the soul.” The two “never meet and measure each other,” and “discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves” (93). Despite Thoreau’s own Transcendentalist sense of these dichotomies, he bases his thinking on his experience of the senses, with the goal of glimpsing the ideal, even if only in outline. Thoreau measures avidly, gives us the measurement, shows the practicality of his measurement, and then tells us the truer part of the thing measured can never *be* measured.

According to Stanley Cavell, Thoreau bears more in common with Kantian thinking than does Emerson. Emerson’s move against Kant determines “that the senses are the scene of illusions.” *The Critique of Pure Reason*, however, is anything but solipsistic. Cavell argues that in Kant, “things (as we know them) *are* as the senses
represent them; that nature, the world opened to the senses, is objective” (95). Cavell’s parenthetical statement puts his assertion in danger of its own tautology. How could things *as we know them* be other than how our senses represent them to us? Nevertheless, he makes a crucial point in next differentiating Thoreau from Emerson. “[Thoreau’s] difference from Kant on this point is that these *a priori* conditions are not themselves knowable *a priori*, but are to be discovered experimentally; historically, Hegel had said.” About *Walden*, Cavell then says, “Epistemologically, its motive is the recovery of the object [...] a recovery of the thing-in-itself” (95). Yes, but the tension remains. Cavell’s parenthetical statement haunts all of this thinking. “As we know them” implies that things might be otherwise, and discovering conditions experimentally, for Thoreau, still leaves the unexaminable truer truth behind the conditions.¹

In fact, this remaining tension, the fundamental incompatibility of the thing-in-itself and what can be experienced, measured, can be seen as the engine that propels Thoreau. His contradictory status as idealist and empiricist ends up, as we will see near the end of this chapter, with two entirely different ways to interpret the phrase “thing-in-itself.” The gap between these two ways helps explain this central tension in Thoreau. If Kant’s idea of the thing-in-itself can be described as the unconditioned object of our inquiry that we automatically condition by inquiry itself, Thoreau’s idea of the thing-in-itself seems to be less indivisibly metaphysical. For Thoreau, the thing-in-itself *itself* seems to exist in a state of opposition. It is both “thing” and “self,” by definition, then, opposed to itself. So what it might mean for Thoreau to seek to recover the thing-in-itself becomes less clear. The tension of ideal and actual, or maybe noumenal and phenomenal, ¹

¹ In some sense, Cavell’s use of the phrase, “*a priori* conditions,” seems odd. Kant says, “we thus find that the unconditioned is not to be met with in things, so far as we know them” and that “so far as they are things in themselves” “we do not know them” (24).
remains, and Thoreau always seeks to catch some glimpse of the ideal through the measurement or mapping or observation of the actual. Thoreau relies on the senses to trace what the senses cannot tell.

The interpretation of the primary difference between Emerson and Thoreau as having to do with the senses dates at least as far back as F.O. Matthiessen’s seminal 1941 study, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*.

What separates Thoreau most from Emerson is his interest in the varied play of all his senses, not merely of the eye, a rare enough attribute in New England and important to dwell on since it is the crucial factor in accounting for the greater density of Thoreau’s style. (87)

Yet even in pointing out a greater reliance on the senses in Thoreau, Matthiessen indicates that the engagement with the senses led Thoreau to the constant attempt to get further into them or get more from them.

He became ecstatic when he talked about touch…He knew, like Anteus, that his strength derived from ever renewed contact with the earth. But he wanted more than contact with nature, he wanted the deepest immersion. (88)

Thoreau sees part of the invisibility of things as having to do with the short range of the senses and the distortion of distance, but he also finds the senses themselves incapable of experiencing “higher” nature. In *A Week*, Thoreau says that “knowledge is to be acquired only by a corresponding experience” (294), but that the true real may be mostly unknowable, a “nature behind the common, unexplored by science or by literature” (46). Consequently and contradictorily,

in our dreams, […] we have a more liberal and juster apprehension of things, unconstrained by habit, which is then in some measure put off, and divested of memory, which we call history. (47)
Still, the unexplored ideal may be glimpsed through a kind of phenomenological
approach; Thoreau says, “so are there manifold visions in the direction of every object,
and even the most opaque reflect the heavens from their surface” (39). If the truer truth,
the more real that is the ideal, can never be experienced directly, it can be witnessed
in pieces, in reflections, in shadows, and partially, if not wholly, puzzled together.

For every oak and birch too growing on the hill-top, as well as
for these elms and willows, we knew that there was a graceful
ethereal and ideal tree making down from the roots, and sometimes
Nature in high tides brings her mirror to its foot and makes it
visible. (37)

If Thoreau can see the thing-in-itself as recoverable at all, we cannot recover it in and of
itself in its entirety.

Near the end of A Week, Thoreau jams together the tensions of his reliance on the
senses and his belief in their unreliability in a way that seems at first to swing wildly
from Whitmanic to neoplatonic assertions. At first, Thoreau says, “We need pray for no
higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life,” a rather un-
Transcendentalist sounding statement. As Whitman trades in the “churches, bibles, and
all the creeds” for “the flesh and the appetites / Seeing, hearing, feeling” and the “aroma”
of his own “arm-pits” (“Song of Myself, Sec. 24), so Thoreau would give up “heaven”
for earth, for the “purely sensuous” (307). The italics are his, however, not mine, the
implication being that the senses remain impure, imperfect. In fact, his next statement
sounds more futuristically Darwinist than metaphysical. “Our present senses are but the
rudiments of what they are destined to become. We are comparatively deaf and dumb and
blind, and without smell or taste or feeling.” Where Whitman will later find the body and
the senses bearing their own kind of perfection, Thoreau finds them primitive.
He calls the senses “divine germs” of what they can become.

The eyes were not made for such groveling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. May we not see God? Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely? (307)

We have the awkward image of groveling eyes, which should be able to see the invisible itself. But how? If our senses can only give us allegories for the ideal, as though we are the inhabitants of Plato’s Cave, he instructs us nevertheless to read. We are to see God by reading God, and this seeing, as Robinson says, “is Thoreau’s language for a reawakened life in the world” (76). Contradictorily, then, our awakening comes through the mediation of reading; in effect, we awake to find ourselves still dreaming. Still, if we “read” Nature and “read” it “rightly,” we will find that what we take as allegory, as “the symbol merely,” may in fact reveal the true Nature behind Nature.

**Reading the Unreadable: Language as Mediation**

But Thoreau never teaches us exactly how to read, and our own reading of his reading nature leaves us little more literate than before. In fact, we don’t know precisely what he reads there either, what he sees of the invisible. In *The Maine Woods*, he has two apparent goals: to go into that part of the wilderness whose representation cannot yet be read on a map and to map out the flora and fauna. He tells us that “we had had enough of houses for the present, and had come here partly to avoid them,” then that “I had found growing on this broad rocky and gravelly shore the *Salix rostrata, discolor, and lucida, Ranunculus recurvatus,*” and on and on. In this paragraph, he lists more than twenty species of plant, followed by the explanation, “I give these names because it was my furthest northern point” (234-235). Something seems absent in his explanation. He gives
fewer lengthy Transcendentalist musings in this book, but a plethora of names of trees, shrubs, flowers, and birds. In *The Maine Woods*, naming becomes mapping, and this kind of mapping not only records the geography, but allows Thoreau to read the landscape back to himself, to represent it. Yet this project hardly gets him past “mere allegory,” since the landscape has been written mostly in Latin, not in any kind of primordial wilderness language.

But this question of what language nature and the wilderness speak brings us back to Thoreau’s central tension once again. It really doesn’t matter what language nature or the wilderness speaks or writes, because language must always be a mediation. Nothing can be directly experienced through language. Thus, Thoreau’s very question, “Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?” is a paradox. He may as well ask us to recover the thing-in-itself by the means of a symbol for the thing-in-itself. The symbol will remain a symbol; it will never be its object.

The same paradox obtains in Thoreau’s earth-literacy of the bean field in *Walden*, where he writes into nature rather than reading it. The beans, he tells us, “attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus” (138). If the beans are his tether to the earth, his hoe is his tether to the beans-as-earth, and his hoe is his pen. “[M]aking the earth say beans instead of grass,—this was my daily work” (139-140). But he does more than decide what the earth will say when it’s his page on which to write. In the wilderness of Maine, his reading of the landscape becomes his mapping the flora and fauna. Reading acts as writing. Here, rather than “making the earth say beans,” he makes it say “*Chiogene hispidula*” and “*Chimaphila umbellate*” (274).
Inasmuch as any true reading must be interpretation, reading Nature rightly must always include speaking for it as well. Whereas Thoreau insists that “the ideal tree” behind every “oak and birch” can be seen in glimpses, reflections, and shadows, and that nature can be read somehow, he also believes that the existence of nature is its own purpose, that it does not exist for us. Nature’s “resolution” is existence itself. As Thoreau writes in *Walden*,

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. (251)

According to Thoreau, nature asks no question, because she is her own answer. She has no dialogue with herself, and has no need of language, being unmediated. Nature implies presence then, and this eternal presence must be the ideal. If we cannot experience nature’s presence without mediation, and without language in particular, we cannot attain wholly to the ideal.

Though Thoreau insists on trying to read nature, while paradoxically believing we cannot experience nature directly, his belief in the invisibility of the true real—the ideal—behind the real brings about his cynicism toward ownership. “How fortunate were we who did not own an acre of these shores, who had not renounced our title to the whole,” he says in *A Week*. Ownership of a deed of land or property can only be artifice. True ownership occurs exclusively of a title deed, and consists of however much of the earth we can sensuously experience. “The poor rich man! all he has is what he has bought. What I see is mine” (282). Of all Thoreau’s ideas, this one perhaps seems to
carry the most of his contrary personality with it. Does the law state such and such a
condition? Then Thoreau deems the law an artifice, a mere human and temporal
institution, and states its inverse, his own law, his “higher” law, as he calls it in Walden
and “Civil Disobedience.”

“Speaking For” the Irrepresentable: Language as Claim for Possession

Yet in Cape Cod, Thoreau seizes on the direct relationship between mediation and
law, between language and ownership. Though he elsewhere makes the earth say what he
wants it to say and then, in turn, reads it, in Cape Cod, he criticizes what he calls
“‘speaking for’ a place.”

When the committee from Plymouth had purchased the territory
of Eastham of the Indians, “it was demanded, who laid claim to
Billingsgate?” which was understood to be all that part of the Cape
north of what they had purchased. “The answer was, there was not
any who owned it. ‘Then, said the committee, ‘that land is ours.’
The Indians answered that it was.” This was a remarkable assertion
and admission. The Pilgrims appear to have regarded themselves
as Not Any’s representatives. (49)

In quoting Massachusetts history, Thoreau undoes history, by pointing out the logical
fallacies of its actors. His sarcasm wears barbs. Rather than being the representatives of
God, the Pilgrims, in their words, claim to represent an atheistic non-entity, “Not Any,”
who has held the land for them in a kind of anti-existent escrow. “Not Any seems to have
been the sole proprietor of all America before the Yankees” (49). His sarcasm also points
up the falsity of language, since it can so easily be used for the opposite of its original
intention, not to mention its working as the enormous colonial blind spot behind which
stood the native peoples. The Pilgrims’ ownership of the land remains vested in the letter of the law, and the instability of language illustrates the artifice of their ownership.

Yet their “‘speaking for’ a place” also indicates that language itself is a claim for possession. Just as Thoreau could map Maine by speaking the names of its plant life, the Pilgrims could take possession of the supposed New World by “speaking” for it. A name acts as a handle by which we hold onto the thing named. By naming, by speaking for a thing, we know the thing, but we know it on our terms and by our means. Possession of land or property, then, remains as problematic as the knowledge of a thing. A complicated chain of mediation results. Nature can only be known by its reading, reading implies its own active stance of writing or making nature speak, and speaking for nature lays claim to it. By none of which has the thing-in-itself been truly recovered, because nature cannot be truly read, spoken for, or possessed.

Cape Cod the Shape Shifter as Metaphor for Unknowability

In Cape Cod, Thoreau’s constant paradoxical experimentation with nature and the awareness of its unknowability, his central driving tension between knowing and not being able to know, can be seen in his incessant pointing out how much on Cape Cod goes unseen. Nothing on Cape Cod, Thoreau tells us throughout the book, is ever what it seems. If on the Concord River, the tree cannot be said to be what it seems, since the ideal tree stands back of the seen tree, Cape Cod epitomizes the Transcendentalist idea of the unreliability of the senses. On Cape Cod, Thoreau constantly reminds us of the

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2 He goes on: “But history says that, when the Pilgrims had held the lands of Billingsgate many years, at length ‘appeared an Indian, who styled himself Lieutenant Anthony,’ who laid claim to them, and of him they bought them. Who knows but a Lieutenant Anthony may be knocking at the door of the White House some day? At any rate, I know that if you hold a thing unjustly, there will surely be the devil to pay at last” (49-50). Thoreau seems to say simultaneously that the land still belongs by rights to the Indians and to call them the devil. His statement brings to mind the takeovers by the radical American Indian Movement in 1972 and 1973 of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Building in Washington D.C. and Wounded Knee, South Dakota, respectively.
constant presence of the unseen, and, as indeed is the case everywhere, that includes the constant presence of the unseen dead.

This continual presence acts as a kind of *memento mori* even though apparently *in absentia*. In other words, by pointing so often to the presence of the unseen dead, we come to think of everything as being comprised of their presence. Perhaps only in Poe’s short stories, where the dead are buried beneath floors and hidden behind walls, do we so often find the unseen dead. The book begins with a shipwreck.

I asked if the bodies which I saw were all that were drowned.
“Not a quarter of them,” said he.
“Where are the rest?”
“Most of them right underneath that piece [of boat] you see.” (8-9)

Meanwhile, “the bones of many a shipwrecked man were buried in the pure sand” (20).

The sand shifts perpetually, as unreliable a place marker as the senses are markers of truth, so there can be no possibility of truly establishing place; a body buried in the sand will surely move with it.

This gentle Ocean will toss and tear the rag of a man’s body like the father of mad bulls, and his relatives may be seen seeking the remnants for weeks along the strand. From some quiet inland hamlet they have rushed weeping to the unheard-of shore, and now stand uncertain where a sailor has recently been buried amid the sandhills. (144-145).

The sand occupies a nebulous border between ocean and land, and to lose the corpse of a loved one in this border would mean losing him entirely.

But the sand, itself consistently inconsistent, bears no comparison in sheer protean vastness to the ocean it borders. Many of the unseen dead remain in the waves. The people who live nearby “would watch there many days and nights for the sea to give up its dead,” and the ocean doesn’t always oblige (13). As a grave, the ocean truly reassigns
one’s corpse to all the elements. “The Gulf Stream may return some to their native
shores, or drop them in some out-of-the-way cave of Ocean, where time and the elements
will write new riddles with their bones” (190). The true loss of one’s body to the ocean
must be even greater, since the ocean serves as the perfect metaphor for nature’s ultimate
and eternal presence, a presence the idea of which implies existence outside mediation
through language. Time and the elements will not write with the bones, but will
impersonally disperse them amongst their own vastness.

   We thought it would be worth the while to read the epitaphs
   where so many were lost at sea; however, as not only their
   lives, but commonly their bodies also, were lost or not
   identified, there were fewer epitaphs of this sort than we
   expected, though there were not a few. Their graveyard is
   the ocean. (171-172)

In fact, the grave marker serves as an attempt to contain and name and own the dead
body, to keep it nearby through the acts of mapping it and naming it. The epitaph “speaks
for” the property that is one’s relative’s grave. When the grave marker cannot mark the
body, the body is most truly lost and gone back to the world.

   The overall effect in Cape Cod of these memento mori even apparently in
   absentia is the permeation of the living world with the dead. Death and the dead become
   part of the great Transcendental unseen, the all-pervading, the unknowable. Similarly,
   Whitman will let himself “depart as air” and claim to “bequeath myself to the dirt to grow
   from the grass I love” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 52), so that in death, his molecules
   pervade the whole world. Thoreau says,

   I saw that corpses might be multiplied, as on the field of battle,
   till they no longer affected us in any degree, as exceptions to the
   common lot of humanity. Take all the graveyards together, they
   are always the majority. (13)
Death and the unseen dead, like the ocean itself, become the unknowability behind everything.

Furthermore, death and the unseen dead can only be known at all through their opposite, the living individual. “It is the individual and private that demands our sympathy,” he says, and the individual lives over and against the unindividuated dead. “A man can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse” (13). The individual can claim his own existence, with a name attached, and mediated through language. But the corpse has become nobody, despite what any grave marker says to the contrary, and all corpses are the same corpse, having been returned to the elemental and the oceanic.³

Partly through the background of the unseen dead, then, the ocean becomes Thoreau’s metaphor for the Transcendentalist ideal, the protean and primordial unknowable, which he insistently and contrarily seeks somehow to know. Here we can see the ideal in its full danger of killing individualities. In terms of their ubiquity, Thoreau even begins to associate the unseen dead with the ocean.

But as I stood there [the bones] grew more and more imposing. They were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed addressed to them, and I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my sniveling sympathies. (124)

His own aloneness at the beach and sea deepens when he feels excluded from the company the ocean keeps with the dead. The ocean and the dead infuse one another, the dead their own ocean, and the ocean as vast and impersonal and unknowable as death.

Thoreau has come to see the dead as themselves oceanic and elemental, and this focus strangely returns us to ownership. Though we may partially glimpse the true truth

³ See my discussion of Emerson’s “Threnody” in the chapter 2.
and the tree behind the tree through a phenomenological gathering of traces, our comprehension of the thing-in-itself fails with our inability to grasp, to possess, the thing. Possession of the thing, as we have seen, depends on naming, titling, and mapping it; it depends on recording, on language, which, as a mediation, precludes the possession of the thing-in-itself. The great irony here is that Thoreau keeps recording faithfully, while he indicates that, as long as our senses remain limited, only they who cannot know can most truly possess. “That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a certain majesty which belonged to it” (124).

The dead reign as the elements do. The living individual looks out at the rest of existence, from which he separates himself, a conscious synecdoche who speaks for the whole without seeing itself as part of the whole. In fact, standing on the beach helps Thoreau see humankind as protean, oceanic, and intermingled forever with the ocean itself.

But as I poured it slowly out on to the sand, it seemed to me that man himself was like a half-emptied bottle of pale ale, which Time had drunk so far, yet stoppled tight for a while, and drifting about in the ocean of circumstances; but destined erelong to mingle with the surrounding waves, or be spilled amid the sands of a distant shore. (135)

The dead mingle with the waves, but the living individual is but “a half-emptied bottle of pale ale.” If any ownership exists here, it’s the ownership of the individual by the elemental and oceanic unknowable, not the other way around.

Consistently, the unknowable resists the senses, resisting measurement as much as ownership. Just as the elementally dispersed dead permeate the measurable elements, the immeasurable ocean itself permeates its opposite, the comparatively knowable dry land. It isn’t even necessary to look to the ocean to find the ocean. In the first place, Thoreau tells us, “the dry land itself came through and out of the water,” and he quotes the Swiss
geologist Pierre Jean Édouard Desor to say that “‘in going back through the geological ages, we come to an epoch when, according to all appearances, the dry land did not exist, and when the surface of our globe was entirely covered with water.’” Land itself becomes the progeny of the ocean, and the ocean “the ‘laboratory of continents’” (147). The oceanic elements entirely infuse the dry, the very “atmosphere […] impregnated with saline particles” from the ocean (147-148).

Thoreau finds himself obsessed with the idea of the ocean as a vast rock-tumbler, further dispersing what might be measured or known into the unknowable protean. The ocean’s act of smoothing objects into pebbles becomes a metaphor for sculpting as evolution.

Every material was rolled into the pebble form by the waves; not only stones of various kinds, but the hard coal which some vessel had dropped, bits of glass, and in one instance a mass of peat three feet long, where there was nothing like it to be seen for many miles. […] I have also seen very perfect pebbles of brick, and bars of Castile soap from a wreck rolled into perfect cylinders, and still spirally streaked with red, like a barber’s pole. (125)

Whereas in his “Auguries of Innocence,” Blake speaks of seeing “a World in a grain of sand,” Thoreau seeks the evidence of the origin of the world in a piece of sea glass. The ocean may as well have rolled the planet into being. As the ocean rounds out all things, it also serves Thoreau as the place where all things “mingle,” into and out of which all things circulate. “All the great rivers of the world are annually, if not constantly, discharging great quantities of lumber, which drifts to different shores” (125). The ocean as rounder of all things, encircler of all things, also circulates all things.
The Phenomenology of Trade

Even as Thoreau’s Transcendentalist metaphor for unknowability, something of the ocean may become known in part through its own kind of commerce. Like ownership, commerce is sense-based human artifice, from the examination of which something might be glimpsed of the ideal realm behind it. We have seen, in Thoreau, how the lineaments of the unexplored ideal may be glimpsed through phenomenological approaches, so we must also see that the back and forth of oceanic trade reveals something else beyond it. Similar to his belief in higher law behind human law, there exists for Thoreau a truer commerce behind commerce. He sees commerce itself as an organic activity. In Walden, Thoreau writes, “[Commerce] is very natural in its methods, withal, far more so than many fantastic enterprises and sentimental experiments” (106). In A Week, Thoreau reads the business section of a newspaper used to wrap his food. “The advertisements and prices current were more closely allied to nature, and were respectable in some measure as tide and meteorological tables are” (149). But human commerce uses the mediations of language and currency, and “tide and meteorological tables” can never become the tides and the weather. Human commerce must be subsumed in the commerce of Nature.

Throughout Cape Cod, Thoreau gives us instances of the unknowable ideal, represented by the ocean’s own global trade, which can never be regulated or even entirely anticipated. This higher commerce of the unknowable and oceanic stands against the lower commerce of human beings just as higher law stands against human law. That the ocean’s global trade can be known only through this kind of estimation makes a ramshackle science of the collection of such random instances. The ocean “vomits up”
giant clams, pieces “of some old pirate ship, wrecked more than a hundred years ago,” a cargo full of nutmeg. “Why, then, might not the Spice Islanders shake their nutmeg trees into the ocean, and let all nations who stand in need of them pick them up?” Even the fish become the purveyors of articles of trade.

You might make a curious list of articles which fishes have swallowed, —sailors’ open clasp-knives, and bright tin snuff-boxes, not knowing what was in them,—and jugs, and jewels, and Jonah. The other day I came across the following scrap in a newspaper. A RELIGIOUS FISH, —A short time ago, mine host Stewart, of the Denton Hotel, purchased a rock-fish, weighing about sixty pounds. On opening it he found in it a certificate of membership of the M.E. Church.” (133-134)

The ocean acts as global trader of fuel, as “Many get all their fuel from the [driftwood on] the beach” (152). Elsewhere Thoreau tells us of finding eighteenth century French coins on the cape (187). The collection of instances of oceanic trade serves as a phenomenological enterprise that gets us as close to knowing the ocean-as-ocean as we can get. We cannot know the ocean, but we can know the things it circulates. We are continually dealing with Thoreau’s idea of catching reflections of the ideal, here represented by the ocean, amongst the measurable, here represented by the items the ocean has left behind.

In some of these instances, the idea of ocean as merchant comes close to converging with the idea of ocean as originator of life. Thoreau is surprised to find people farming in the sand on Cape Cod, successfully raising turnips, beets, and carrots. How could this shifting and fine-grained beach sand prove fertile ground? He surmises that this fertility obtains through the air itself, ambient, with “an abundance of moisture in the atmosphere.” Even the air on the cape seems infused with the originating quality of the cape’s opposite, the ocean. “[W]hat little grass there was was remarkably laden with dew
in the morning.” Meanwhile, the thick summer fogs last until “midday, turning one’s beard into a wet napkin about his throat” (192). The fertile ground must be none other than the air itself. At the same time, the ocean has granted its own spoils from the other side of the world, so that the beets and turnips, Thoreau tells us, first grew by using seaweed as compost, having sprouted from seeds in a shipwrecked cargo.

It’s hard to miss the strange sexual imagery here. The ocean has broken its waves and spilled its shipwrecked seed upon a beach which is oddly fertile from the amount of moisture in its atmosphere. Thoreau’s notion of a higher commerce has turned out to be a kind of sexual congress, the ocean as primordial origin bearing the “Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world” that Whitman writes about (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 3). The ocean’s global trade exists through a dispersal of fertility.

This suggests how various plants may have been dispersed over the world to distant islands and continents. Vessels, with seeds in their cargoes, destined for particular ports, where perhaps they were not needed, have been cast away on desolate islands, and though their crews perished, some of their seeds have been preserved (193).

Having come to see oceanic global trade as sexual, we find it difficult not to read this segment as expressive of homosexual desire. When destined ports have no need of the seed (or perhaps the seed-filled vessels have no need of “particular ports”?), other places of entry, though seemingly “desolate,” may receive the cargo. The trading of primordial desire, however, must remain unpredictable. The desirous and procreant ocean remains so much in charge that even the individual must be lost to it. Shipwrecks may “contribute a new vegetable to a continent’s stock,” or, in fact, “winds and currents might effect the

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4 Certainly Michael Warner and others have argued that Thoreau’s writing is full of such latent expression. Warner writes, “The entire reflective/penetrative thematic of bottoms (or no bottoms) ostensibly serves as a metaphor for the imagined and the real, self and other. But it also carries the displaced interest in the bottoms or no bottoms of other men” (74).
same without the intervention of man” (193). Here the “procreant urge” seems so autonomous as to exist as a natural force outside of human lives.

**Traveling to the Eternal**

Finally, Thoreau’s complicated understanding of time—his paradoxical experimentalism with the ideal, his desire, by turns naturalistic and Transcendentalist, to experience Nature in its factual unknowability—means that he seeks paradoxical relations with time. He contradictorily seeks a *new* encounter with the *old* and an *historic* encounter with the *timeless*. Even in *The Maine Woods*, his push away from all settlements, further into the wilderness, comes across as a push toward some new meeting with a timeless source. Robinson says,

> Such glimpses of the actual nature of a realm that we inhabit but do not really know in detail are the hints of a new and more perfected life […]. The goal is to move inward toward the center and source of the gravity that we sense but do not fully comprehend. (76)

If that moving inward is true, it happens here through a further traveling outward. “[O]nly a few axe-men have gone ‘up river’ into the howling wilderness which feeds it” (*The Maine Woods*, 82). Then Thoreau tells us that “sixty miles above, the country is virtually unmapped and unexplored, and there still waves the virgin forest of the New World” (83). The aim consists of more than merely going where no (white) man has gone before.

Thoreau perpetually trudges toward the eternal and ideal, to that invisible spring he believes feeds its opposite, the time-bound and visible. “It was as if the seasons had revolved backward two or three months, or I had arrived at the abode of perpetual spring” (163). Going off the map, so to speak, means going back in time, finding source and origin, the self-perpetuation of which makes Nature timeless. Indeed, the idea of
apparently ceaseless self-perpetuation implies no end, and therefore, the search for a
beginning only ends up in the obliteration of tracks in the oceanic, the “primordial ooze,”
as we might say today. If traveling further into the unmapped means traveling further
toward the eternal and ideal, the primordial and timeless, so Thoreau suspects “that if you
should go to the end of the world⁵, you would find somebody there going further, as if
just starting for home at sundown, and having a last word before he drove off”⁶ (13).

At the end of the world, then, both in time and in geography, Thoreau looks for
the new. In “Thoreau’s Cape Cod: The Unsettling Art of the Wrecker,” John Lowney
argues that the book evokes the idea of “manifest destiny” with the rather perverse goal
of creating an un-settlement. That the end of the world might be seen as the beginning,
because the eternal and invisible feed the time-bound and visible, directly implicates the
idea of the frontier.

*Cape Cod* explicitly invokes the nationalist myth of the frontier, the myth of manifest destiny that translates “Ne plus ultra (no more beyond)” into “plus ultra (more beyond),” legitimating
the process of pulling up roots and leaving behind one’s past […] Rather than asserting such freedom from a local past in order to
nationalize his identity, the shoreline frontiersman who narrates
*Cape Cod* instead enacts his dissent from a fallen national mission
in order to affirm the significance of the local. (240-241).

Indeed through the local, the grain of sand or piece of sea glass, Thoreau sees the
primordial.

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⁵ Similarly, in Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*, narrator Ray Smith, while climbing mountains in the
Sierras, says, “The woods do that to you, they always look familiar, long lost […] most of all like gold
eternities of past childhood or past manhood and all the living and the dying and the heartbreak that went
on a million years ago” (61-62). Japhy Ryder, a character based on the poet Gary Snyder, tells Smith that
“a mountain is a Buddha” (67), and that “This is the beginning and the end of the world right here. Look at
all those patient Buddhas lookin [sic] at us saying nothing” (68).

⁶ Later in *The Dharma Bums*, when Smith can’t climb any higher up Matterhorn, he watches Ryder head
for the top and remembers “with horror” the Zen koan, “‘When you get to the top of a mountain, keep
climbing’” (84).
He seeks the original, the primordial, but his ideas about what such transcendent seeking might mean entail strange rearrangements in the oppositions of old and new. The ancient forests remain “virgin.” The “primeval” in nature can yet be called new, so long as we can say it is “untamed, and forever untameable” (69). What we might now call “old growth forests” he calls “new country.” Thoreau’s oppositions of new and old, in fact, bear much in common with those oppositional definitions of new and old that would allow anthropology to become the discipline it did in the twentieth century. “New” means much the same as “virgin” or “untouched,” in the sense of the wilderness not having been contaminated by the touch of “civilization.” Since “civilization” means urban civilization, both the wilderness and its indigenous peoples are deemed primitive, in the sense that they are closer to the origin.7

Even here Thoreau moves closer to the eternal and ideal. The idea of visiting primitive peoples carries with it the racial condescension of traveling backward through evolutionary history, though this condescension also romantically implies the primitive is more whole, true, even more real. Thus, for Thoreau, “the woods” and “the general twilight” should have the effect on the inhabitants of towns of “mak[ing] them salvages” (198). The strange spelling of “savage” seems to indicate that something is saved in the life that has not been “civilized.” Robinson says that Thoreau “divorces [‘true knowledge’] from the corruptions of civilization, arguing that the accumulation of knowledge lacks value for those who come to it simply as fact” (75). Thoreau’s sitting by the river and listening to the singing of thrushes makes him muse that “no higher

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7 This explains Claude Levi-Strauss’s apparently contrarian statement that the New World is often much older than the Old World, since it ages so much faster. “I fall into the opposite error: since these towns are new and derive their being and their justification from their newness, I find it difficult to forgive them for not remaining new. In the case of European towns, the passing of centuries provides an enhancement; in the case of American towns, the passing of years brings degeneration (Tristes Tropiques, 95).
civilization could be attained,” whether he means the experiential, non-factual and new civilization of himself in nature, or that of the thrush as Nature itself (274).

**Demythologizing History-in-Itself**

In *Cape Cod*, the timelessness of the ocean finally and paradoxically becomes the means for demythologizing history. History becomes myth when people come to think of it as immutable, as indeed factual, rather than narrative. Thoreau’s push to know the unknowable, with the unknowable made metaphoric by the ocean itself, leads him to the limits of what we can know. Just as in Kant, we cannot meet the thing in its unconditioned state, cannot directly meet the thing-in-itself, Thoreau reminds us that history is entirely conditioned. He explores epistemology by pointing out that what we know can never definitively be fixed. Lowney sees Thoreau’s attempts to trace the etymology of “Cape Cod” as an “apparent linguistic playfulness” that “actually adumbrates the unsettlement method of the book” (243). Thus Thoreau begins to question or unsettle the historical consensus of particular Europeans having first explored particular New England coastal areas. He tells us that New England was first New France, accusing our history-telling of Anglicization (274). He speaks of the mythological city of Norumbega, which early European explorers said was a vast Indian trading center somewhere high on the Eastern coast (279). Then he travels further into the past to the Vikings, who may or may not have sailed by Cape Cod shortly after the first millennium (289).

In accordance with Thoreau’s experimentation with the invisible, his enterprise to know, somehow, the unknowable, he tells us that we can only know history by un-knowing it, demythologizing it. His considerations of recorded history necessarily take
him to the aporia of unrecorded history, history in absentia. A 1609 account says that the French had “frequent[ed] the Newfoundland Banks from time immemorial” (290). Another French account claims the Gauls visited the Northeastern American coast “more than sixteen hundred years ago.” Thoreau doesn’t dismiss these stories, but admits the countless possibilities of what we do not and cannot know. “It is the old story. Bob Smith discovered the mine, but I discovered it to the world. And now Bob Smith is putting in his claim” (291).

Thoreau admits that history must always be a political record, and this admission takes us back to land claims once again. History acknowledges those who first “spoke for” the land, but this speaking for cannot occlude the possibility of unspoken-for occurrences preceding the naming, the claim-staking of history.

If America was found and lost again once, as most of us believe, then why not twice? especially as there were likely to be so few records of an earlier discovery. Consider what stuff history is made of,—that for the most part it is merely a story agreed on by posterity. Who will tell us even how many Russians were engaged in the battle of the Chernaya, the other day? Yet no doubt, Mr. Scriblerus, the historian, will fix on a definite number for the schoolboys to commit to their excellent memories. (291-292)

The historian “speaks for” history in the same way that the Pilgrims “spoke for” the land and Thoreau himself “mak[es] the earth say beans” or “Apocynum androsaemifolium” (The Maine Woods 310). Our reading and writing of the truth and our speaking for Nature still fail, but for reflections and shadows, to see the tree behind the tree.

The Doubled Thing: “Thing” and “Self”

Through all Thoreau’s various musings in Cape Cod, we see the consistency of his stubborn attempt to know some reflection or refraction of the unknowable, to use the senses to approach the ideal indirectly, although he knows this quest to be quixotic. He
shows the artifice of our measures to get to their object, whether those measures be language, ownership, law, commerce, or even time. All of these mediations can only remain precisely that, mediations. Nevertheless, he insists on using them to approach some higher form of each construction. Cape Cod is a ramble, but it does have this underlying consistency. Again, the opposition between all of these constructions and what Thoreau believes to be the truth behind them pushes him forward, evidence of his contradictory status as idealist and empiricist. This contradictory status brings us back to the “thing-in-itself.”

With his drive to use measurements, always constructed and therefore faulty, to approach the ideal, Thoreau travels further, constantly. The last isolated cabin will not be far enough into the wilderness and the visits of the Vikings or even of Gauls before them will not be far enough into the past. The place where the world ends, past which we can still start off on a journey, and the place where the tree meets the ideal tree behind it are the same placeless place, which for Thoreau must be the ocean.

If Thoreau depends on the thing measured, even though he finds the measurement ultimately untrue, then we might say he measures the material thing to approach its ideal self. The metaphysical realm is not saved by saying that an empirically trustworthy scientific measurement cannot touch the metaphysical, as is the case in Kant. Instead, the metaphysical is seen as capable of being glimpsed from the physical. The thing-in-itself is no longer the unconditioned thing as it is in Kant. Perhaps it’s the actual in the ideal, the visible in the invisible. The thing doubled into “thing” and “self” must be the paradoxical “original” “echo” that Thoreau also talks about in A Week, where he says,
“But to-day I like best the echo amid these cliffs and woods. It is no feeble imitation, but rather its original” (41).

The question of how one can recover the thing-in-itself from its oppositional status and simultaneously believe in the existence of the ideal behind the sensuous cannot entirely be answered outside of this all-pervading tension. To whatever extent Thoreau can seek to know the ocean in its unknowability, he can only do so from the ocean’s opposite. He can only look directly into the self-perpetuating source, the ideal, the origin, from the beach. The stanza following his assertion in *A Week* that “the ocean they’ve sailed o’er / Is deeper known upon the strand to me,” says,

> The middle sea contains no crimson dulse,  
> Its deeper waves cast up no pearls to view,  
> Along the shore my hand is on its pulse,  
> And I converse with many a shipwrecked crew. (195)

So Thoreau stands on the time-bound beach with his hand upon the pulse of the timeless ocean, itself the origin of the world. According to William H. Bonner,

> He viewed the sea either as a landsman from the shore or, like a landsman turned sailor, amidst waves that roll and winds that blow toward some mystic shore that should be eagerly sought or chosen for a home. Either way, the shore was a point of focus and emphasis. (53)

As the shore allows him to take the pulse of the origin, the shore allows him to witness the permeation of the world with the unseen dead.

> Strewn with crabs, horse-shoes, and razor-clams, and whatever the sea casts up,—a vast morgue, where famished dogs may range in packs, and crows come daily to glean the pittance which the tide leaves them. The carcasses of men and beasts together lie stately up upon its shelf, rotting and bleaching in the sun and waves, and each tide turns them in their beds, and tucks fresh sand under them. There is naked Nature, inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray. (217-218)
On the continental shelf above the waves, at the edge of the ocean, Nature stands naked and entirely oblivious to him.

To whatever degree the thing-in-itself in its unconditioned sense, its Kantian sense, can be made manifest, it can only be done over and against its opposite. In seeking to recover what he admits to be irrecoverable, in knowing the unknowable ocean from the shore, Cape Cod-in-itself reveals itself to him.

There I had got the Cape under me, as much as if I were riding it bare-backed. It was not as on the map, or seen from the stagecoach; but there I found it all out of doors, huge and real, Cape Cod! as it cannot be represented on a map, color it as you will; the thing itself, than which there is nothing more like it, no truer picture or account; which you cannot go further and see. (74)

This moment in this short book is about as happy as Thoreau ever shows himself to be. Cape Cod here, against the ocean, seems not just to be real, but to be ideal and unconditioned. And if travelers are even starting up from the end of the world to head further, “you cannot go further” than Cape Cod.

Cape Cod-in-itself exists here in a particular Thoreauvian state of opposition to both Concord and Walden Pond so that Cape Cod itself must have made necessary the journey from Concord, for being what Concord could never be. In The Environmental Imagination, Lawrence Buell writes, “Among all American places made famous by literary associations, Concord had already long been and still remains today the most visited and most luminous” (318). Buell goes on to call Concord sacred in the way a place of pilgrimage creates its own hagiography. Walden Pond became its own pilgrimage site over and against that of Concord, since Thoreau used it as a site, not for “withdrawal,” but for “confrontation” (Cavell xv). He “wake[s] his neighbors up” “as lustily as chanticleer in the morning” (Walden 75). But Walden Pond, Buell points out,
has consistently been “over-pastoralize[d]” (“The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage” 180), itself the anti-pilgrimage shrine mirroring Concord, which, having become “noted as the resort of bucolic philosopher-literati, [had] its pastoral mystique redoubled” (183). Walden becomes an overly pastoralized symbol, but the semiotics of the ocean must surely reject such limitations. The ocean must be its own undoing of any historical “manifest destiny,” since Thoreau uses the idea of its paradoxical deep-time timelessness to demythologize history. And as that place from which the ocean can be known, Cape Cod becomes for Thoreau the possibility of an enduring un-settlement. The trip to Cape Cod-in-itself has become his un-pilgrimage.

In his excitement, Thoreau has forgotten to be self-conscious of his writing. If he calls Cape Cod “huge and real,” he refuses to take the time to realize he is “speaking for.” This one moment acts as a strange window. Thoreau seems to have seen straight through the Cape Cod that exists in language, that his book speaks for, and that hinges on its name, to the Cape Cod that he cannot represent for us. There can be “no truer account” than “the thing itself,” he says here, but he can do no better than give us an account of that account.

Against the ocean, which he ends the book by calling “the spring of springs, the waterfall of waterfalls” (319), no human mythology can sustain itself. Not history. Not even that historical construct, itself an invention of consensus, the nation. What is America, he asks in *The Maine Woods*, but a European name for a place that has no idea it’s been so called.

Seeing and hearing moose, caribou, bears, porcupines, lynxes, wolves, and panthers. Places [within the American wilderness] where he might live and die and never hear of the United States, which make such a noise in the world,—never hear of America, so called from the name
of a European gentleman. (236)

Because for Thoreau in that one moment, Cape Cod existed in and of itself, outside of the mediation of its name and of any “speaking for” it, Cape Cod opposite its representation, Cape Cod opposite the ocean, the book could end with the sentence, “A man may stand there and put all America behind him” (319).
CHAPTER 5
AN OUROBORIC UNDERSTANDING OF OPPOSITIONS IN WALT WHITMAN’S “SONG OF MYSELF”

Writing in her journal in 1844, Margaret Fuller drew a serpent swallowing its own tail. Beneath the sketch, she wrote, “Patient serpent, circle round / Till in death thy life is found” (195). The serpent is an ouroboros, an ancient worldwide symbol, also used in alchemy, of a dragon or serpent devouring its tail. While the image of a snake swallowing its tail can be found in cultures as wide-ranging as Japanese, Aztec and American Indian, French historian and archaeologist Louis Charbonneau-Lassay traces its lineage from the Egyptians to the Greeks. The ouroboros was used to represent a conciliation of opposites such as part and whole or life and death. Fuller’s short verse also uses the serpent to bring together male and female, darkness and light, and time and eternity. The ouroboros can be used as a trope for Whitman’s response to the Transcendentalist goal of bringing oppositions into harmony. The times abounded in esotericism, and Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century constantly refers to a range of the occult from Swedenborg to Theosophy. The symbiotic relationship of opposites was a leitmotiv for the Transcendentalists and those they influenced, such as Walt Whitman.

Famously and contrarily, Whitman declares, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (Sec. 51). Whitman continually jams opposites together in apparently contradictory ways. In “Song of Myself,” the claim that a thing is its opposite, or is in direct relationship with its opposite, is ubiquitous. Like Fuller in her journal, Whitman deals with the oppositions of time and eternity, life and death, male and female, as well as self and other, body and soul, part and whole, and so on. Though this ourobic balance is perpetually sustained, it is not
The ouroboric is cyclically dynamic; it is balance in process. Whitman writes against static form, as oppositions constantly circle each other, “and ever come back thither” (Sec. 27). The “opposite equals” always “advance” (Sec. 3). Opposites have been one another and will be again.

Despite Whitman’s ouroboric sense that opposites directly sustain each other, critics have often seen Whitman as coming down on one side or the other of the equation. D.H. Lawrence excoriates the “I” of “Song of Myself,” as falling under a totalitarian delusion that “Eskimos” are “minor little Walts,” rather than “something that I am not” (Maslan, 121). Meanwhile, many of those critics who praise Whitman call him a healer and consider “division […] an affliction for which Whitman seeks a cure” (Maslan, 135). To seek a “cure” for division, however, or to consider the other as primarily part of the self, is to seek not only an imbalance, but a solution that will finally halt the intercourse of opposites. Precisely because of the balance of oppositions devouring and creating one another in “Song of Myself,” Whitman can claim to “bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (Sec. 52). The speaker’s death gives life to the grass, so it is from the grass that he speaks to us. Because the speaker’s role is not to eliminate division, but to show the necessary intercourse and sustenance between opposites, he shows us the necessity of death for life. The division must be sustained. Both sides must depend on each other for the relationship to hold. Whitman’s “Song of Myself” preaches an ouroboric balance of oppositions in process that depends as much on the autonomy of each opposing item as on the overarching opposition itself.
One critic after another has emphasized Whitman as healer, as arbitrator of various tensions, or as a heroic figure resolving the antagonisms of his times. He fits this role for those whose concerns are overwhelmingly political, psychoanalytic, or sexual. Certainly Whitman himself has led us to this portrait, saying, “No two have exactly the same language, and the great translator and joiner of the whole is the poet.” Indeed Betsy Erkkila quotes this line in *Whitman, the Political Poet* to show that he is “The Poet of Slaves and the Masters of Slaves” (49).

Erkkila sees the struggles of the marketplace in Whitman. In his poetry, “the real contradictions of the American marketplace […] continually collide with and threaten to explode Whitman’s democratizing designs” (10). At the outset, the poems are opposed to these tensions. “Whitman’s poems are a response to and an attempt to manage the disintegrative forces of democracy and technology in the nineteenth century” (11). For Erkkila, the politics is primary, and “the theme of political union” is “the overarching figure of his life and work” (23). Though she is right to point out that the poetic and the political were not considered separate spheres before the late nineteenth century ideal of *ars gratia artis* (11), to make Whitman primarily political, rather than spiritual or

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1 Academic critics are not alone in this assessment. In her 1949 book, *The Life of Poetry*, poet Muriel Rukeyser writes, “Whitman’s fight for reconciliation was of profound value as a symbol. The fight was the essential process of democracy.” Then, a poet of that democracy would have to acknowledge and make that truth emerge from the widest humanity in himself, among the horizons of his contradicted days and nights. The reconciliation was not a passive one; the unity was not an identification in which the range was lost. (78)

Her point that “the range was [not] lost” in Whitman’s “reconciliation” may present a more complicated argument than that Whitman was the healer of the Divided States.

She also says that Whitman’s rhythms were those of the relation of our breathing to our heartbeat, and these measured against an ideal of water at the shore, not beginning nor ending, but endlessly drawing in, making forever its forms of massing and falling among the breakers, seething in the white recessions of surf, never finishing, always making a meeting-place. (78)

Her description here is of an infinite rhythm, a neverending give-and-take, though where the poem captures this rhythm, it constitutes Rukeyser’s frequent definition of a poem: “a meeting-place.”
naturalistic, is to upset the balancing act of oppositions that Whitman sets up in such poems as “Song of Myself.” This focus is not to say that Whitman’s poetry is apolitical, but that the political does not constitute a primacy.

Likewise M. Wynn Thomas sees Whitman’s ideas of self as a synthesis of marketplace struggles. Whitman’s strange contradiction of celebrating the self and disdaining the trappings of selfishness reflects the shift from the artisanal market economy to industrial capitalism. The artisanal system emphasized individualism and pride in one’s skills, yet the new system placed money and all it could buy before everything else. Once again, Whitman’s role is to heal the fissure, to arbitrate the tension, or, as Thomas says, “Whitman turned to poetry to resolve him of his ambiguities.”

Furthermore,

In “Song of Myself” he makes contemporary capitalism, with all the freedom and variety of existence it quite genuinely seems to him to promise, the ostensibly simple subject of his celebrations; while at the same time he attacks the very spirit of selfhood, which in historical fact animates and agitates this new world—pulling down its vanity by means of his very different pride in himself. It is almost as if he were trying to bring the artisanal and post-artisanal phases he had known together into a single imaginative synthesis (The Lunar Light of Whitman’s Poetry, 71).

Again, Whitman dissolves oppositions in his role as healer or arbitrator of the times.

Though Vivian Pollak also gives him this role, she sees the danger of solely focusing on one aspect of Whitman’s balancing act of oppositions. In particular, in writing The Erotic Whitman, she risks reducing “Whitman’s rich literary achievement to the sum of his insecurities,” but she does “hope to demonstrate that his insights into ‘the problems of freedom’ (LG 1860, p. 349) were always conditioned by the ‘chaos’ that he himself had encountered” (xv). To Pollak, the fissures Whitman fuses are between an
artistic “feminization” and his own “compensatory virilization” (xvi-xvii), and “between sexual love and social cohesion rather than the ‘destructive iconoclasms’ of individual romantic obsession” (148). Somehow, Whitman is “able to convert his fear of erotic intimacy […] into a poetics of national closeness” (xvii). Whitman’s own self-healing somehow leads to a national healing through his poetry.

But if to resolve a tension means to eliminate the opposing poles, or at least to move them from their polar positions, if to unite means to bring together, and if to heal means to stitch the sides of a wound together again, then Whitman fails to achieve these ends. Even as many claim him to be the poet of union and healing, Whitman is also the poet of polar opposition and division. This perspective seems to deny the most popular ways of viewing Whitman, yet it’s not hard to see his particular understanding of things proceeding through oppositions. Nor can too much emphasis be placed on the word “proceeding,” for if Whitman sees existence as a series of oppositions, he doesn’t see a static series. He sees all things perpetually becoming all other things, and this perpetual becoming is the very essence of that serpent swallowing its tail. Since all of these critical viewpoints of Whitman as healer fail to take into account the oppositions Whitman maintains, a good place to begin looking at Whitman’s ouroboric understanding is the opposition between meaning itself and the world as it exists outside of meaning (that extra-hermeneutic world itself being, of course, a human notion).

The speaker preaches an ouroboric balance between what things mean to us and the opposite pole where grass or hawks cannot be said to “mean,” because they exist on their own, outside human attempts to define them. On one side of this opposition he searches for a way to express nature for itself, and in doing so, to exclude human
interpretation of nature. On the other side of this opposition he must use language to express nature, and language is automatically interpretive. On one hand, inasmuch as words dissolve into the air, or a book can rot or burn in the fire, a poem always consists of the elements, always only a part of nature. On the other hand, any expression of nature ascribes a human meaning, and cannot be considered natural.

The speaker deals with the first side of this opposition by seeking to allow nature to speak through the speaker, but still as nature. Hermeneutics is not allowed. He claims to “harbor for good or bad” both and calls this “Nature without check with original energy” (Sec. 1). The speaker’s words themselves remain only so much air and vibration, only as natural as anything else on the earth, “The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loosed to the eddies of the wind” (Sec. 2). Right from the beginning, then, “Song of Myself” strikes an organicist stance, in which all the thinking or faith in meaning in the poem continues to be only a part of nature, words no more than belches. In this view, it becomes futile, indeed groundless, to speak of what something might mean. If the reader has “felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems,” then a “day and night,” and “the good of the earth and sun” need to be seen as “the origin of all poems” (Sec. 2). The speaker asks his reader to stop with him to see nature not as the meaning of the poem, but as what Whitman elsewhere calls “The real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures)” (Whitman, “Spontaneous Me”). No defense could suffice against such an effort to make things “mean,” against the assaults of “trippers and askers,” “linguists and contenders,” but to “witness and wait” (Sec. 4).

Positioned against such interpreters and critics, against the very chapter you now read, the speaker comes across as the truly anti-intellectual poet. Where there is no
meaning, there is no knowing, as “What is known I strip away, / I launch all men and
women forward with me into the Unknown” (Sec. 44). Nature cannot know itself, the
way its interpreters claim to know it and to speak for it. As the speaker seeks to speak as
nature, as a part of nature on nature’s own non-critical terms, his voice comes from a
realm where there is no knowing, no hermeneutics, no translation. He contradictorily
says, “I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me
in the open air” (Sec. 47). The never-at-all can be qualified, because the mere vibrations
of words, as so much roil of nature in the open air, constitute the only possible
translation. The speaker becomes finally like the hawk, “not a bit tamed” and
“untranslatable” (Sec. 52). He says to the leaves of grass, “If you do not say any thing
how can I say any thing?” (Sec. 49), because a translation of the speaker would be as
futile as a translation of the grass or the hawk. What does grass or a hawk or a vine
“mean”? They can “mean” nothing, because meaning marks the projection of the human
mind, cutting itself off via its very interpretation from the things it interprets. Language
and philosophy always break down to the elemental, subsumed by nature and also,
therefore, by nature’s non-meaning.

On the other side of this opposition between non-meaning nature and our inability
not to make nature “mean” appears the obvious problem: the poem’s organicist siding
against meaning proclaims to speak for what nature “means,” that it “means” by not
meaning. Only through the speaker’s witnessing and theorizing, only through language,
can language and philosophy be considered, elementally and naturally, not to mean
anything. “Song of Myself” begins with celebrating and, at least in its titled version,
singing. This entire poem as organicist piece of nature, belch with hawk and grass, bears
the title of a song. Though the end of the poem speaks outside the “shutter’d room or
school,” and claims, “I swear I will never again mention love or death inside a house”
(Sec. 47), the beginning tells us that “Creeds and schools,” though “in abeyance,” are
“never forgotten,” because they are “sufficed at what they are” (Sec. 1). Here Whitman
strikes the balance, where even those things we distinguish from nature belong with
nature. After all, the poem sings of “streets and public halls” as much as “flower-beds,
vines” (Sec. 45). What things mean to us and what we say they mean also comprise the
opposite pole where grass or hawks cannot be said to “mean,” as do these non-meaning
things with our meanings. So the grass itself becomes “uttering tongues” of the dead who
have fed it, and the speaker simultaneously and contradictorily wishes he “could translate
the hints,” even as he does so by imagining the “old men and mothers, and the offspring”
(193). The grass sprouts everywhere and it means everywhere. It doesn’t mean such and
such a meaning; it simply means.

Because meaning and non-meaning here depend on one another, the speaker
shows no interest in resolving this particular dilemma. He remains happy and content not
to understand. Herbert Levine sees “Song of Myself” as a narrative going from phases of
union to disunion and finally reunion in a grand scheme of healing the national body.
Knowing Whitman’s biography, especially his time as nurse during the Civil War, makes
it all the more tempting to write large the mystic poet as healer. Levine begins his article
with John Calhoun saying, “The cry of ‘Union, Union, the glorious Union!’ can no more
prevent disunion than the cry of ‘Health, health, glorious health!’ on the part of the
physician can save a patient” (570). Levine shows us the body of the nation, sick because
of slavery and its legislative compromises, for which Whitman will act as natural physician.

The Section 6 explanations to the child about what the leaf of grass may actually be are ouroboric in the full sense of the interdependence of oppositions, whereas Levine reads the section linearly. The speaker answers the child, but does so only after saying he cannot answer him. “How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.” The speaker guesses and talks about what the grass seems to be and then wishes he could translate it. The grass embodies both the human and the divine, both “the flag of my disposition” and “the handkerchief of the Lord.” It reads as “uniform hieroglyphic,” because it grows everywhere and only means inasmuch as it does not mean. The grass “is itself a child” only because it is “the beautiful uncut hair of graves.” The impersonal grass, which cannot itself mean, becomes personal, as it may “transpire from the breasts of young men” the speaker perhaps “would have loved.” It is “dark,” even as it rises from “white heads,” and though it is “so many uttering tongues,” has nothing to say but itself. Because of death, because of the grave, life perpetuates itself, since “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death.”

Instead of the equal truth of all these guesses, the validity of all these necessarily failed translations, Levine sees this section as a strict linear sequence. He asks, “Why then did [the speaker] tease us with his series of artificial guesses?”

Uniformity is represented here by Whitman’s democratic homily that the grass has a universal meaning. But in the interest of variety, he makes room for other possible views among his audience or within a pluralized democratic self. Only after presenting these other interpretations, does he present his preference for a spiritualized reading of physical matter (582).
Because Whitman’s organicism implies a kind of anti-hermeneutic non-meaning, however, to call the grass a uniform hieroglyphic is not to imply a universal meaning. It is to imply a possibility of interpretation by everyone.

Nor is it necessary to see a linear hierarchy in the speaker’s responses to the child. An example of the ouroboric alternative to the linear appears in an 1815 letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Joseph Cottle. Coleridge writes that the “the common end of . . . all Poems is to convert a series into a Whole.” Furthermore, Coleridge strives for a “cyclopedic comprehension by way of the logic of burning ice—a grammar that ‘assume[s] to our Understanding a circular motion, the snake with its [sic] Tail in its Mouth’” (La Bossiere, 174). If Levine interprets correctly that the speaker intends merely to make room for “other possible views” he will then shoot down, the speaker undermines his own democratic notions, his own “cyclopedic comprehension.” Instead, the speaker understands each of the grass’ meanings in its place. He doesn’t rank them and has no problem with their differences. The meanings do not cancel each other out, belonging as they do to the circular whole, rather than the series. Louis Charbonneau-Lassay gives an example of how the ouroboros converts “a series into a Whole” by describing a seventeenth-century sundial, in which an ouroboros radially demarcates the hours of the day. The radial configuration ensures an absence of hierarchy in the series as much as does the clamping of the snake’s jaws on its tail. The sundial bears an inscription: “Memento quia pulvis es: Remember thou art dust” (429). The combination of the memento mori and the ouroboros serves as a reminder that the dust embodies the remains of old life and the compost of new life. This embodiment “[t]he smallest sprout
shows,” being the “good manure” that is the “Corpse” (Sec. 49). The ouroboric expresses principles inherently non-serial and non-hierarchial.

If “Song of Myself” claims as much about nature-as-itself as it does about the selfish human presumption of nature, the poem also declares the negation of the self as much as it does the centrality of the self. The self-negation and egocentrism relate to each other in an ouroboric sense, so that the self cannot exist without its own negation and the self cannot be negated without its own central importance. So many Whitman readers have felt his “barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” to be little more than bombast (Sec. 52). “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son” (Sec. 24) claims to be “an acme of things accomplish’d, and I an encloser of things to be.” All of existence has prepared the way for him, the whole cosmos his John the Baptist. “Immense have been the preparations for me, / Faithful and friendly the arms that have help’d me.” In what sounds like the ultimate egocentrism and solipsism, “All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and delight me, / Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul” (Sec. 44). He epitomizes the purpose for which all things exist. All things lead to him and all things lead out of him.

Yet paradoxically, the negation of the self attains through every other self’s equally central self-importance. The central importance of the self the speaker finds not limited to one self. Hence, the self, in its own ultimate selfishness, cannot fail to understand the ultimate selfishness of the self of each other person or thing. This understanding negates the self by allowing the central importance of the self of anyone and anything else that is not one’s own self. The speaker can say, “I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious” (Sec. 24), only because “what I assume you shall
assume” (Sec. 1). Each self shall assume Self itself. Furthermore, all the speaker’s selfishness obtains not only to negate itself, but for the reader to negate. Sounding like a Zen koan, the teacher tells the student, “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (Sec. 47). The speaker answers nothing for anyone else and tells everyone else to revel as much in their existence and all its oppositions as he does in his. Just as in every moment, he has “the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured,” he says, “You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life” (Sec. 46). Paradoxically, the “best of time and space” becomes exclusively his moment, though he wants his student too to claim this moment, and to claim it every moment. The full living of the self exists for every self, simultaneously “regardless of others, ever regardful of others” (Sec. 16).

Though “Song of Myself” talks of being an “acme of things accomplish’d, and I an encloser of things to be,” Whitman sings as much of openness as enclosure. Each I at each moment becomes this very same acme and this same seed, and this perpetuity means that I, writing about Walt Whitman, am as central to “Song of Myself” as the speaker, as are you reading me. Whitman’s ouroboros is contradictorily (and ouroborically) open. As mentioned, “Song of Myself” uses words to speak for the wordless, but even in ascribing an anti-hermeneutic non-meaning as the meaning of things, the poem leads us away from itself, to the “real poems” mentioned in “Spontaneous Me.” The opposition lies between everything as part of the self and the self as part of everything else. If nothing can escape the self in one’s own consideration, the way out of the self goes through the self as everything else. Paradoxically, the ouroboric leads to the open road.
The speaker’s selfishness achieves its selflessness by a dispersion of the self, through atoms or compost or smoke, to everything else in existence. The self in the poem’s title refers as much to everything outside of the self as it does to the ostensible “I.” Coleridge’s “cyclopedic comprehension” manifests itself in Whitman as an encyclopedic cataloguing. By the dispersion of the self into the non-self, the self achieves the infinite, and the infinite can be most closely approximated as the random. So the speaker rambles without apparent aim about “the she-whale,” “the steam-ship,” “the fin of the shark,” and on to “the cider-mill,” “apple-peelings” and “beach-parties,” “Pleas’d with” and moving among seemingly anything he can name (Sec. 33). Though the speaker identifies himself as the poet, “Walt Whitman” (Sec. 24), “The latest dates,” “My dinner,” “indifference” and “sickness,” “Battles,” and “fitful events” “come to me days and nights and go from me again, / But they are not the Me myself.” The presumed “Me” himself stands to the side, “Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it” (Sec. 4), even as he says, “You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean” (Sec. 22).

The “Me myself” stands apart even as the self disperses into everything else. The “I” cannot be contained in form, but disperses even as it brings everything else into and through it.

To be in any form, what is that?
(Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither,)
If nothing lay more develop’d the quahaug in its callous shell
were enough.

Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,
To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand (Sec. 27).

The speaker waxes ecstatic with the very thought of this “influx and efflux” (Sec. 22).

The intercourse of the oppositions of self and everything else and this incessant permeation of the membrane of the self are simultaneously physical and metaphysical.

A brief historical look at the sexual aspects of the ouroboros can indicate how this physical ecstasy in “Song of Myself” always entails (ouroboric pun intended) the interdependence of the sexual and the spiritual. Whereas the ouroboros serves as a spiritual symbol, indicating “the circle as the image of the universe, of the infinite cosmos which includes divinity and all its works” (Charbonneau-Lassay, 430), it also works as an innately physical image. The serpent, autophagous, sustains itself on its own flesh. In alchemy, the autophagy of the ouroboros becomes essentially sexual, a symbol for “‘the dissolution of the body by fermentation.’” Such notions remain from ancient Greek ideas of the sperm being a part of the soul or even “a clot of brain” (Foucault, 130), so that “the sexual act that expels it constitutes a costly expenditure for the human being” (133). In this spiritualized view of sex, reproduction occurred only through the passing on of a bit of the life of the procreator (131). In this view, masturbation wastes one’s very soul. The ouroboros, on the other hand, as the eternal circularity of opposites, expends only into itself, passes its life on only into itself. Autophagous, as well as autoerotic and auto-reproductive, the ouroboros perpetually sustains its spiritual and physical aspects simultaneously. In alchemy, for example, the ouroboros becomes “the emblem of the active and of the passive elements, the former represented by the tail and the latter by the mouth of the snake—as in the ancient idea, the first giving to the second the substance for a new growth.” Similarly, Kabala sees the serpent in Eden as “‘the symbol of primordial
egoism,”” and uses the ouroboros itself to illustrate “the mysterious attraction of the self for itself” (Charbonneau-Lassay, 433).

The ouroboric in Whitman likewise brings together the spiritual and the sexual. The serpent now not only sustains itself, but as a phallic image, procreates itself through its own intercourse of opposites. The onward movement of the world, eternal life, depends on the “advance” of “opposite equals […] always substance and increase, always sex.” Just as the self calls every moment of its own existence the acme of all other moments, “There was never any more inception than there is now.” The ouroboros undulates around its circle eternally. “Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world” (Sec. 3). The speaker tells his own soul, “I believe in you,” and that “the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other.” He then remembers a morning when the soul “settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me.” The strangest ouroboric image ever given the world may be that of Walt Whitman’s soul performing fellatio on his body (Sec. 5).

 Whereas to the ancients, sex may always have come at the expense of the partaker, for the speaker of “Song of Myself,” “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is” (Sec. 24). Sex is not only le petit mort, but death procreates, as “the smallest sprout” shows. For the ancient Greeks, the soul cheated death by passing itself through the semen to a new generation, and for Plato, the soul in the semen “partakes of immortality by means of coming-into-being” (Foucault, 133). In the ouroboros of “Song of Myself,” the soul eternally procreates its own self through death into new life.

 In this interdependence of the sexual and the spiritual, “Song of Myself” illustrates the interdependence of the male and female. The speaker’s saying existence is
“always sex” relies on his vision of “opposite equals advanc[ing]” “Out of the dimness” (Sec. 3). The speaker declares himself “maternal as well as paternal” (Sec. 16), and says, “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man” (Sec. 21). If he also says, “And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man, / And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men” (Sec. 21), again reducing the sexes to procreation, he does so because everything “Always” brims full with “the procreant urge of the world” (Sec. 3).

Even the homoeroticism of “Song of Myself” appears to be the ouroboric outcome of the interdependence of male and female. As Fuller writes,

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman (68, 69).

This principle enables Fuller’s feminism; as she repeatedly states, “Union is only possible to those who are units” (71). Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary notes,

The alchemical parallel [of the “idea of eternal process”) is the double nature of Mercurius, which shows itself most clearly in the [O]Uroboros, the dragon that devours, fertilizes, begets, and slays itself and brings itself to life again. 1957 N. FRYE Anat. Criticism 157 Alchemical symbolism takes the ouroborus and the hermaphrodite in this redemptive context.

If the speaker embodies both man and woman, he can relate erotically to neither men nor women without homoeroticism. In this hermaphroditism, it makes no more sense to define the speaker’s self-fellatio as homoerotic than it does to describe it as heteronormative. The male and female within each gender equally balance the two. The speaker’s own transformation into the grass growing from the ground at the end of the poem appears likewise hermaphroditic as the only way to truly translate “the hints” about the “old men and mothers” both uttered by the tongues of the grass on graves (Sec. 6).
The speaker’s own “Corpse” will become “leafy lips” and “polish’d breasts of melons” (Sec. 49).

Even more radically, the interdependence of the sexual and the spiritual extends itself into the interdependence of the physical and the divine. “[T]he poet of the Body and the poet of the Soul” (Sec. 21) has faith “in the flesh” and says,

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds (Sec. 24).

Nothing is more divine than the most fleshy and earthly thing. Elsewhere he asks, “Why should I pray? Why should I venerate and be ceremonious?” before proclaiming, “I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones” (Sec. 20). Though Whitman’s sexual ecstasies made Emerson cringe, Emerson himself became the object of scorn for telling the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School that Jesus Christ was the “[o]ne man [who] was true to what is in you and me” (67). This Emersonian stance of Christ foreshadows the selfless selfishness Whitman’s speaker enacts. Christ best expresses being physically human by claiming to be God and thereby asking everyone else to fulfill their physical humanity by seeing the divine moving through them to “take possession of his World.”

Because Whitman’s speaker moves along the open road “Accepting the Gospels” as much as “the llama or Brahmin,” the “Shastas and Vedas,” “the Koran” (Sec. 43), he can see the divine miracle of his own physical being, as “acme of things accomplish’d” and “encloser of things to be.” He has a “rendezvous” with “the Lord,” whom he calls

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2 Emerson continues, “He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, ‘I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.’”
“the lover true for whom I pine” (Sec. 45). Having known the Lord in the Biblical sense of “knowing,” and thus the divine in the physical, he can see himself as a complete pagan Christ figure, sought by “The young mechanic,” “the woodman,” or “The farm-boy ploughing in the field” (Sec. 47), sought by the reader who “prove[s] already too late” to “speak before [he] is gone” (Sec. 51). Though as by now his “Corpse” (in the ground and in his poems) has become “good manure,” we may “look for [him] under our boot-soles” (Sec. 52). Most Christ-like of all, however, he says in effect, “Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think,” when he says,

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is (Sec. 48).

As Emerson saw all human beings as parts of one Oversoul, Whitman portrays an ouroboric relationship in the opposition of the part and the whole. Every part of existence equates to the whole, and because the whole remains unattainable as such, it must always become merely part. Thus in his pagan Christ-like stance, he can “say to mankind, Be not curious about God,” since ultimately, he says, “I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself” (Sec. 48). The self, as part, equates to God, a pantheistic whole, as God becomes the self. This exemplifies an ouroboric relationship between microcosm and macrocosm. Each part synecdochally reinvents the whole, even as the whole is visible in each part. The speaker calls himself “One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same.” He embodies at once everything from “Southerner” to “Northerner,” “teacher” and “novice,” “Of every hue and caste.” He says,

I resist any thing better than my own diversity,
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,
And am not stuck up, and am in my place (Sec. 16).

To be in one’s place is as much to be content and unselfish as to be Christ and not have to wonder about God. This is the democracy of the ouroboros. “Have you outstript the rest? are you the President? / It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on” (Sec. 21). The self always measures as “by far the largest” of the worlds, “And whether I come to my own to-day or in ten thousand or ten million years, / I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait” (Sec. 20). Because the whole obtains in each of its parts, “there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel’d universe,” “And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth” (Sec. 48). Even time and eternity, as opposites, are related in this interdependence of the part and the whole, as “a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars” (Sec. 31).

If, as I’ve earlier claimed, the speaker sees himself as a pagan Christ figure at the end of “Song of Myself,” the poem becomes no less ouroboric, since even the story of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection ouroborically represents the necessity of death for life. A medieval Christian sect known as L’estoile Internelle, the Eternal Star, used a symbol of an ouroboros surrounding the three crosses of Golgotha and the initials for Iesus Hominum Salvator. “The snake’s closed ring shows the old symbol of the perpetuity of the sacrifice and the redemption” (Charbonneau-Lassay, 434). Seen through the ouroboric, the question of being “born again” takes on mythological connotations; death is as necessary for life in the ouroboros as it is in the central act of Christianity. In Christianity, one must be “born again,” which implies a death first. Paul premises this second birth on the “death of the old man,” the old sinful nature (Romans 7:9). Being
born again typifies Christ’s own resurrection after crucifixion. The Latin writer Macrobius explains how the ouroboros became associated with resurrection:

[A]s serpents each year shed the skin of old age and renew their youth[,] […] it is for this reason that the sun itself too is represented in the form of a serpent, because in its passage from the lowest point of its course to its height it always seems, as it were, to pass from the depth of old age and return to the vigor of youth (137).

The associations move quickly, but we can see the sun in the shape of the ouroboros as both resurrect themselves from their own “death of the old man.” This connection leads to the historical association of the ouroboros and the resurrection of Christ.

Whitman’s pagan Christ likeness itself opposes Christianity with pagan history, because the ouroboric roots of Christ’s death and resurrection grow from the ancient story of Osiris. In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, “[t]he man or woman who has died is identified with and actually called Osiris” (Campbell, 368). Having been trapped in a sarcophagus by his jealous brother Set, Osiris rose again from the dead, only to be killed by his brother a second time and torn into fourteen pieces to be scattered over the land. Osiris becomes a savior, because his death and dismemberment rejuvenate the earth (Campbell, 92-93). A prayer for the deceased from Book of the Dead calls for all the body parts of the dead to become the parallel body part of a deity. “My phallus is the phallus of Osiris.” Campbell says, “The soul comes to the fulness of its stature and power through assimilating the deities that formerly had been thought to be separate from and outside of it” (371). The story of Christ’s death and resurrection may well have emerged from ancient myths like that of Osiris, myths which paralleled the coming and going of the seasons and harvests.
Justin Kaplan’s biography of Whitman points out the connections between “Song of Myself” and Osiris. “In some of the texts Whitman studied, Osiris, the god of eternal renewal, was depicted with stalks growing from his corpse” (171). Going further, Paul Zweig explores Whitman’s interest in ancient Egyptian mythology, calling Osiris “the Egyptian Christ.”

A few years later, an acquaintance maliciously described Whitman walking down Broadway, “with a red shirt on, open in front to show the ‘scented herbage of his breast’ and [comparing] himself with Christ and Osiris” (159).

If Christ makes humanity more fully human by seeing its innate divinity, then Whitman makes Christ more fully Christ by giving him back his pagan roots, his ouroboric essence.

Having seen the story of Christ as an ouroboric one, and having claimed the speaker of “Song of Myself” as a pagan Christ figure, we can see that figure’s own ultimate message as one of eternal life. This is not the eternal life of an extraterrestrial heaven and hell, but the eternal life of winter and spring, of compost and harvest, of death and rebirth. As much as the sexual remains interdependent with the sacred, and the physical with the divine, the full meaning of the ouroboric shows us the interrelation of life and death. The speaker claims, “I know I am deathless, / I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter’s compass” (Sec. 20). He knows of his own deathlessness from “the smallest sprout,” and as it may be the grass or the sprout of any future plant through which he lives eternally, since “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Sec. 1), he can speak as any part of creation.

The sharing of atoms moves through the eternal process of death and life. The grass is the “uniform hieroglyphic,” because it extends “the beautiful uncut hair of
graves” (Sec. 6). Death is an integral part of life revitalizing itself. In death, life makes compost of itself, and the snake cannibalizes itself. If there ever were such a thing as death, “it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it, / And ceas’d the moment life appear’d” (Sec. 6). The “Corpse” becomes “good manure” for “the white roses sweet-scented and growing.” Death acts as fertilizing agent, so that the sexual, the procreant, moves interdependently even with the corpse, leading to “leafy lips” and “the polish’d breasts of melons.” Ouroborically, no two things exist in such harmony as in the grotesque, the incongruous. “And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths, / (No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)” (Sec. 49). The fact that the speaker ends with bequeathing himself “to the dirt to grow from the grass I love” means he could just as easily end with “I stop everywhere waiting for you,” as with “somewhere” (Sec. 52). Through the ouroboric, the speaker has transcended the specificity of time and place to wait for us everywhere, as he has dispersed himself in everything.

In the speaker’s final ouroboric transcendence, he immortalizes himself quite literally in his text. The book itself he calls Leaves of Grass, and he tells us that this text, this Leaves of Grass, is itself his body. In the final move of the speaker’s anti-hermeneutic organicism, the text itself becomes the world, for if the earth itself cannot “mean,” if the earth itself lives, Leaves of Grass becomes metacritical, even metaliterary. “This [poem?] is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is, / This [text?] the common air that bathes the globe” (Sec. 17). Two sections later, he asks, “Do you guess I have some intricate purpose? / Well I have, for the Fourth-month showers have, and the mica on the side of the rock has” (Sec. 19). The speaker has dispersed himself
into all the rest of creation, and as he speaks to us from the poem, the text and speaker become nature and the world, and the world becomes the poem. If the grass did “not say any thing,” the speaker could not “say any thing” (Sec. 49), because the poem, itself the grass, cannot speak without the speaker.

In the poem’s ultimate ouroboric move, the text and the world become one, and the speaker leaves himself to the dirt and the grass, but this dirt and grass become one and the same with the text. The speaker, deathless, bequeaths himself to the _Leaves of Grass_, the text, and the leaves of grass in our forests and on the sides of our streets.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood (Sec. 52).

The physical, the chthonic, is divine, as the divine is physical, and in this oppositional interdependence lies the poem’s final transubstantiation. The speaker leaving his compost to the earth, we literally eat him through the vegetation growing from the ground. He will be our “good health,” but cannot be said to mean. Nevertheless the speaker speaks, and he speaks through his poem, where after fifty-two sections of his non-autobiographical “Song of Myself,” we still hardly know who he is or what he means.

The world of “Song of Myself” is an ouroboric one, where eternity and each moment exist at once, as do all opposites. Seen through the ouroboric, “Song of Myself” becomes an alchemical text, in which all things sustain, enter into, _become_ their opposites. If the ouroboros sometimes looks like a static structure, upon closer scrutiny, we find that it never stops moving. The head swallows the tail perpetually. In alchemy, “the circular serpent was the guardian of the temple of Knowledge, and only the one who has conquered it can cross the threshold of the holy place” (Charbonneau-Lassay, 433).
Its threshold comprises the nexus between oppositions, between time and eternity, I and Thou, meaning and non-meaning, the text and the world. The writer on the text and reader of the text become the same as the writer of the text. Leaves of grass in the field or the courtyard become the same as Leaves of Grass, the text. After all, grass has blades, not leaves. The leaves of grass are the pages of the poem.
In *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse describes a circle in relation to a dialectic. Nor does he describe any ordinary circle, but a vicious one.

A vicious circle seems indeed the proper image of a society which is self-expanding and self-perpetuating in its own preestablished direction—driven by the growing needs which it generates and, at the same time, contains. (34)

This vicious circle circumscribes the reified society, the society in which the individual exists “as an instrument, as a thing” (33), in “subjection to his productive apparatus” (32). Direct domination, in the form of slavery, does not apply here, but “Domination is transfigured into administration” (32). The individual in such a reified society believes himself to be free, but his freedom is an “unfreedom,” “the suppression of individuality in the mechanization of socially necessary but painful performances” (1).

True economic freedom, on the other hand, Marcuse says, “would mean freedom from the economy” (4). Reification, the process of transforming the individual to economic instrument, results in a mutual dependence of the “organizers and administrators” and the “machinery which they organize and administer.”

And this mutual dependence is no longer the dialectical relationship between Master and Servant, which has been broken in this struggle for mutual recognition, but rather a vicious circle which encloses both the Master and the Servant. (33)

For Marcuse, reification draws a “vicious circle” that forecloses the dialectical possibilities of individual achievement.

Now we skip backwards from the 1960s to the 1890s, from Marcuse’s New Left Marxism to the final edition of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Whitman also draws
circles for us. Rather than the vicious ones of reification, these are circles of full self-awareness and self-actualization. There are two different kinds of circle for us to focus on here. A macrocosmic one is drawn in such lines as “Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always / substance and increase, always sex, / Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life” (Sec. 3). Whitman constantly deals with oppositions, and always portrays them in process. The oppositions always circle each other, become one another, an infinite give-and-take in which even “Life” itself is “the leavings of many deaths” (Sec. 49).

If Whitman considered only this macrocosmic circle, his poetry could have seemed fatalistic, a mere description of existence maintaining itself with no overall change. But the personal circles Whitman draws keep this from being the case. After all, the poem sings of the self, “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Sec. 1). The personal circles show us the oppositional relationship in which the self and everything not the self constantly pass into each other, so that “Walt Whitman” can claim to be not only “of Manhattan the son,” but also, “a kosmos” himself (Sec. 24). The personal circles also show that the selfishness of he who sings himself (Sec. 1) and can “dote” on himself, thinking himself “all so luscious” (Sec. 24) exists in oppositional relationship with a real selflessness that recognizes the right to selfishness of every other self. So Whitman can claim, “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (Sec. 47). The relationship between the macrocosmic and the personal circles outlines the coming-into-consciousness, the self-awareness and self-actualization of one element in the infinite give-and-take of existence, the element called the human being, that part of existence that can know itself.
I call that self-awareness and actualization “[self] identification,” the definition of which I take from Whitman’s rambling and paradoxical prose work Democratic Vistas (1871). Whitman uses the term “identification,” not to apply to identification of objects exterior to the self, but to make the self aware and active against the institutions and traditions with which one finds oneself in discourse. When one actively determines his own identity over and against that which would otherwise be passively accepted and unquestioned, he has undertaken an active role. Whitman says,

[T]he identified soul […] when greatest, knows not bibles in the old way, but in new ways—the identified soul […] can really confront Religion when it extricates itself entirely from the churches and not before.

That confrontation leads to the dissolution of the hitherto unchallenged, or underchallenged, institutions, and the emergence of the aware and active self as soul. “Alone, and identity, and the mood—and the soul emerges, and all statements, churches, sermons melt away like vapors.” This soul obtains as consciousness, the knowledge and agency of the self. “[T]he interior consciousness, like a hitherto unseen inscription, in magic ink, beams out its wondrous lines to the sense” (965).

I bring Marcuse’s ideas of the reified circle as opposed to the historical dialectic together with Whitman’s oppositional circles of [self] identification, because Whitman’s circles can be used to answer Marcuse’s. Marcuse writes of what he calls in Negations, “affirmative culture,” culture that acts as a safety valve for all the material frustrations in the lives of individuals. He calls this culture affirmative because it affirms the industrialist capitalist society by siphoning off the material frustrations created by that society and effectively sealing them away. But culture and politics can never truly be separated, and when used with the acknowledgement of their involvement with each
other, the body politic becomes cultured with its own material situation. “By eliminating affirmative culture, the abolition of this social organization will not eliminate individuality, but realize it” (133). This abolition would be the opposite of cultural refinement, in the sense that refinement is a separating-out. Reification would be replaced with [self] identification.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives a definition for reification that is itself based on Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution*. The entry quotes Marcuse’s statement that reification is a process through which “all personal relations between men take the form of objective relations between things.” Though I don’t intend to try to prove whether these effects in Whitman’s poetry were intended, there are a number of instances of wordplay that indicate he was quite aware of the tendencies of a newly industrial economy to reduce human relationships to economic ones. “What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me / Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns, / Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me” (Sec. 14). In *The Lunar Light of Whitman’s Poetry*, M. Wynn Thomas argues that Whitman “complicates things by borrowing the language of ‘having’ in order to speak about living in the ‘being’ mode.” Furthermore, he sees such lines as the above as “the unmistakable element of satire, subversion, and redefinition in Whitman’s use of these metaphors” (48).

I will use reification in the wide Marcusean sense of the term, and show “Song of Myself” to replace it with humanization, which can only be achieved through and by the self.

The oppositional relationship between the personal circular and the macrocosmic circular in Whitman’s “Song of Myself” connects the interpersonal relationships in which
human beings have one-on-one agency ("personal") and larger and more impersonal oppositions like death and life (the macrocosmic). The relationship between these circulars creates a politicization of culture and a materialization of the spiritual that can be used to illustrate the individual’s self-actualizing return to the historical dialectic from Marcuse’s image of the closed circle of reification.

The Ouroboros

In the “Philosophical Interlude” of *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse illustrates the dialectic nature of the “antagonistic relation between subject and object,” which “also retains the image of their reconciliation” (112). The opposition of subject and object extends through self-consciousness into the opposition of ego and other. According to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

> When mere consciousness reaches the state of self-consciousness, it finds itself as ego, and the ego is first desire: it can become conscious of itself only by satisfying itself in and by an “other.” But such satisfaction involves the “negation” of the other, for the ego has to prove itself by truly “being-for-itself” against all “otherness.” (*Eros*, 113)

For Hegel, then, the world, all that which is not the ego, exists in the negative, and the ego must constantly identify itself against the world. The other, the world itself, denies the freedom of the ego, and the ego must constantly contest some particular other in the never-ending effort to gain its freedom.

But even between the ego and the other, the “image of their reconciliation” has been retained. Marcuse writes, “Mutual acknowledgement and recognition are still the test for the reality of freedom, but the terms are now forgiveness and reconciliation,” and he quotes Hegel:

> The word of reconciliation is the (objectively) existent Spirit which apprehends in its opposite the pure knowledge of itself
qua universal essence…a mutual recognition which is Absolute Spirit. (115)

The relationship that obtains between the self and the other reaches fulfillment in reconciliation. Yet if this state of reconciliation, seeing the self in the opposite, is momentarily “Absolute Spirit,” Whitman will emphasize it as only so momentarily. For this “mutual recognition” is not a final state, but a point in process.

“Song of Myself” expresses this “mutual recognition” throughout, though Whitman does not see it as “spirit” any more than he does as “body,” for he sees neither as “absolute.” There can be no absolute, because there can be no final form. “To be in any form, what is that?” he asks. All other forms constantly move through the speaker, as he does through all other forms. “I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop, / They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.” The result is a kind of ecstasy of the realization of this process. “To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand.” Not only does all-that-is-other constantly move through him, but he constantly loses himself in everything he encounters. The ecstatic realization of this process, this “touch […] quivers me to a new identity.” For Whitman, the image of reconciliation is circular. “(Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither)” (Sec. 27). Yet this “thither” is a new place every time, precisely because of the first-person pronoun: “Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there” (Sec. 44).

In the preceding chapter, I called Whitman’s circularity ouroboric, because the ouroboros, the ancient image of the serpent swallowing its tail, represents the eternal process of oppositions giving way to and becoming one another.
According to Jorge Luis Borges, the ouroboros replaced the image of Oceanus for the ancient Greeks, “he ‘from whom all gods arose,’” whereas in Norse myth, “The Serpent, Jormungandr […] ‘was flung into the deep sea which surrounds the whole world, and it grew so large that it now lies in the middle of the ocean round the earth, biting its own tail’” (147). The end must always be swallowed by the beginning in order that perpetuity perpetuate itself. In Whitman’s macrocosmic circle, the serpent that lies round the earth perpetuates it. In Whitman’s personal circles, the “mutual recognition” of self and other, indeed their ouroboric mutual becoming of each other, brings with it an ecstatic realization, self-awareness.

Nor does Nietzsche’s “eternal return” compare to Whitman’s ouroboric understanding. In Nietzsche’s thinking, transcendence must be entirely overcome; transcendence must be transcended. When an object can be seen as the “being-as-end-in-itself,” the eternal can be seized in the present. “Nietzsche’s conception terminates in the vision of the closed circle—not progress, but the ‘eternal return.’”

Nietzsche envisages the eternal return of the finite exactly as it is—in its full concreteness and finiteness. This is the total affirmation of the life instincts, repelling all escape and negation. The eternal return is the will and vision of an erotic attitude toward being for which necessity and fulfillment coincide. (Eros, 122)
Though Whitman sees death as existing only to “[lead] forward life, and does not wait at
the end to arrest it, / And ceas’d the moment life appear’d” (Sec. 6), he doesn’t see an
eternal finite. The “thither” we “ever come back” to paradoxically changes to a new
“thither” each time through individual agency. The eternal finite assumes no agency for
the individual, while the ouroboros is an open circle. Whitman’s circles, as we will
increasingly see, depend on [self] identification and its agency.

Figure 5-2. An American Indian ouroboros.

**Circling In On “Affirmative Culture”**

Because, in Marcuse’s view, “affirmative culture” affirms the capitalist social
structure by siphoning off and sealing away the material complaints of individuals, it
creates a contained space, a condensed space, a reservoir, of dissatisfaction. Although
“affirmative culture” allows the social structure to continue, the material dissatisfaction it
turns toward fantasy does not merely evaporate. Culture, then, can act either as
affirmative or as a tool for change. The double nature of culture, as Marcuse describes it,
describes a site capable of either shifting away dissatisfaction with society, or of using
that same dissatisfaction for change. Marcuse traces culture and politics back to the
Cartesian (and even Aristotelian) split between mind and body, or soul and body. If soul,
or culture, should not interfere in the affairs of body, or politics, then the soul/culture will
be used to affirm, if only by sticking to their immaterial realm, the state of body/politics.
Yet the soul as “intermediate realm” between mind and body may serve not only for the
perpetuation of affirmative culture, but in fact be reclaimable for a new kind of culture. When soul becomes divorced from body and when culture becomes cut off from politics, the former abdicate all power to the latter. The intermediacy of the soul, however, can be used to reintegrate with body. In fact, Marcuse says, “[T]he soul really is essential—as the unexpressed, unfulfilled life of the individual” (114).

In “Song of Myself,” the speaker does everything he can to break apart this divide between body and soul.

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is […]
(Sec. 48)

If the soul receives no privileging over the body, then material needs cannot be deferred to heaven, nor ascetically denied in favor of the soul. If the body receives no privilege above the soul, then what must nourish the body must nourish the soul. To extend this to the spiritual/political divide, culture and politics must infuse each other ouroborically. Indeed, politics always infuses culture, even if only in the form of culture denying any political infusion.

Yet Whitman goes further in Section 48 than perhaps anywhere else in this long poem to show what equalization of the estimation of body and soul means in direct material terms.

And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud,
And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth.

The ouroboric understanding that opposites feed and even become one another translates not into solipsism, but sympathy. And the lack of a dime does not mean poverty, because as Marcuse puts it, economic freedom “would mean freedom from the economy” (One-
Nor does he who is “pocketless of a dime” “lay up for [himself] treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (Matthew 6:20). The speaker revels in his physical existence, his earthly, his material existence. The scriptural admonition continues, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). But Whitman treasures the earth itself, even with its moths and rust and thieves, and his soul, alongside his heart, remains here on the earth with him (his body).

Whitman’s oppositional relationships take the form of paradox (the grass as “the beautiful uncut hair of graves,” for example), but Marcuse says the transcendent truth that contradicts its own materiality affirms the dominant culture. Whitman certainly seems aware of his paradoxes, his contradictions, as one of his most famous lines asserts: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (Sec. 51). Does this contradiction nullify itself? We have seen that Whitman’s ouroboric representations lead to sympathy, rather than solipsism. But do these paradoxes, in fact, nullify their own potential material value by transcending it? Whitman was, after all, influenced by Transcendentalist thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

In fact, Whitman can be seen as a kind of anti-Transcendentalist Transcendentalist. He privileges neither side of an opposition. Rather than this lack of privileging becoming fatalistic, it leads to sympathy, inasmuch as popular ideas of sympathy were often associated with mesmerism or “magnetism,” implying a correspondence of influence between parties. Whitman’s poetic truth, his metaphysical truth, is embedded in his prosaic and physical truths. The kind of transcendent truth that
Marcuse says contradicts its materiality keeps the status quo of that material realm safe from change by always transcending it. This preservation occurs where a certain truth value is granted to the transcendent concepts in a separate dimension of meaning and significance (poetic truth, metaphysical truth). For precisely the setting aside of a special reservation in which thought and language are permitted to be legitimately inexact, vague, and even contradictory is the most effective way of protecting the normal universe of discourse from being seriously disturbed by unfitting ideas. (One Dimensional Man, 184)

We can certainly see how such a description might apply to a Transcendentalist thinker like Emerson. In his journals, Emerson wrote that the problems of “earthly marriage” matter less to “a strong mind,” with its “resource of the all-creating, all obliterating spirit; retreating on its grand essence the nearest persons become pictures merely. The Universe is his bride” (Zwarg, 140). Emerson too emphasized such oppositions as ideal and real, body and soul, but he saw these binary relations as being worked out in the realm of the ideal or the universal.

Yet Whitman’s anti-Transcendentalist Transcendentalism means that while he stands in a constant sense of awe and mystery, he never retreats to any grand essence, never seeks a divorce from the particular in order to marry the universal. Answers to the simplest facts may be lacking, but he revels in their physicality nonetheless. Though he says, “I cannot tell how my ankles bend, nor whence the cause of my faintest wish,” he also claims:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.
His metaphysics is physical: “A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics of books” (Sec. 24). No “separate dimension of meaning and significance” obtains here. The “normal universe of discourse” is invaded by language that if “inexact, vague, and even contradictory” is so for exact, precise, and non-affirmative reasons.

The speaker calls us to disrupt the institution, to refuse denial of our physicality, and to take over where he has left off. “No shutter’d room or school can commune with me,” he says (Sec. 47).

No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,
I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooking you round the waist,
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road. (Sec. 46)

Ironically, since *Leaves of Grass* has long since been canonized, the speaker speaks from no canon. He speaks from no system, no institution. He speaks of “the Body” as well as “the Soul,” and calls himself “the poet of the woman the same as the man,” while the position of “the President” receives no privilege, but “is a trifle” (Sec. 21). Finally, though he speaks for us now, in this poem, he leaves us at the end, hoping we will far surpass what he has taught us. “He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my own, / He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (Sec. 47). Such lines have little or nothing to do with Emersonian Transcendentalism. Whitman offers no image of himself retreating to a Universal bride. But he does transcend. He transcends stasis, transcends it by seeing one pole’s circular exchange with its opposite, transcends it by representing a sympathy necessary between
polarities, transcends it by seeking to disrupt the status quo by spiritualizing the body and 
embodying the soul.

**Narcissus**

The speaker of “Song of Myself” leaves us with the speaking of his death, the 
enactment of his dissolution, yet the continuing of his voice. Indeed in Whitman’s view 
of death lies the greatest embrace of physicality, the greatest embodiment of soul. The 
“grass of graves” speaks. The “Corpse” is “good manure,” from which rise “the white 
roses sweet-scented and growing, / I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish’d breasts 
of melons” (Sec. 49). Death is not only seen as fully physical, but the corpse is sexualized 
in lips and melons. The corpse as fertility / fertilizer brings together sex and death. After 
all, “Copulation is no more rank to me than death is” (Sec. 24). At the very end of the 
poem, he says,

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I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood. (Sec. 52)
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We are not to look for him in his poem, unless *Leaves of Grass* doubles as the text title 
and that which his compost nourishes on the sides of the road. He has become selfless in 
death, but as he pervades the air and the soil, his ego becomes most boundless after he 
ceases to exist as himself.

This paradox describes the circle of selfishness and selflessness in “Song of 
Myself.” The ouroboric relationship between the self and the not-self leads to a [self] 
identification as the very part of existence that is conscious of existing. When the self 
dies, the ego disperses into the soil and air and everything not the self. So it is knowledge
of death, of the coming dispersal of the self, that makes us both aware of ourselves and of ourselves in everything not ourselves. For Hegel, the reconciliation of the Spirit “which apprehends in its opposite the pure knowledge of itself qua universal essence” becomes “a mutual recognition which is Absolute Spirit” (Eros and Civilization, 115). For Whitman, the apprehension of the self in the non-self defines physicality, which can never be absolute, because it is always involved in infinite exchange of elements. And yet there ego obtains in this physicality.

That this ego can be called inherently narcissistic may not come as much of a surprise, but Narcissus may not have been as “narcissistic” as the common usage of that adjective would indicate. Marcuse tells us that Narcissus “does not know that the image he admires is his own,” but that alone will hardly get him off the hook. Marcuse also tells us that Narcissus’ focus on the self brings a death through the self that disperses outward from there.

If his erotic attitude is akin to death and brings death, then rest and sleep and death are not painfully separated and distinguished: the Nirvana principle rules throughout all these stages. And when he dies he continues to live as the flower that bears his name. (Eros and Civilization, 167)

Eros, as centered on the self and the pleasure principle, brings death with it, and thus transcends death and self.

Thus Narcissus bears likeness to two other characters associated with resurrection whom Whitman’s speaker has been compared to—Jesus and Osiris. A certain Greek tradition sees Narcissus’s erotic entrapment with his own reflection as “the beginning of the god’s self-manifestation in the multitude of the phenomena of the world.” The embodiment of the spirit, then, defines the erotic entrapment of the divine in the physical.
The myth would thus express the reunification of that which was separated, of God and world, man and nature—identity of the one and the many. (Eros, 167n.)

Like Osiris pieced back together after his dismemberment, the myth of Narcissus reunites the divine and the physical, the body and the soul. Narcissus represents the embodiment of the soul.

Whereas Narcissus can be seen as the erotic entrapment of the body with the soul, Whitman’s speaker fully sexualizes this Narcissistic relationship in Section Five. The ouroboric relationship between body and soul attains literal imagery. “I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other,” he says. Neither body nor soul receives privilege. But there’s much more. The speaker remembers aloud to his soul, “how once we lay such a transparent summer morning, / How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me.” The speaker’s body and soul perform an ouroboric fellatio, and the soul’s tongue “plunged,” then, “to my bare-stript heart.” When this “erotic attitude,” “akin to death,” “brings death,” the death is not merely le petit mort, but the dispersal of the ego into the non-self.

Narcissism relates the self to all non-self, as Narcissus relates the divine to the physical and the individual to the world. The scene of self-fellatio becomes more than an ultimate self-involvement, even as Marcuse says that “Primary narcissism is more than autoeroticism; it engulfs the ‘environment,’ integrating the narcissistic ego with the objective world.” In Freudian terms, the original ego of the child includes the entire world the child experiences, and only later separates from it. “Freud describes the ‘ideational content’ of the surviving primary ego-feeling as ‘limitless extension and
“oneness with the universe’ (oceanic feeling)” (Eros, 168). Thus the “antagonistic relation between subject and object,” which “also retains the image of their reconciliation” (112).

The Narcissistic relation of the self to the non-self clearly occurs through the death via self-love in Section Five of “Song of Myself.” After the soul stuck its tongue in the body’s heart, “Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth.” Then comes the “oceanic feeling” of sympathy, of solidarity. Through the ouroboric circle of body and soul comes a brotherhood and sisterhood that is sustained through love.

And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the 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.

The focus of Narcissism leads to death and dispersal of the ego into everything not the self, thus to sympathy, to solidarity, to love. Says Marcuse,

In other words, narcissism may contain the germ of a different reality principle: the libidinal cathexis of the ego (one’s own body) may become the source and reservoir for a new libidinal cathexis of the objective world—transforming this world into a new mode of being. (Eros, 169)

As the cathexis shifts, not only does it experience transformation, but it brings transformation to the world.

The vicious circle of reification, of self made into instrument or thing—the proverbial cog in the wheel—is replaced by the circle of [self] identification. The love of the self opposes the instrumentalization of the self. The reification of the self necessarily implies the reification of everything else in one’s world. Everything exists to serve one purpose, to get a job done, and this reduction of purpose comes to be excepted as natural.
The way things are has come to be seen as the only way things can be. But the love of the self disperses the self amongst everything else. Through narcissism, the self becomes aware, and through narcissism, the self becomes actual. The identification of the self necessarily implies the identification of everything else in one’s world. No wonder then that Whitman says, “I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured.” No true measure can be had for the human being, no scientific management can organize him, and any narcissist will have “the best of time and space” (Sec. 46).

**Polymorphous Sexuality and the Death of Culture**

Though many researchers have speculated about the men Whitman may have been attracted to, and Whitman’s attachment to Peter Doyle, a Washington D.C. streetcar conductor, and other young men seems clear, there exists no list of Whitman’s beaus or lovers. Before the 1960s, some scholars argued the supremely erotic poet may have been mostly celibate. Though this assertion is strikingly doubtful, the possibility shouldn’t be entirely surprising, as the sexuality of the poems is supremely erotic, not pornographic, and the difference is one of kind, not degree. In *The Erotic Whitman*, Vivian Pollak, one of many scholars who believe Whitman was anything but celibate, comes to a conclusion that differs greatly but nevertheless converges with our focus on sexual narcissism here. “Whitman’s refusal to concentrate on one particular lover […] could, under some circumstances, reinforce his connection to the whole human race” (148). In Section Five,

1 In his strange book of sexual astrology, Gavin Arthur quotes the British homosexual rights advocate Edward Carpenter as saying he “slept” with Whitman in his old age. “There was no orgasm in the sense of spilling seed, but a far more intense orgasm of the whole nervous system in which oneself, as a unit, reunites with the Whole” (135). In a 1974 interview with *Gay Sunshine*, Ginsberg described a kind of sexual six-degrees-of-separation (only this particular lineage falls just short of six) from Whitman. He called it an “Apostolic succession”: Ginsberg, he said, had slept with Neal Cassady, who had slept with Gavin Arthur, who had slept with Edward Carpenter, who had slept with Walt Whitman.
the death and dispersal of the self in its own narcissism lead not only to sympathy, love
and solidarity with other men and women, but to the realization that

[...] limitless are leaves stiff or dropping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap’d stones, elder,
mullein and poke-weed.

For the narcissistic speaker, the entire world is eroticized.

The speaker who says “I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease
observing a spear of summer grass” can experience an erotic world, because he is free of
workplace reification. The eroticization of the world means “not simply a release but a
transformation of the libido: from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to
erotization [sic] of the entire personality” (Eros, 201). For Marcuse, this eroticization
comes about from the breakdown of the opposition between reality principle and pleasure
principle. When the body is not conceived of primarily as an instrument for work, it will
cease to be objectified. The reification of the body for the workplace means the body will
also be reified for pleasure. When it comes to pleasure, the reified body is an object, and
pleasure is a job of work. The body reified for work can only be used for pleasure if
pleasure is work using the body as reified instrument. But this reification of the body for
pleasure as a job means the body cannot be reified as object for pleasure’s own sake.

But the body used for pleasure’s own sake does not translate into rampant

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2 Interestingly, vastly different writers on sexuality come to similar conclusions. In The Female Eunuch, Germaine Greer writes, “Many women [...] have discovered sexual pleasure after being denied it but the fact that they have only ever experienced gratification from clitoral stimulation is evidence for my case, because it is the index of the desexualization of the whole body, the substitution of genitality for sexuality” (349).

3 Yet there’s a paradox: “In the societal relations, reification would be reduced as the division of labor became reoriented on the gratification of freely developing individual needs; whereas, in the libidinal relations, the taboo on the reification of the body would be lessened. No longer used as a full-time instrument of labor, the body would be resexualized. (Eros, 201) In Marcuse’s thinking, the obvious paradox surrounds the reification of the body in terms of pleasure.
hedonism, which only exists as the opposite side of Puritanism. In fact, this “spread rather than explosion of libido” results in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy. The body in its entirety would become an object of catheysis, a thing to be enjoyed—an instrument of pleasure. (Eros, 201)

Whitman’s reveling in “My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs” indicates exactly this kind of polymorphous sexuality. Rather than body here being reified as a thing to take notice of no longer, the speaker seems to receive physical gratification from the strangely aware acts of breathing and circulating his own blood. If the speaker’s own genitals are not supreme, no more blatant way exists to indicate the resexualization of his body and through the death of the body in its own narcissism, the surrounding world, than by referring to the objective world in genital terms. “Root of wash’d sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded duplicate eggs! it shall be you!” he says. “You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you! Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!” The world moves about him “at innocent gambols,” though “Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven” (Sec. 24). All the world is sexualized, and its polymorphous sexuality can be described as innocent.

Whitman’s macrocosmic representations of the ouroboric become sexualized by the [self] identification occurring from Whitman’s ouroboric representations on the personal level. In other words, the ouroboric relationship between self and not-self, the spread of the ego through the death of the ego in narcissism, eroticizes everything the speaker experiences in the world around him. The self becomes eroticized and the world becomes eroticized. The closed circle of reification shatters through love of the self. The
The reified self can only be an instrument for work and would thus remain closed off from any larger agency. Any material frustrations the reified self experiences can be siphoned off and sealed away in “affirmative culture.” But culture, when created through self-realization, by a self that realizes its situation and its self-ness, can also become a means of transforming the world. The true dialectic is a dialectic in historical progress, and through agency and self-realization, the individual can use culture to re-engage (or engage in the first place) the dialectics of historical change.

The [self] identification of narcissism and polymorphous sexuality can become the builders of a new culture. If narcissism extends to an “oceanic feeling” that includes a solidarity with men and women as well as an identification with the “uttering” tongues of grass, the same grass to which Whitman bequeaths himself, it represents the spiritualization of the body and the embodiment of the soul. Again Marcuse:

Moreover, nothing in the nature of Eros justifies the notion that the “extension” of the impulse is confined to the corporeal sphere. If the antagonistic separation of the physical from the spiritual part of the organism is itself the historical result of repression, the overcoming of this antagonism would open the spiritual sphere to the impulse. (Eros, 210)

Like Marcuse’s “overcoming of this antagonism” between the physical and the spiritual, Whitman’s ouroboric representation of body and soul opens each to the other. Likewise it makes the cultural political and the political cultural, themselves extensions of the Cartesian body/soul divide. And no place remains for the idea of culture as refinement, as separation-out, as pure distillation of material frustration cut off from the material world.

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4 “Reactivation of polymorphous and narcissistic sexuality ceases to be a threat to culture and can itself lead to culture-building if the organism exists not as an instrument of alienated labor but as a subject of self-realization—in other words, if socially useful work is at the same time the transparent satisfaction of the individual need.” (Eros, 210)
Figure 5-3. The series entitled only “Old Man,” photographed by Thomas Eakins in the 1880s, is presumed by some to be Walt Whitman.
Though we see Whitman as the singer of the most shameless panegyrics of the self, few of his poems tell us anything directly autobiographical about himself. While Whitman looks confidently and cockily out at whomever it may be, “holding me now in hand,” from the front of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, his name appears nowhere on the outside or even the title page of the volume. Though certain poems seem to tell us more about the poet than others¹, Whitman’s *Drum-Taps* appears to be his most autobiographical series of poems.

Many critics have portrayed Whitman as a kind of poetic healer of the national disunity that resulted from slavery and the American Civil War, yet a close reading of the particular poetry in which Whitman chronicles his Civil War nurse experiences reveals a more complicated figure. The figure is more human. Using the Marcusean definition of reification as objectification of human beings into a relationship between “things” (OED), humanization means recognition of the subjective in each person, seeing the self in the other. The figure is more human also for finding himself divine. The critical portrayal of Whitman as national healer can certainly be extended from Whitman’s own portrayal of himself as a kind of divinely nurturing and patient caretaker of Union army patients. But the idea of Whitman as national healer rings superheroic. We end up with a heavy-handed cartoon of a giant who, having sounded his “barbaric yawp over the roofs of the

¹ “There Was a Child Went Forth,” for example, certainly seems autobiographical in its presentation of a child becoming the objects around him, as Whitman’s later first-person speaker does, and in the child’s relations with his parents, his mother domestic, “mild,” “clean,” and “wholesome,” and his father “manly, mean, anger’d, unjust.”
world” (“Song of Myself, Sec. 52), now straddles the crevasse known as the Mason-Dixon line and brutally muscles the two halves of the nation back together.

The poems of *Drum-Taps* conflict with one another, some calling shamelessly for war and others bemoaning the call for war. As Erkkila notes in *Whitman the Political Poet*, this conflict exists in the very title of the collection, as an “elegiac note sounds throughout *Drum-Taps* […], investing the drum taps of the title with multiple significance as taps of recruitment and soldiers on the march and taps for lost lives […]” (213). Whitman as “I,” the poet as speaker, comes most to life in these poems, in the portrayal of sympathy between caretaker and wounded. All of the rallying concerns of the masses fall away in these scenes, and the humanizing effect of interpersonal sympathy stands out in relief. This humanization belies the reification inherent in mass rallies and parades and uniting in arms, the reification that makes human beings become a united cause for war.

I should add here that in considering abstractions with such very physical effects, such as [self] identification and reification, the danger exists that the idea of reification might itself become reified. Reification, as we saw in Marcuse’s thinking in the previous chapter, must be a historical process. To assume the details of its operations to be timeless or without change might put us in danger of reifying reification. Yet, as we will see, the local and historical situations of [self] identification and reification will differ enormously from Whitman’s roles in and writing about the American Civil War to discourse agency in late twentieth-century Spoken Word poetry, which we will discuss in the last chapter.
In Whitman’s Civil War verse, the humanization of interpersonal scenes occurs through the realization of divinity both in the other and, through the other, in the self. Whitman so often brings forward and further develops Emerson’s idea of Christ as the “[o]ne man [who] was true to what is in you and me” (67). Christ most realizes his divinity by most realizing his humanity, and Whitman offers to those of his readers who will understand this, the possibility of most realizing one’s humanity through realizing one’s godhood. But since Whitman’s metaphysics are physical, Whitman’s use of the concept of divinity doesn’t equate with Emerson’s exactly. In Drum-Taps, as we will see, what is divine and Christ-like must be the same as what is most human, the possibility for interpersonal connection. The interpersonal makes love possible, makes vicariousness and caretaking possible. The manifestation of this kind of cathexis becomes Christ-like and can therefore be expressed as a higher than normal state of human affairs—divinity. In Emerson’s words, Christ says, “Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think” (67). In the most intimate sections of Drum-Taps, humanization occurs through an interpersonal realization of the more than human, the god, in the other.

In analyzing Drum-Taps to zoom in on Whitman’s central oppositional relationship of self and other, we must first look briefly at the reifying voices of the call to arms and the rally cry. We will also look at the transition to the personal that seems to occur through Whitman’s identification with the mother of a soldier in “Come Up from the Fields Father” and “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night.” Finally we will focus on the most autobiographical and the most interpersonal scenes of “A March in the

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2 Emerson says, “He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, ‘I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.’”
Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown,” “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim,” and “The Wound-Dresser.” In the most autobiographical scenes of Drum-Taps, the speaker-caretaker and the wounded humanize one another through the interpersonal sympathy of seeing the divine in one another. The ouroboric relationship of interpersonal oppositions works both through seeing the other in the self and vice versa and seeing God in the humanness of the other and vice versa.

If Whitman’s Civil War poems are indeed “drum taps,” then they can hardly be said to be spoken in human voices. The first few poems of the collection certainly tap the drums, raise the banners, and sound the call to arms. These first few poems are the true “drum taps” of the collection. Whereas in earlier poems, Whitman has democratically sung the otherwise unsung actions of working-class occupations, all the rich variety of those activities must be shelved when “the drum-taps prompt.” “The lawyer,” “[t]he driver,” and “[t]he salesman” must leave behind their various and individual functions, “[t]he mechanics arming, the trowel, the jack-plane, the blacksmith’s hammer, tost aside with precipitation,)” (“First O Songs for a Prelude”). These drum taps un-sing all the variety of daily working-class life the poet has sung in “I Hear America Singing” (“mechanics,” “[t]he carpenter,” “[t]he mason,” “[t]he boatman,” “[t]he shoemaker,” etc.) and “A Song For Occupations” (“[t]he veneer and glue-pot,” “[t]he awl and knee-strap,” “[t]he brewery,” “[l]eather-dressing, coach-making, boiler-making,” etc.). Whitman’s city in these artisanal panegyrics exists in the variety of labor in much the same way urbanist Jane Jacobs will describe a healthy city a century later as an “enormous collection of small elements” (Jacobs, 164). This idea of the health of a city implies a humanization brought about by a great variety of individualities. But the “drum-taps” and
the blowing of the bugles regiment and homogenize the variety of the city. “Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow! / Over the traffic of the cities—over the rumble of wheels in the streets” (“Beat! Beat! Drums!”). The city has become inhuman, its many singing voices replaced by one call to war.

M. Wynn Thomas argues that from the very beginning of Drum-Taps, Whitman cannot entirely justify this un-singing of the variety of the city into a united war cry. Thomas explains the initial drum-beating poems by seeing the united war cry as the vocalization of a united ideal.

He rejoiced in the commencement of hostilities because it seemed to him to involve the clearest and most uncompromising commitment by the North to the idea, and ideal, of a truly democratic Union […] (The Lunar Light of Whitman’s Poetry, 194)

But what kind of expression of a united idea is the war cry? And how does the war cry relate to the democratic voice? These are the kinds of concerns Thomas sees as troubling Whitman from the beginning, keeping him from being able to “wholehearted[ly]” support the war. “Could the war after all be so implicitly relied upon to advance the democratic cause as he understood it?” (195). In requiring unity of ideal and voice, does the war cry necessarily deny the democratic notion of speaking with one’s own voice? Might not “the spirit of war […] be the very antithesis of the spirit of democratic life”? From the beginning, according to Thomas, the possibility that a “democratic war” might be “a direct contradiction in terms” means that a shift away from the “intolerant” and regimented rhythm of the drum taps is bound to occur.

Though the poems to come introduce the conversation of a father and child with a banner and pennant and the conversation of a poet with an “old Revolutionary,” “the centenarian,” a true shift toward the personal arrives when the speaker identifies with the
“dear mother” who receives word of her son’s death in the field. Despite the focus in the poem’s title, “Come Up from the Fields Father,” the speaker identifies most with the “stricken mother’s soul!” When the father tears open the letter received in the mail, “All swims before her eyes, flashes with black, she catches the main words only, / Sentences broken, gunshot wound in the breast, cavalry skirmish, taken to hospital, / At present low, but will soon be better.” Now, for the first time in these poems, the speaker will come forward as nurturer. The daughter tells her, ”Grieve not so, dear mother / […] See, dearest mother, the letter says Pete will soon be better,” but only the speaker knows what the mother knows, that “he will never be better, (nor may-be needs to be better),” since he is dead. It cannot be with the dead soldier that the speaker spends his emphasis then, and the mother entirely eclipses the rest of the family by the end of the poem.

The title might indicate otherwise, but the poem primarily concerns itself with the mother, and with the mother’s relationship with her son. Identification with her mourning prefigures the speaker’s own nurturing role in relation to the wounded in the camps. Whereas the boy “will never be better,” “the mother needs to be better / She with thin form presently drest in black.” This shift in the focus of Drum-Taps has come in the emphasis on an individual, in the empathy with another’s suffering. The voice of the mother in weeping replaces the reification, the making into one united instrument, of the human voice subsumed in the battle cry. The suffering mother replaces the unified mass.

By day her meals untouch’d, then at night fitfully sleeping, often waking,
In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing,
O that she might withdraw unnoticed, silent from life escape and withdraw,
To follow, to seek, to be with her dear dead son.
The mother becomes utterly alone here, and the speaker has left behind the rest of the family to become alone with the mother in his identification with her.

Vivian Pollak rightly points out that Whitman’s mentions of women, for whom he claims himself to be the poet as much as for men, often quickly turn into praises of motherhood. This common turn, she calls “his reaffirmation of the mid-nineteenth century American cult of the mother, which celebrated maternity as any woman’s supreme destiny” (172). Yet Whitman here empathizes with the mother as creator and nurturer of her son, and his similar role in the nursing of mother’s sons in the war surely has a parallel in his own role as creator and nurturer of poems. As David Leverenz has suggested in discussing Whitman’s androgyny,

> He speaks as a fatherly midwife, urging impotent readers to push, push, push out our own strong selves into the open air. That voice I like. It mixes birthing with a grandiloquent potency. (31)

Erkkila argues that not only did Whitman “not limit the female to a maternal role,” he also “sought to revive the mother not as a biological function only but as a creative and intellectual force” [italics mine] (258). Significantly, the creative function that allows the poet to write may be said to feminize, and thereby also allow him to nurse. It shouldn’t be surprising that the poet/nurse empathizes with the mother. Pollak acknowledges, in discussing “Whitman’s Civil War nursing,” that “male feminization evidently held considerable appeal for Whitman, even though he was inconsistent about what it might mean” (185). In *Drum-Taps*, it means a move toward humanization.

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3 Leverenz goes on to say, “He also speaks as if he were one long kiss, much longer than the kisses he loved to give wounded soldiers, breathing his inspiration into my lungs. Though that voice makes me uncomfortable, I do yearn for the fatherly love and the unstinting mother love he promises” (31).
The move from reification to humanization carries a female gendering. The voice of the masses in united war cry must be a male one, the working-class men leaving their occupations to regiment themselves for battle. For the speaker of *Drum-Taps* to fully empathize with the soldiers, with the wounded, he will have to do so through the empathy of the nurturer, the war nurse. Though early voices of poems speak in unity with the soldiers, they do not speak in empathy. Empathy humanizes, while mass unity reifies, makes into a tool for a utilitarian purpose. Empathy must be interpersonal, while mass unity can only be a critical mass larger than the sum of its parts. Its parts are human beings, and their humanity must be denied for the unity of the mass. The “drum-tap” and the bugle cannot empathize. They can only unite. When the emphasis shifts from the mass rallying cry to the suffering individual, as it does in “Come Up from the Fields Father,” the speaker’s identification with the mother is compounded even further because his empathy brings with it the necessity of nurturing. In traditional gender roles, to be one who empathizes is to be a nurturer, a caretaker, a mother-er. The speaker needs to take care of the mother, even as he becomes the mother in his empathy. He’s doubly bound, then, for his role as nurse.

The double binding of speaker as nurturer and mother bears itself out further in “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” the poem in which an interpersonal connection finally exists between the speaker and the injured. The speaker calls the dead soldier both “my son” and “my comrade,” presaging the deeply intimate relationship Whitman as nurse will establish with the wounded. “One look I but gave which your dear eyes return’d with a look I shall never forget, / One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach’d up as you lay on the ground.” Whitman has called the boy his son, carrying
forward the identification with the mother established in “Come Up from the Fields Dear Father,” which directly precedes this poem. But his moment of identification had come only when the mother receives the news of her son’s death. The son himself never appears, never becomes directly present. In “Vigil Strange,” the mother has been replaced by the identifying figure, the poet, and now he directly experiences his “son”’s death. The boy lives only long enough for Whitman to establish that deep connection of the eyes and the touch of hands, which will move him toward becoming the intimate figure of “The Wound-Dresser.”

The regendering that occurs in identifying with the mother of “Come Up” also allows another role of interpersonal intimacy in “Vigil Strange,” that of the lover. Nevertheless, in identifying with the mother, the speaker has not left his maleness behind. The interdependence of male and female, which obtains as a significant theme in “Song of Myself,” here allows the poet to relate to the soldier as mother, caretaker, comrade, and lover. He returns at night to the place where the dead boy lay, with the impassioned responsibility of giving him a proper burial.

Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear’d,
My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop’d well his form,
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and carefully under feet,
And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited[.]

He still calls the boy his son here, and folds him into the blanket in which he will bury him, as a mother might tuck her young child into bed.

Yet a subtle change in otherwise repetitive language on either side of this section of the poem indicates a movement in the poet’s regendering identification from mother to
lover. Earlier in the poem, he calls the boy both “comrade” and “son” when he speaks of kissing the boy. “Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body son of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,).” After he buries the boy, he says,

Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain, vigil I never forget, how as day brighten’d,
I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell.

No longer does Whitman call the boy “son of responding kisses,” but now merely “boy of responding kisses.” Whereas the first phrase determines the nature of the kiss, the second leaves the nature of the kiss undetermined. In both sections he calls the boy “comrade,” but in the second section, he calls him not “my son and my soldier” as before, but merely “my soldier.” This poem alone would not definitively lend itself to an erotic connection, but it opens the way for the definitive connection in poems to come.

The intimacy of the action of burial almost lends itself to an interpersonal connection between the living and the dead. In the sequence of *Drum-Taps*, Whitman has not yet given direct signs of his own divinity, nor that of the wounded, yet Whitman’s understanding of divinity, as we will later see, does not extend to a spiritual afterlife. Indeed, as abundantly evident in “Song of Myself,” Whitman sees nothing as more divine than the most fleshy and earthly thing, so full as living things are with the life that procreates and continues itself through countless generations and regenerations. The boy will “never again on earth” respond to kisses, but the speaker still relates to the boy’s dead body as earth in human form. He “bequeath[s]” him “to the dirt to grow from the grass [he] love[s]” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 52). The divinity of the human being, as we
will later see in greater detail, lies in the human body, and in the fact that earth can take
the form of the human body and exhibit animation and consciousness. Thus, even the act
of burial humanizes the boy. The bugle and the pennant that call men to war cannot speak
the way a dead human being can, whose image responds to the reifying calls of the bugle
and pennant, reducing the human being to a weapon, with the very human inability to
respond ever “again on earth.”

The shift that has occurred from impersonal rallying cry to personal identification
with suffering must also be a shift from reification to humanization. The masses of
soldiers united in one destructive aim exist as both a mass unit, reducing the variability of
human life to that of a tool for war, and a self-perpetuating reification. On the one hand,
all diversity and all individuality have been sacrificed for one single cause. The men have
ceased to be human beings and have become their cause. Furthermore, that single cause
depends on the dehumanization of the other in order to perpetuate itself. The enemy
cannot be a human being, but must become instead a superfluous other. Yet empathy with
suffering has arrived in the form of identification with the grieving mother. In granting
the mother this recognition, the poet also grants her her humanity. In recognizing her own
humanity, the poet also humanizes his own function. He has now rounded himself as a
character, has humanized himself through empathy with suffering. Rather than a flat
character in his own text, he has now added tension to his presentation of himself, and
tension depends on opposition.

The subject must realize opposition within himself and within others for
humanization to replace reification. We have seen the realization of the polarities of male
and female within the speaker, through the identification with the soldier, the comrade, as
both mother and lover. We have seen the speaker’s realization of the polarities of death and life within the boy he buries. Inasmuch as the human form must always be earth, it contains its own death, but the human being inhabits its earth, its death, with its animation, its consciousness. This consciousness enables the central realization of the polarities of self in other and other in self. This realization allows the exchanged look, the touch of hands. This realization of self in other fully humanizes the other and the reciprocal realization of other in self fully humanizes the self. Through the look exchanged between the caretaker and the sufferer, then, humanization replaces the reification of the beginning poems in *Drum-Taps*. Out of this transformation, this shift, the central figure of *Drum-Taps* emerges: not the soldier, but the nurse.

In the two poems in which the central figure of the poet as nurse emerges, yet another shift occurs, a shift dependent on the polarity of text and object of text, and also on the polarity of poet as recorder and poet as actor within the poem. Both polarities have to do with the relation of the poet to the poem. In “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown,” Whitman seems preoccupied with the inferiority of the poem to the objects of the poem. While this focus doesn’t emerge as any new concern here, since Whitman plays with this polarity in several other poems, the horrible sights of the war add a desperation, a new intensity, to the opposition. Meanwhile, the next poem, “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim” backs away from the self-consciousness of the reportage in the previous poem. Rather than focusing on itself so much, the poem focuses on the [self] identification\(^4\) of the poet as nurse through his sympathy with the wounded and dying. In these two poems, we will also see Whitman’s understanding of the human as tragically divine.

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\(^4\) See Chapter 6 for Whitman’s definition of “[self] identification” in *Democratic Vistas*. 

151
In “A March in the Ranks,” Whitman seems to distrust the medium of the poem and to bemoan the failure of the medium to convey any real reality or any fully humanized human being. Erkkila suggests that the “brutality of war shocked Whitman into a new realism in which painting and the snapshot rather than oratory and opera became the primary artistic analogues of his poems.” As part of this process, “the vaunting ‘I’ of his earlier poems recedes to the margins of his verse; in some of his sketches, in fact, the ‘I’ is not present at all” (214). As in “Spontaneous Me,” where Whitman speaks of “The real poems, (what we call poems being merely pictures),” he here enters upon “a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made.” The poem can only be written as a failure; the poet’s action within the poem receives much less attention than the speaker’s documentation of the scene. The poem bears a symmetry of two halves, both beginning with descriptions of forms and followed by an action. Following the first several lines of description, the poet forgets the self-consciousness of documentation and acts, stanching a soldier’s blood. Then the poem returns to its documentation until again the self-consciousness of documenting cuts to an action, the poet’s bending to the “half-smile” of “the dying lad.”

Aware of its failure and therefore resorting to documentation, the poem’s documentary sections fail to fully humanize the human figures. The poet first tells us the sight is of “deepest, deepest black, just lit by moving candles and lamps,” which barely illuminate “groups of forms” on the floor and in the pews. The vagueness of the phrase “groups of forms” corresponds to the dimness of the light, but also to the extent to which the poem as medium cannot stand up to the task at hand. The sight appears so far “beyond all the pictures and poems” that it hardly seems worthwhile to describe the
injured bodies lying about as more than “groups of forms.” Yet the phrase also indicates war’s tendency to reify the human being as mere body performing mere action. The dead and dying men are most often referred to with adjectival pronouns, “some” and “most,” or synecdochically as “[f]aces, varieties, postures.” In the poem’s second documentary section, following the poet’s action in stanching the soldier’s blood, “the groups of forms” have been replaced by “The crowd, O the crowd of bloody forms, the yard outside also fill’d.”

The difference in the description of human faces between the documentary sections and the lines in which the poet acts corresponds with the difference between a face as a body part and a face as the face of a human being. In the second documentary section, beginning with Whitman’s telling us, “Then before I depart I sweep my eyes o’er the scene fain to absorb it all,” he first shows us “Faces, varieties, postures beyond description, most in obscurity, some of them dead.” Likewise, after the second instance of the poet’s acting, his bending down to “the dying lad,” he leaves as “the eyes close, calmly close.” The eyes of the boy, in dying, become no longer “his eyes,” but “the eyes.” Yet in the moments of the poet’s actions, his interactions with the sufferers, the “forms” become humanized. In the first instance, “At my feet more distinctly a soldier, a mere lad, in danger of bleeding to death, (he is shot in the abdomen,) / I stanch the blood temporarily, (the youngster’s face is white as a lily,).” The parenthetical asides seem directly intended for the reader, as though the speaker turns to us personally, drawing us into the scene of humanizing. The act of caretaking replaces the act of the observing of “forms.” Now, although the boy’s face compares to a non-human, non-suffering thing—
perhaps the lily for which the boy’s corpse will make “good manure”\(^5\) ("Song of Myself," Sec. 49)—we see clearly that a human being suffers here.\(^6\) Again, in the poet’s interaction with the wounded that follows the second section of documentation, he says, “But first I bend to the dying lad, his eyes open, a half-smile he gives me.” This line constitutes the climax of the poem’s narrative, the only truly personal interaction.

Through these oppositions between text and object of text, people as bodies and people as actualized human beings, the speaker emerges in his own [self] identification. Though “A March in the Ranks” and “A Sight in Camp” both tell us early on that they have little more than sights to give us, the poet as actor within the poems challenges that declaration. Whereas in the first poem, the speaker establishes a documentary mode due to his seeing “a sight beyond all the pictures and poems ever made,” the second poem begins, “A sight in camp in the daybreak gray and dim, / As from my tent I emerge so early sleepless.” A vast difference in the role of the poet separates these two poems. If the first poem seems passive, even fatalistic, to the inevitable failure of a poem before such themes, the second line of the second poem takes an active stance. The poet/nurse emerges. He emerges from his tent, but he also emerges into the poem. In the first poem, the poet/nurse also gives us an emergence, but a less active one.

A march in the ranks hard-prest, and the road unknown,
A route through a heavy wood with muffled steps in the darkness,

\(^5\) The connection between corpse and lily might also remind us of the connection between Osiris and Christ discussed in Chapter 5. Whitman writes in “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” “Grow up taller, sweet leaves, that I may see! grow up out of my breast!” a line that carries connotations of life arising from the dead Osiris, and the resurrected Christ is sometimes called the “lily of the valley.”

\(^6\) The comparison of the reified human form, or face, with the humanized one in “A March in the Ranks” could itself be compared with Roland Barthes’ comparison of the cinematic faces of Greta Garbo and Audrey Hepburn. Garbo, he says, “belongs to that moment in cinema […] when the face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh (56), while Hepburn’s face “is individualized,” and “has nothing of the essence left in it, but is constituted by an infinite complexity of morphological functions.” Barthes says, “The face of Garbo is an Idea, that of Hepburn, an Event” (57).
Our army foil’d with loss severe, and the sullen remnant
retreating,
Till after midnight glimmer upon us the lights of a dim-
lighted building,
We come to an open space in the woods, and halt by the
dim-lighted building,
’Tis a large old church at the crossing roads, now an
impromptu hospital […]

Not indeed “the Open Road” on which the speaker leads his own way, this “Road
Unknown” leads the speaker and the army he accompanies. The speaker does not emerge.
After the steady march of lines without verbs, the “impromptu hospital” emerges. The
speaker comes to an emergence here when he enters “but for a minute” and we see the
sight that will doom this poem to the failure of its object.

Yet if, in “A March in the Ranks,” the poet passively fails the object of his poem,
the changing of his role toward that of an actor within the poetry, instead of a mere
recorder of unrecordable sights, begins here. Erkkila writes, “It was partly in response to
these psychic wounds of the nation that Whitman emerged in the role of wound-dresser
during the war years” (218). But the emergence of the wound-dresser must take place
within the poem. Where the role of the poet stays only on the outside of the poem, as the
poem’s creator, the poem must be doomed to fail its object, and the poet, though creator
of the poem, cannot achieve any kind of [self] identification through the poem. The
poet’s role must be doubled. He must become both speaker and actor. This doubling of
roles reflects what George Hutchinson calls the “crucial issue of the relationship between
representation and reality” and “the gap between the ‘actual’ and the ‘acted’” (23). In “A
March in the Ranks,” the poet only acts when he fully actualizes and humanizes the
wounded, the poet only becomes fully actualized and humanized himself when he
emerges as nurse. There is a marked shift from “A March in the Ranks” to “A Sight in
Camp.” The speaker’s action as nurse only comes as response to the text’s failure of its object, in the first poem, whereas he immediately emerges as actor within the text, in the second.

In “A Sight in Camp,” though he tells us what he sees, he also shows us his immediate action in response to what he sees. He never makes any attempt to separate the two, the seeing and the acting upon.

As slow I walk in the cool fresh air the path near by the hospital tent,
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there untended lying,
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woolen blanket,
Gray and heavy blanket, folding, covering all,

Curious I halt and silent stand,
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest the first just lift the blanket […]

We do not merely see what he sees. We see him walking amongst what he sees. He never removes himself from the frame. Differing greatly from the documenter of the first poem, the poet makes himself speaker and actor both. As speaker only, the poet has no direct relationship to the poem’s objects. The poet’s separation of himself as speaker from himself as actor thereby leaves the objects of the text as objects of the text. But in making himself both speaker and actor, he acts in direct relation to the objects and the objects are human beings. “Who are you elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-grayed hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes? / Who are you my dear comrade?” Then, rather than merely letting us see the next sight, he acts in relation to the next sight, which is again not merely an inanimate object, but human: “you sweet boy with cheeks yet blooming.” The boy becomes both his “child” and his “darling.” Whitman has made the substance of this
poem that [self] identification and humanization that had occurred only as a result of the first poem’s inferiority to its object.

That humanization also relies on the poet/nurse’s seeing of the human as divine and the divine as human. The poet [self] identifies through the recognition of the other. We will soon see how this [self] identification comes through a realization of God in the other and through this realization, a realization of God in the self. Yet in these realizations, no separation of the human and the divine ever obtains. Whitman’s metaphysics always remains physical, the “morning-glory at my window” still “more than the metaphysics of books” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 24). When the human body dies, that body becomes “the grass I love” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 52), life ongoing in the always-physical metaphysics. Yet every human being killed must be seen as “the Christ himself” (“A Sight in Camp”), through the embodiment of the divine in the human.

Erkkila writes, “The half-smile of the dying lad [in “A March in the Ranks”] represents a sustaining gesture of comradeship, love, and human affirmation, shooting its light into the surrounding darkness,” unintentionally connoting a divine light or glory shining through the interpersonal exchange (225). Humanization, then, depends on an interpersonal deification of subjectivity, whereas reification depended on making the human body into a tool for a specific job or cause.

The self’s own identification and humanization through the awareness of its divinity depend on the humanization of the other through the awareness of the other’s divinity. While it may seem merely reportage, the fact of the “impromptu hospital[s]” having been made from “a large old church at the crossing roads” becomes significant as a foreshadowing of this new realization. The central placement at a crossroads and the
church building bearing the hospital metaphorically imply the interrelation of the metaphysical and the physical. The full realization of the divinity of the other, and of the humanization that occurs through this full realization, come at the very end of “A Sight in Camp.” We see the poet/nurse move amongst the three apparently dead soldiers on stretchers. The first two are the “elderly man” and the “child and darling.”

Then to the third—a face nor child nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;
Young man I think I know you—I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,
Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.

This Christ will not rise again from the dead, unless he rises as the “uttering tongues” of “leaves of grass” (“Song of Myself;” Section 6). This Christ lies dead, and yet as Christ. Metaphysics implies here no soul separate from the body that will live forever, though the body may die. This “young man” lies both “dead and divine,” and in doing so, he also lies there, “brother of all.” The poet has seen this dead stranger as brother, just as he experienced an intimacy with the soldier he buried in his “Vigil Strange.”

This awareness of the divinity in the other, which fully humanizes the other, in the eyes of the poet/nurse, in turn allows for the humanization of the self through the awareness of the self’s divinity. This oppositional relationship works elsewhere, in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” where the speaker’s seeing the “fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water” (Sec. 3) allows for the “fine spokes of light” to “diverge” “from the shape of my head, or any one’s head, in the sunlit water!” (Sec. 9). In “A Sight in Camp,” the poet/nurse, active now in relation to the “Christ himself;” dead on a stretcher, becomes himself a Christ. As the impromptu hospital has been set up in the church, so the volunteer war nurse walks among the “Dead and divine”
like a Christ walking among sinners. In effect, the dead soldier has said to the poet, as Emerson’s Christ says to other men and women, “Would you see God, see me.” This dead young Christ, by being “brother of all,” must make of everyone likewise a Christ. In turn, the poet/nurse, seeing Christ in the dead and the wounded, can walk among them, completing the quotation of Emerson’s Christ: “Would you see God, see me; or see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.”

Now the poet as speaker and actor subsumes the various roles of empathy that have replaced the reification of the battle cry and the pennant. In “The Wound-Dresser,” [self] identification becomes most complete through the full recognition of the self in the other and the other in the self. The very title indicates the poet/nurse’s role as both speaker of and actor within the poem. The poet/nurse walks among the dying and the wounded like a lustful Jesus, not a sinless one, fully physical and fully divine, fully empathetic with the sufferers as brother, comrade, lover, and savior. At times he seems fully selfless, requiring no sleep, requiring no life of his own if necessarily a life without the sufferer he loves. He seems to love all of them equally. Yet contradictorily this selflessness remains entirely selfish, as full empathy with another self would require the empathizer to be selfish within and as that other self. So the poet/nurse’s selflessness never becomes ideal or ethereal, but becomes fully physical, as in his empathy he feels “deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame” (Sec. 3). In inhabiting both sides of these polarities, both sufferers and wound-dresser become fully humanized.

The poem begins dialogically, with the poet as old man commenting on his own voice in earlier Drum-Taps poems.

An old man bending I come among new faces,
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that
love me,
(Arous’d and angry, I’d thought to beat the alarum, and
urge relentless war,
But soon my fingers fail’d me, my face droop’d and I
resign'd myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch
the dead) […]

Again, the parentheses, as if the speaker confides more personally to the reader than to
the hearers within the poem. This parenthetical sharing further manifests his own [self]
identification through inner opposition. He speaks to us, but also speaks to himself. Or
perhaps he speaks to his portrait, since, as Hutchinson points out, the original subtitle of
Whitman’s poem, “Out From Behind This Mask”

was “To confront My Portrait, illustrating ‘the Wound-Dresser,’ in
LEAVES OF GRASS.” The unusual specificity of the reference,
within the Whitman canon, derives from the fact that it was as a
“wound-dresser” (which, strictly speaking, he was not!) that
Whitman had anchored his poetic persona. (28)

In the entirely human self-conflict of his parenthetical address, the transformation
from reifying and reified voice of the alarm to humanizing and humanized voice of the
volunteer nurse gets recapitulated in a few lines. The latter voice comments on the
former, and the old man finds himself called upon by the young to “be witness again” to
“What stays with you latest and deepest […]” They ask him to tell “Of unsurpass’d
heroes,” but as heroism must be one of the most prevalent forms of mythmaking, and
thus of dehumanization, he says parenthetically, “(was one side so brave? The other was
equally brave;)[…]” The true hero cannot be any mythological, patriotic construct, any
more than Christ can be anything other than the wholly self-actualized human.

The world of soldiering, necessarily making a thing of the other and
dehumanizing him, falls away as unreal, and the speaker, “in dreams’ projections,”
“enter[s] the doors” to walk among the suffering like a Christ-nurse. The young have asked him for “what deepest remains,” expecting that inevitably to be “armies so rapid and wondrous,” and “hard-fought engagements or sieges.” Yet though he remembers the fights, “like a swift-running river they fade, / Pass and are gone they fade—I dwell not on soldiers’ perils or soldiers’ joys.” Instead, he invites his listeners down into his dreams, “(while for you up there, / Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)” Again, the readers are included parenthetically, extending the interpersonal not only between speaker and the hearers within the poem, but also between the poet and the readers, who, by being parenthetical, stand both in and out of the poem. His listeners within the poem, and we the readers of the poem, “enter the doors” behind him and come to a clear scene.

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof’d hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return […]

Not the job of the soldier, but the empathizing and actualizing role of the nurse “deepest remains.”

The self becomes whole through the giving of the self by the serving of suffering individuals. The “wound-dresser” gives himself to every sufferer who needs help. There can be nothing of his self left over for himself as long as others need him. “To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss.” The speaker becomes pure propulsion, beginning one stanza, “I onward go,” and the next section, “On, on I go,” saying finally, “I am faithful, I do not give out.” Indeed he seems to become the very
exercise of wound-dressing itself, becoming the role of the poem’s title by fully becoming the action. Fully faithful, he becomes most human by ceasing to be a man, by becoming constant giving. Yet rather than the reduction of the body to mere tool in reification, the speaker becomes more fully human by living as much as possible in the interpersonal. Likewise, he fully humanizes the sufferers by becoming the constant meeting of needs. He moves from “[t]he crush’d head” to “[t]he neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through” to “the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,” to “a wound in the side, deep, deep.” Then,

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.

In this apparent selflessness, the selves of others also seem to have been effaced. The face, the side, the shoulder, and the arm appear as though disconnected from the sufferers, and yet they do so because the nurse attends to one suffering body part after another to help as many sufferers as can be helped.

Lest the poet/nurse’s selflessness fully become its own form of reification, however, his self fully inhabits its physical being. So active in service, “with impassive hand,” the speaker feels “deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.” His “knees” are “hinged,” and he says, “I am firm with each.” Rather than consuming him, the fire in his breast makes him strong and steady. Constantly giving of his own self, then, he can inhabit relations with the sufferers as sons or comrades. One of the most intimate, interpersonal moments in Drum-Taps occurs when “One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you, / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if
that would save you.” The ultimate interpersonal exchange would certainly be one’s life for another’s, but as such an exchange would be futile, it must be limited to the look between the two men.

Indeed, the divinity of the dead man in “A Sight in Camp” necessitates the divinity in the speaker. If it would save the boy, the nurse would die for him, would perform that act of redemption, that vicarious atonement symbolized by the crucifixion of Christ. But as all metaphysics remains physical, no such substitution can finally be possible. The nurse cannot always be savior. Still, while once the speaker would have blown the bugle that sent this man off to war, he now serves him as a brother-Christ. The patience and the gentleness the speaker describes to us and his lasting faithfulness must suffice as the truest signs of the divine in the human.

Yet this nurse-Christ moves among these sufferers as a lustful figure, his self-generosity fully and physically self-actualizing. At times, Whitman seems positively ecstatic in his selflessness. Etymologically, ecstasy relates directly to selflessness. Original Greek wordings have to do with putting “out of place,” or “driv[ing] a person out of his wits,” while later Greek applications indicated “withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance” (Oxford English Dictionary, “ecstasy”). This connotation of ecstasy certainly relates to the desire to give up one’s life for another. Furthermore, as a physical ecstasy might also be indicated by a fire in the breast, we might also see the ecstatic extension of selfless service in the nurse-as-lover.

I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young, 
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad, 
(Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested, 
Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)
The giving up of one’s sleep to “sit by the restless” surely constitutes a faithfulness, a selflessness in service, yet an altogether physical fruition obtains in the “kiss [that] dwells on these bearded lips.”

We can see the full [self] identification and humanization of the self and the other occurring through the full realization of each through the other. This process must remain a process, for the moment it becomes static, it fails to be more than the thing-in-itself, the sight of a body part, for example. The moment [self] identification and humanization cease in their interpersonal circuit, the state of reification resumes. The process depends on an understanding of certain interpersonal flows of oppositions, those of self and other, those of the living and the dead, those of male and female, those of the divine and human and the metaphysical and physical.

We can complement our tracing of this process through *Drum-Taps* with the Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of “sympathy,” “empathy,” and “ecstasy.” The dictionary defines sympathy as

The quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others; fellow-feeling.

The OED defines “empathy” as “The power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation.” Though the definition implies the potential to “walk in someone else’s shoes,” it complicates itself by its use of the word “projecting,” which carries the psychoanalytical association of the subjective urge “To attribute (an emotion, state of mind, etc.) to an external object or person, esp. unconsciously.”
This association certainly implies the ultimate failure of empathy to actually
become the other individual, but it does not negate the humanizing action of imagining
the other having a self as real to him- or her- self as one’s own self is to oneself. The
OED also gives us an alchemical definition of the verb, “project,” which implies the
transformative power of the term: “To make projection, i.e., to throw powder of
projection into a crucible of melted metal, for the purpose of transmuting the latter into
gold or silver.” Though sympathy and empathy have their obvious limitations, always
remaining within the partially contained self, they yet allow for certain actions. Empathy
with the suffering of another allows for the understanding that the selfhood of the other
must be every bit as real and central for that other person, as one’s own selfhood to
oneself. To imagine that the other is less human than you, or less than human, is to enable
yourself to kill him. To imagine that person is as real and human as you are enables you
to help, heal, and nurture him. We have already seen how the Greek roots of the word
“ecstasy” can extend directly from the concept of “empathy,” so that humanization of the
other through the self and the self through the other extends to a physical and ecstatic
realization. The desire “to die for you, if that would save you” connotes Christ’s vicarious
death as well as the Elizabethan and Jacobean poetic metaphor for orgasm.
In Michael Cunningham’s 2005 novel *Specimen Days*, three separate sections work as interwoven novellas, each presenting particular readings of, different relationships to and uses of Whitman’s poetry in separate time periods. The narratives range from a story set in the mid-nineteenth century about a misshapen, possibly hydrocephalic boy’s comfort in meeting Whitman on the street to a romance in a futuristic dystopia between a lizard-like space alien and a cyborg implanted with a computer chip that makes him quote Whitman. The middle narrative, “The Children’s Crusade,” set in the beginning of the twenty-first century, tells of a strange underground group, half cult and half political movement, which indoctrinates exploited children with a violent political agenda and lines of Whitman’s poems, and then sends them out to undertake suicide bombings on New York City streets. An old woman, a kind of mother of the movement, whose followers call her Walt Whitman, tells investigators that the purpose of this children’s crusade is to “start over,” “reversing the flow” of injustice toward “[t]he injured world” (169).

Cat, a police officer whose job is to deter bombings, has spoken to and failed to deter two of the suicide bombers who called the police prior to their actions. A New York University professor, whom she visits to talk about Whitman’s poetry, tells her,

> “Well. Whitman empathized with everyone. In Whitman there are no insignificant lives. There are mill owners and mill workers, there are great ladies and prostitutes, and he refuses to favor any of them. He finds them all worthy and fascinating. He finds them all miraculous.” (146)
She also calls Whitman “an ecstatic” and “a dervish of sorts,” as a way of refuting that *Leaves of Grass* could be called “patriotic” or an “extended national anthem.” Whereas the professor may very well have been trying to describe Whitman as the supreme democratic poet, Cat interprets this description of Whitman in a cynical and entirely different manner. She later explains to her co-worker,

“It seems you could interpret him as some sort of voice for the status quo. As in, if you worked at some awful job in a factory, twelve hours a day, six days a week, here was Whitman to tell you that your life was great, your life was poetry, you were a king in your own world.” (148)

My purpose here is not to prove any thesis about Cunningham’s novel; I want to show how the novel offers two extremes for interpreting Whitman. One pole gives us a Whitman who represents the status quo, and the other gives us a Whitman who can be harnessed for extreme social causes.

My goal in the last several chapters has been to show Whitman’s understanding of opposites as perpetually interrelating not as static and separate, but as process. I’ve called this understanding ouroboric, and have argued that the central ouroboric relationship between oppositions in Whitman’s poetry must be between the self and the other. Because of this central relationship, and because the self and the other must exist through one another, the result must at first seem counterintuitive. The ouroboric relationship between oppositions in Whitman’s poetry does not end up in a final support of the status quo, but in the dismantling of reifications and in full self-actualization.

It only makes sense, then, that Whitman’s poetry acts in the world, that it does work outside of itself. Whereas someone like Roland Barthes (who, ironically, often writes quite poetically) defines poetry as “in a very general way, the search for the
inalienable meaning of things” (159), as, in other words, essentialism through and through, those writing in Whitman’s lineage have been anything but essentialist. Whitman writes poetry that responds to and even exists as part of “the blab of the pave” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 8). This opening up of poetry to be the voice on the sidewalk itself determines an ouroboric relationship between opposites in style. The poetic voice becomes the common voice, and the common voice becomes poetic.

In this ouroboric process, poetry and the poet’s idea of everyday life both change. Rather than only concerning itself with lofty matters above the concerns of everyday struggles, poetry will increasingly concern itself with the daily life of ordinary people. Stylistically, its voice must change to accommodate the change in content, so that specifically, the ouroboric relationship obtains between the speaker’s voice and the voice of the ordinary person as focus of attention. In his poetic lineage, the central ouroboric relationship in Whitman between self and other extends rhetorically into an ouroboric relationship between speaker and subject. The change in style likewise entails that the poet now think of everyday life as itself poetic, as itself substantial and important, even grand, enough for poetry. These ouroboric rhetorical relationships between opposites, between the poetic (often thought of as innately lyric or epic) and the everyday, the speaker and the ordinary person as focus, obtain in the works of poets following Whitman, from Sandburg to Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, from the Beats to Baraka’s Black Arts Movement, and from there to Hip Hop and the Spoken Word movement.

In many ways, then, Whitman’s response to Transcendentalism made necessary a change in form. If Whitman can be called the anti-Transcendentalist Transcendentalist, it’s because he doesn’t hierarchize his oppositions. We’ve seen the works of oppositional
hierarchies in Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller. We have also seen how Whitman’s oppositions inform and infuse one another in a flux that never becomes still. This difference in understanding oppositions likewise entails a move from the essay form, favored by Transcendentalists, though Emerson’s essays, for example, may be called poetic in many ways, to the poetic, whose new focuses some might call prosaic. This poetic form carries its own oppositional relationship to the antipoetic, and this antipoetic-poetic has been taken up in the century and more since Whitman’s death by some of the most politically conscious American poets. Chapter 8 begins with, but takes leave of Whitman to focus on the arc toward increased spokenness of the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic and the ouroboric relationship between speaker and subject in post-Whitman American poetry.

**The Whitmanic Humanization of a Cyborg**

Before delving into this Whitmanic lineage, I’d like to return briefly to Cunningham’s novel. The final section of the novel, “Like Beauty,” describes the unlikely romance between a cyborg earthling and a lizard-like alien from the planet of Nadia. If a main character in the preceding section, who incidentally has her life horribly altered by one of the devotees of what she deems to be the poetic voice of the status quo, thinks of Whitman as a character who will tell you to accept the undesirable conditions of your life, in the final section, the cyborg with the Whitman implant finds himself fully humanized through the actualization of his empathy. Simon the cyborg has found himself traveling toward Denver with Catareen the Nadian through a post-apocalyptic America. They are headed to Denver to find Emory Lowell, who created Simon and several other cyborgs, each harboring a poetic implant. Simon doesn’t know why he’s headed to
Denver, only that he bears implanted knowledge that he should make it there by a certain date.

In fact, “Like Beauty” is both a travel narrative and a story about the cyborg’s humanization through cathexis. Lowell, with a motley crew of Nadians and misfit humans, plans to launch a spaceship to another planet, in which the crew will flee the ruined earth. The other cyborgs all had the works of various poets implanted, but only Simon, with his lines from *Leaves of Grass*, makes it to Denver. Strangely, Simon had been programmed to empathize without emotion. If he caused any pain or suffering to any other being, even if that suffering were disguised or otherwise invisible, Simon would cease to function correctly. If the situation became desperate enough, he would shut down altogether. In this way, it might be said his empathy superseded that of humans, who are so often oblivious to the harm they cause. Though he cannot initially feel the pain of others, he struggles to understand what happens to him when empathy makes him fail to function. In Denver, Lowell tells him, “I’ve always wondered if actual emotions might start springing up in you. If your connections might start firing, given the proper stimuli” (282).

Simon’s full humanization occurs with the ability to fellowfeel, with cathexis, specifically through his falling in love with the Nadian and accepting his existence as an earthling. He finds that Catereen has been traveling with him for no other reason than to die, that she has been in the process of dying the entire trip. Though he initially plans to board the spaceship, he decides to stay behind with her on her deathbed. Just before making this decision, she indicates that she wants him to take her to the window of the room where she is dying.
Simon held her before the window that looked out onto the tree. It might have been the tree and only the tree Simon had brought her to see, though of course neither he nor Catareen had thought anything of it, one ordinary tree spreading over a standard-issue patch of dirt. It was only now, at this window, with the dying Catareen in his arms and the tree so perfectly centered in the view, that Simon understood it to be in any way singular or mysterious.

He said, “Urge and urge and urge, always the procreant urge of the world.”

“Yes,” she answered. (292)

Catareen doesn’t usually answer his Whitman quotes, and the reader has no indication that she knows these are other than Simon’s own words, however bizarre. But this is the tree beneath which he will bury her, to which he will “bequeath” her (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 52). The eternal “procreant urge of the world” includes the constant fertilization, in full sexual connotation of the word, of the living with the dead.

His decision to stay with Catareen on her deathbed means he misses the launch of the spaceship from this post-apocalyptic world and its toxic environment; he finds cathexis with her and with the earth itself. His act of burial is an act of love for her and for the world. She tells him to go and he tells her, “This is where I want to be” (302). This statement marks a radical shift in his desire. The indeterminate “this” may well be taken to mean both “here with you” and “here on the earth.” She falls asleep and dies in her sleep, and he falls asleep with her. He wakes up to the sound of the spaceship as it is launched. He calls for it, but calls too late. Now Simon no longer wonders what it means to be human, though his cathexis has been wrought in tragedy. He is going to head west, to California.

The woman was in the ground. The child [Luke, whom they picked up along the way] was on his way to another world [in the spaceship]. Simon was on his way someplace, and there might be nothing there. No, there was something everywhere. He was going into his future. There was nothing to do but ride into it.
A pure change had happened. He felt it buzzing through his circuits. He had no name for it.

He said aloud, “The earth, that is sufficient, I do not want the constellations any nearer, I know they are very well where they are, I know they suffice for those who belong to them.”

He rode on then, through the long grass toward the mountains.

(305)

Simon has acted on his own and he has loved. If this world has been poisoned and he has lost the woman he loved, he has nevertheless become capable of love and has become an actualized and empathetic part of the world. He has joined that part of existence that is conscious of itself and of its relation to its context through cathexis, that part called human.

The novel shows us not only the different ways Whitman might be read, but that where Whitman’s poetry does the most work, it doesn’t reify. It doesn’t essentialize. Essentialism tends toward reification because it can reduce human beings to largely immobile types, so that relationships between human beings become relationships between individuals who view each other as essential categories. If Whitman’s poetry leads instead to individualization and humanization, Cunningham’s novel makes this movement literal. Simon ceases being a cyborg as a result of an intense inner struggle over what it means to be human, which inevitably has to do with interconnection and the human relationship to the world. Most of those writing in the wake of Whitman’s anti-Transcendental Transcendentalism have not chosen the novel any more than they have the essay to throw their voices into such a discussion. Instead, they have followed Whitman’s antipoetic-poetic with their own.
Democratic Poets: “Puny and Cold”

To track the lineage of the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic, we have to go back before Whitman. It’s hardly original to point out how Whitman’s attempt at a democratic poetry answers Alexis de Tocqueville’s comments about poetry in the United States, but it’s necessary here to look at De Tocqueville’s assertions to see just how opposed Whitman’s uses of poetry are to de Tocqueville’s ideas of the poetic. Oddly, de Toqueville’s definition of poetry sounds much like Barthes’ more contemporary definition. “Poetry, in my view, is the search for and depiction of the ideal,” de Toqueville writes (559). Yet we’ve already seen how Whitman favors neither side of the opposition between real and ideal, and Whitman chooses poetry as the form in which to dismantle that Emersonian hierarchy of ideal over real.

De Tocqueville’s assertion that the poetic necessarily concerns itself with the ideal, even finding itself defined by the ideal, means that Whitman’s poetry will be everything de Tocqueville says poetry cannot be. Democracy breeds skepticism, de Tocqueville says, and “A time of skepticism brings poet’s imaginations back to earth and shuts them away in the actual, visible world” (560). Indeed, Whitman concerns himself primarily with the earth and with physical life, rather than any metaphysical hereafter. De Tocqueville says,

In democracies where men are insignificant and very much alike, everyone sees in himself a portrait of all the others. In such societies, poets can never, therefore, take one particular individual as the subject of their poetry because an object of mediocrity with obvious outlines will never contribute to the portrayal of ideal beauty. (561)

Since Whitman doesn’t devote his poetry to ideal beauty, the so-called “object of mediocrity” for de Tocqueville becomes the “divine average” of “Starting from
Paumanok.” Everyone seeing “in himself a portrait of all the others” becomes, as we have seen, the very means of self-actualization. The making “insignificant” of all individuals in de Tocqueville’s thinking becomes the inverse of the epic significance of all individuals in Whitman’s poems.

In fact, Whitman will take advantage of the idea of egalitarianism to depict himself as the strong, hearty poet, though de Tocqueville says equality makes individuals puny and insignificant. Whitman might agree with de Tocqueville that “Since citizens in a democratic society share a similar equality, the poet cannot treat any single one of them but the whole nation itself becomes a subject for his pen” (562). Whitman’s preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* directly counters this assertion. What makes the United States the least poetic of nations for de Tocqueville makes it the most poetic for Whitman, who says, “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.” Whereas the danger of essentializing the United States as a reified object clearly exists here, the primary poetic concern remains on individuals’ lives and voices. In Whitman’s thinking, the poem’s focal point always supersedes the poem itself as the true poem, and this opposition can be seen as most certainly the case with individuals in a democratic society as his main interest. As long as the poem’s topic exists as the true poem, the poem always grants its topic an existence of its own, besides that of the poem on the page.

De Tocqueville’s most famous thoughts on this score are that “It would be hard to imagine anything more insignificant, dull, more crowded with paltry interests, in one word, antipoetic, than the life of a man in the United States” (563). Certainly Whitman
stands this statement on its head, seeing the ordinary as extraordinary and the
insignificant as significant. He uses the context of a democratic society as the perfect
pretext for the ecstatic poet, and makes empathy the method of his ecstasy. De
Tocqueville asserts,

Democratic poets will always appear puny and cold when they
attempt to give bodily shape to gods, demons, or angels and when
they strive to bring them down from heaven to fight for the
supremacy of the earth. (564)

We might take this last description as a possible metaphor for Whitman’s embodying the
metaphysical in the physical, and this embodiment hardly makes this poet of the
“barbaric yawp” “puny and cold.” Worst of all, in a democratic society, the poet need not
contemplate the ideal, the mythological, the heavenly and sublime, but instead, de
Tocqueville says bitingly, “I need only contemplate myself” (564). To this statement as
well, Whitman seems to respond with poetry that would have told de Tocqueville he was
right, but had no idea what he was really right about. Whitman’s hot and broad-chested
“Song of Myself” defines the epic proportions of the self defining itself through
everything not self.

Whitman becomes most antipoetic not in theme, but in form, not the metered
poetry of mythological allusions and rarefied eloquence, but the poetics of the “blab of
the pave.” If the speaker of “Song of Myself” could walk down the street and transcribe
for the reader,

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of
the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb,
the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd mobs, (Sec. 8)
then the merest transcription of the voices of the streets becomes the new poetry. “Song of Myself” presents democracy not as a form of government, but a form of non-government. The true democracy shows itself to be the anarchic convergences of the voices of the public space.

**Sandburg’s Populism**

In Whitman’s twentieth-century wake, this understanding will clear the way for the populist poet. If Whitman’s poetry answers de Tocqueville’s assertion that nothing could be more “antipoetic, than the life of a man in the United States,” Emerson’s more elitist idea of the poet as one who “traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man” (289) has been transformed through Whitman’s ouroboric of the antipoetic-poetic to enable a poem such as Sandburg’s “Sojourner Truth Speaking,” which attempts to place in verse Sojourner Truth’s direct quotes. The characteristic move of the twentieth-century populist poet can be defined as the reversal of Emerson’s idea of the poet. Emerson’s notion of the poet carries the potential for this populism in the very idea that the poet should give voice to the matters of ordinary people, but remains elitist in the necessity for poetic control it expresses. Emerson answers the question of who this representative of the people should be with a conception of the poet as superior being. “He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth” (288).

If the poet’s representational abilities entitle him to representational responsibilities, Emerson also, *malgre lui*, allows an opening for the possibility of a later populism to emerge, for though the poet stands in for the complete man amongst partial men, yet “[t]he man is only half himself, the other half is his expression” (288). When
Whitman transcribes the voices of the public, he moves toward allowing the part of him that is his expression to become in fact the public’s expression. In the century that follows him, populist poets such as Sandburg and Hughes will step further toward the *vox populi*. The twentieth-century populist reversal of the Emersonian idea of the poet replaces poetry as representation of some “whole scale of experience” of “man” with the idea of the voice of the public itself as poetry.

In Sandburg’s ”Sojourner Truth Speaking,” the poet attempts to step out of the way and let the poem’s title become literal. The ouroboric relationship between speaker and subject is such that the speaker attempts to let the subject become speaker, though in doing so, the speaker obscures the fact of his own speaking for the subject. Chapter XXIX of the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* describes a camp meeting at which the abolitionist and former slave spoke. She finds herself terrified of a group of rioting whites who come to respect her for standing up to them and speaking eloquently to them. The narrator describes Sojourner Truth’s initial moments of speaking to them. “‘Oh,’ said she, ‘I felt as if I had three hearts! and that they were so large, my body could hardly hold them!’” (69). Sandburg’s poem begins, “I felt as if I had three hearts / and they were so large / my body could hardly hold them.” The whole poem consists of five sayings attributed to Sojourner Truth. The populist concept clearly presents itself as the need for the poet to get out of the way of the *vox populi*. Yet, as Mark Van Wienen has written, “even while Sandburg adopts the voice of the People, he is also a self-conscious observer of their plight” (92). In reading such poems, we are always conscious that the poet has gotten out of the way of the voice of the people, only to immediately return and speak as that voice himself.
The very title of “Sojourner Truth Speaking” carries forward a further complication of the issue of the title of Sojourner Truth’s narrative. The blatant problem of the latter, of course, remains that the narrative is not Sojourner Truth’s, but that of one Olive Gilbert, to whom Sojourner’s story was supposedly dictated. Because Gilbert writes down the story of her illiterate subject, she becomes her representative voice. The subject can never speak for herself. Sandburg’s poem implies otherwise. Yet Sandburg breaks the quotation into poetic lines and removes the cumbersome “that.” He rewrites Gilbert’s speaking for Sojourner Truth to restore some oratorical power, since the tone of the populist poet often rings oratorical. In neither place, however, does the subject speak. In fact, Sandburg seems to present her to the reader more directly, though the poem would more accurately be titled, “Sandburg Speaking for Olive Gilbert Speaking for Sojourner Truth.”

Later in the poem, Sandburg’s attempt to present Sojourner Truth more directly to the reader leads to the artifice of vernacular in the quest for verisimilitude. The text of Sojourner’s 1851 “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech contains this well-known biting wit:

“Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.”

The penultimate section of Sandburg’s poem says,

Dat little man he say woman can't have as much rights as a man ’cause Christ wasn’t a woman. What did your Christ come from? Whar? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with Him.
Sandburg’s “Whar?” stands in for Sojourner Truth’s repetition of the entire question, and he replaces her exclamation point with a period. The rhetorical power and incredulity in Sojourner Truth’s original phrasing becomes a mere catechismal response in Sandburg.

The credibility of this kind of attempt at verisimilitude may have worn more thin with time, and/or with the growth of identity politics, which made more questionable many uses of black American vernacular in literature, even when intentions are good.\(^1\) But the primary paradox here must be Sandburg’s shaping of Sojourner’s Truth’s voice, even as he appears to get out of the way of his subject. The particular ouroboric relationship of speaker and subject cannot be said to meet the apparent goal of the poem. Inasmuch as the poet tries to make the subject (Sojourner Truth) the speaker, and the speaker the subject of her own poem, the speaker cannot quite become devoid of the presence of the poet. Sandburg’s efforts at verisimilitude get in the way of the poem’s verisimilitude.

Nevertheless, Sandburg’s poems seem intent on speaking for the public by trying to let the public speak. If the poet cannot write the poem without being the writer of the poem, he can still lend it the voice of those for whom he seeks to write. If Emerson is correct that half of a poet is the poet’s expression, Sandburg’s speakers seek to speak \textit{with} the public, not \textit{for} it. This is the poet who eulogizes Eugene Debs by imagining him spending his afterlife speaking, “at ease with Garrison, John Brown, Albert Parsons, Spartacus” (“Eugene V. Debs”). This is a poet who picks up from Whitman the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic and gives it an early twentieth-century Midwestern accent. Sandburg may sound most Whitmanic in poems like “Chicago,” with long rambling lines like

\(^{1}\) There remains the question of whether Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s vernacular poems constitute, in fact, a sort of minstrelsy, with their subjects singing of watermelon and cornpone.
“Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the people, / Laughing!” He may sound most populist in the long stretches of *The People, Yes*, where he quotes apparently random snatches of dialogue, as if the poet has become mere tape recorder.

   “Am I the first girl you ever kissed?”
   “No, but I want you to know I am a lot more particular than I used to be.” (154)

Whereas “Sojourner Truth Speaking” presents a stylized verisimilitude of the poet getting out of the way of his speaking subject, *The People, Yes* presents a similar verisimilitude on the much grander scale of assuming the entire American public for its subject. Still, this verisimilitude implies a double stance.

   Thus Sandburg stands in a relationship both sympathetic to and critical of the common people: his position is much like the one he occupied as a Wisconsin party organizer mobilizing the masses; it is the spirit, roughly speaking, of the socialist intellectual who discerns and proclaims the spirit of the people. (Van Wienen, 93)

The subject is always the people, but not only the people. Indirectly, the subject must also be the speaker himself as speaker for the people.

   In parts of *The People, Yes*, and poems such as “Grass” and “Ready to Kill,” we can trace a direct extension from Whitmanic motifs to the social consciousness of the new populist poet. Though displaying what I’ve called an ouroboric understanding of oppositions, Whitman, unlike Fuller, never refers directly to the ouroboros itself. Ouroboric images occur in section 45 of Sandburg’s *The People, Yes*, and the Whitmanic ouroboric understanding of the grass occurs in Section 52. The former section begins, “They have yarns,” and is followed by 27 lines that begin with “Of.” We are told “Of
horned snakes, hoop snakes that roll themselves where they want to go,” and “Of the man who killed a snake by putting its tail in its mouth so it swallowed itself.” But if Sandburg gives us the image of the ouroboros here, he doesn’t give us the Whitmanic ouroboric understanding until later.

Sandburg does give us the ouroboric understanding of oppositions in Section 52, after telling us about “that early sodbuster in Kansas” and right before telling us of the different kinds of “grass families.” He tells us, “All flesh is grass.”

From the sod the grazers derive their food and pass it on to man. Out of the grasslands man takes his meat and milk and lives. Wherever is a rich banquet it goes back to the grass. Howsoever men break bread together or eat alone it is grass giving them life and they could pray: “Give us this day our daily grass.”

As in “Song of Myself,” where the grass was “many uttering tongues,” in Whitman’s “This Compost,” the speaker claims to be “terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient.”

That all is clean forever and forever,
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,
That blackberries are so flavorous and juicy,
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me,
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.

Whitman’s speaker professes awe at the cleansing power of the grass, yet simultaneously expresses terror at this power. Sandburg’s more preachy language lacks Whitman’s

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1 In reminiscing about his childhood obsession with snakes, the biologist Edward O. Wilson writes, “Deep in the woods live creatures of startling power. (That is what I most wanted to hear.) Among them is the hoop snake. Skeptics, who used to be found hunkered down in a row along the county courthouse guardrail on a Saturday morning, say it is only mythical; on the other hand it might be the familiar coachwhip racer turned vicious by special circumstances. Thus transformed, it puts its tail in its mouth and rolls down hills at great speed to attack its terrified victims.” He also says, differentiating the snake from the serpent, “In the back country during a century and a half of settlement, the common experience of snakes was embroidered into the lore of serpents. Cut off a rattlesnake’s head, one still hears, and it will live on until sundown” (Biophilia, 89).
wonder. Though in *The People, Yes*, Sandburg’s speaker may simply, and without Whitman’s sense of terror, express the physically spiritual reverence the farmer feels for the grass, the poet elsewhere treats the simultaneous wonder of the grass’ cleansing power in terms more politically charged.

In the poem, “Grass,” the grass itself assumes the role of speaker, expressing its own responsibility to work its cleansing miracle, while having nothing to do with the entirely human responsibility toward memory. No matter what horror of war human beings create, the grass quickly erases it from its place of perpetration.

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work—
   I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
   What place is this?
   Where are we now?

   I am the grass.
   Let me work.

Later travelers through these places of horror do not find themselves haunted by the dead.

No angry spirits avenge themselves on them. No sign remains of the corpses that were shoveled under. The grass itself makes no memorial.³ Certainly this grass, this most

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³ Likewise, the South African psychoanalyst Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela writes of one woman who angrily resisted post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission discussions by saying she had “‘put grass over the past,’ using a Xhosa expression, the main language of the Eastern and Western Cape. ‘And now you want us to remember? Is this going to bring back my son?’” (88). Having expressed regret that the death of a former rival “weak[ens his] derision,” the speaker in James Wright’s “Devotions” says:

Lost mocker of my childhood, how the moss
Softens your hair, how deeply nibbling fangs
Sink in the careless ground.
Seasons of healing grasses weave across
Your caving lips, and dull my strange
Terror of failures […]

182
banal and ordinary plant, works constant wonders then, but just as certainly its power of erasure should terrify us.

The miracle the grass makes happen, its power to cleanse, enables human beings to forget the immediacy of what they’ve done, to justify their crimes, to rewrite by memorializing. The grass has no memory, and its cleansing power encourages human beings likewise to forget. Memorialization, as a form of reification, since it objectifies the complexities of a human interaction into a form of mythology, may in fact be the most dangerous form of forgetting, because “this general of the army holding a flag in the air” will be memorialized in bronze. This general “[r]eady to kill anybody that gets in his way, / Ready to run the red blood and slush the bowels of men all over the sweet new grass of the prairie” will find this “sweet new grass” ready to absorb the blood and the bowels. That absorption, that cleansing, constitutes the responsibility of the grass and allows people to shirk their own responsibility toward memory.

In Sandburg’s “Ready to Kill,” the speaker looks at the “bronze memorial of a famous general” and wants “to smash the whole thing into a pile of junk to be hauled away to the scrap yard.” The act of memorialization alleviates the feeling of responsibility toward memory. Memorialization is not memory, but a substitute for memory. If the memorialization of war heroes could be done away with, then, the speaker tells us, we could honor those individuals who do the real “work of the world.” Here Sandburg’s populist antipoetic-poetic shows its full oratorical and socialistic fervor. “I put it straight to you,” he says. “After the farmer, the miner, the shop man, the factory hand, the fireman and the teamster, / Have all been remembered with bronze memorials,” he might find himself able to look at the general’s statue and not get sick. These
memorials would show workers “on the job of getting all of us / Something to eat and something to wear” and finally, to contrast fully against the memorial of the general, “show the real huskies that are doing the work of the world, and feeding people instead of butchering them.”

So if “Sojourner Truth Speaking” cannot give us Sojourner Truth herself, speaking, and if The People, Yes gives us stylized (and now often dated to a certain hokiness) folksy witticisms in place of the actual dialogue of the public space, Sandburg’s Whitmanic populism does give us a series of a different kind of memorial. These Sandburg poems lack the more complex tensions of the struggles of everyday people that we find in Whitman, though the poems at least attempt to give the voice of the working class a place in poetry, and likewise poetry access to the voices of the working class. With the ouroboric rhetorical goal of making the subject speaker and the speaker subject, the poet tries, quixotically at times and never quite succeeding, to disappear. His subject is always the people, but also always himself as speaker to and of the people.

Louis Untermeyer once wrote that Sandburg “is a socialist and (or, if the opposition prefers, but) an artist.” Though Untermeyer is correct in seeing the double stance of Sandburg’s speaker, Van Wienen is also correct to point out, “even while he praises Sandburg’s politics, Untermeyer risks subsuming them in his depiction of Sandburg’s poetic excellence” (96). That is, Untermeyer’s approach contains an element of ars gratia artis, as it treats art and politics as though the latter were both separate and inferior. We will see with Langston Hughes, however, that the politics of the poem succeeds when the speaker presents the people-as-subject as discourse-as-subject. Still,
the farmer and the miner are antipoetic by de Tocqueville’s standards; if the subject of poetry has changed, the form has changed as well. Sandburg’s antipoetic-poetic gives us the memorials he wishes to take the place of the bronze statue of the general.

“The Music of a Community in Transition”

George Hutchinson has asserted that “[p]robably no white American poet has had a greater impact upon black American literature than Walt Whitman, yet the history, nature, and extent of this impact have barely been recognized, let alone analyzed” (“Whitman and the Black Poet,” 46). Indeed the “antipoetic” life of people in the United States brought about the Harlem Renaissance and would eventually make Langston Hughes a household name. Surely this is a matter of ouroboric irony. The most antipoetic subject matter brings fame to an American poet. Arnold Rampersad, in his two-volume critical biography of Langston Hughes, writes,

“[I]n apprenticing himself to Whitman and Sandburg, [Hughes] freed himself from the most conventional kinds of imitation, especially sentimental Anglophilia; he joined a rival tradition grounded in a passion for native, democratic themes and flexible forms, especially free verse. (v.1, 29)

The rival camp Ampersad speaks of included modernist poets like Pound, Eliot, and Stevens.

Hughes’ 1951 Montage of a Dream Deferred used the idioms of jazz and the blues to reflect

the conflicting changes, sudden nuances sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition. (387)
With that preface to the *Montage*, Hughes quickly lays out his own theory of what this long poem of interconnected poems would accomplish and how it should be read. Hughes, then, was one of the first to theorize jazz as a truly democratic musical form, a conversation in which each soloist discursively adds his own improvisation to the central theme. Then Hughes fitted this jazz theory to poetry.

The entire *Montage* works as a conversation, coming much closer to the role of poet as transcriber of the “blab of the pave” than Sandburg in “Sojourner Truth, Speaking.” Here, the ouroboric rhetorical move of subject becoming speaker and speaker subject obtains through the use of a multiple and multivocal subject. Because conversation appears to be organic, a representation of conversation seems to have a life of its own. The conversation works as a musical one, as well as one in which each element of the Harlem streets speaks to the other elements, and these two descriptions of the conversation cannot be disconnected. The poems often comment on themselves with italics.

Listen closely:
You’ll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a—

*You think
It’s a happy beat?*

Listen to it closely[.] (“Dream Boogie”)

The sudden address of poet to reader changes the tone of the poem, but doesn’t alter the ensemble arrangement. The poet speaks to us from within the musical conversation.

In poems such as “Sister,” the dialogue between non-italicized and italicized lines forms a kind of jazz- or blues-inflected call-and-response pattern. “Don’t decent folks have dough? / *Unfortunately usually no!*” Meanwhile, often riffing directly off of Dizzy
Gillespie and other scat-singing musicians, Hughes’ musical connotations punctuate the poems throughout the *Montage*, with “Hey, pop! / Re-bop! / Mop!” followed by a line space and “Y-e-a-h!” (“Dream Boogie”), “Oop-pop-a-da! / Skee! Daddle-de-do! / Be-bop!” (“Children’s Rhymes”), and “De-daddle-dy! / De-dop!” (“What? So Soon!”). The call and response create their own kind of ouroboric rhetoric, each not only informing the other, but infusing the other. In much the same way conversations can become one self-involved entity, a microcosm comprised of its multiple parties and oblivious to voices or goings-on outside its self-involvement, the multivocal poem seems to have become its own creator, and if the poet does speak, he speaks as part of a live discourse.

In the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic of the *Montage*, lists of slang, mottos, newspaper headlines, and neon signs become parts of poems or become poems in and of themselves. The short poem “Motto” ends with

```
My motto,
As I live and learn,
   is:
    Dig And Be Dug
    In Return.
```

The isolated and centered copula and colon set up the motto with a certain semiofficial status, as do its capitalized letters.

Meanwhile, “The Ballad of the Landlord” ends with rhyming and metered headlines:

```
MAN THREATENS LANDLORD
TENANT HELD NO BAIL
JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN JAIL.
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In the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic that presents the street itself as the poet, pure drug slang constitutes poetry: “Hemp… / A stick… / A roach… / Straw…” (“Gauge”). Hughes could have interchanged any single line of the poem with the title.

And if drug slang itself becomes poetry, no urban poem could be complete without letting the neon signs speak. So they get their own poem.

```
WONDER BAR
WISHING WELL
MONTEREY
MINTON’S
(ancient altar of Thelonious)
MANDALAY
Spots where the booted
and unbooted play
SMALL’S
CASBAH
SHALIMAR
Mirror-go-round
where a broken glass
in the early bright
smears re-bop
sound. (“Neon Signs”)
```

Certainly these signs speak with voices more readily heard than those of most poets.

For Whitman, the voices of the public space consisted of the sounds of tires and the “pelts of snowballs,” because he could exclaim of every sound of the street, “What living and buried speech is always vibrating here” (“Song of Myself,” Sec. 8). Likewise, the streets of Harlem speak to its denizens as much from newspaper headlines and neon signs as they do from daily gossip, the conversation of music, and the music of conversation. These other voices as well are part of that music and conversation.

Sandburg’s poems give the appearance of the poet trying to get out of the way of his subject’s voice. In poems like “Gauge” or “Neon Signs,” the poet does appear, but only in the selection of which slang terms to include or in a supporting role to that of the neon
signs. Inasmuch as the poet has been successful in merging with the ensemble, the multiple voices each infuse the others in a multiverse of self-other relationships.

In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes, “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” This proof carries an image of ouroboric absorption by the country the poet has absorbed, but Hughes, “the darker brother,” said, “I, Too, Sing America.” As noted by Hutchinson,

[Whitman’s] attempts to achieve an orally based poetics with the cadence and diction of the voice on the street, at the pond-side, or at the pulpit, provided a partial model for the young black poet looking for a way to sing his own song, which would be at the same time a song of his people. (“Langston Hughes and the ‘Other’ Whitman,” 21)

The “song of his people,” says Rampersad, would be a “single transcendent song of himself as a major American singer,” making Hughes “the central poet of the black condition in America” (v.2, 295).

In Whitman, as we have seen, the self and other complete each other only through an ouroboric interrelationship. Rampersad writes, “While Walt Whitman declared that *Leaves of Grass* could not have been written without the inspiration of opera, for Langston it was blues and jazz that had been indispensable” (v.2, 250). Hughes uses music, jazz and the blues, to ensure that the speaker and populace-as-subject complete each other in their own ouroboric interrelationship. Only because Hughes’ subject is multivocal, a discourse in and of itself, does it succeed in becoming speaker. By extension, only because this particular discourse-as-subject can successfully become speaker, does the speaker truly become part of his subject.
“Heart of the Poem of Life Butchered out of their Own Bodies”

A noticeable shift occurs with the poets of the Beat generation. Many of these poets, especially Allen Ginsberg, considered themselves Whitman’s direct descendents. In their varying developments of the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic, however, the poet reappears in the spotlight. Whether this return can be attributed to a countercultural response to America’s mid-twentieth century celebrity culture, or a renewed emphasis on the Romantic poets, or both, Whitman’s own self-promoting style perfectly fit their idea of him as the progenitor of American poetry. The two poets I wish to consider here, Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, both wax antipoetic, yet they both figure largely, and figure Whitman largely as well, in their own poems.

From the 1950s to the early 1970s, Ginsberg’s poems often seem to take one of two stylistic tacks. Both extend the ouroboric speaker/subject relationship to a representation of a shadow-America as speaker, and thereby, the poet, whom Ginsberg’s speaker never seems to leave far behind, as an America that America doesn’t want to acknowledge, Ginsberg as a kind of nightmare-Uncle Sam. Ginsberg’s most famous poem, “Howl,” for example, extends Whitman’s street oratory into a veritable rant. The transcription of the voices of the streets has turned into a lamentation and catalogue of a strung-out underground America, a decadent poetic America,

who wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of onions and bad music,
who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and rose to build harpsichords in their lofts.[.]

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4 Ginsberg, for example, claimed influence from Shelley, Keats, and especially Blake, of whom he claimed to have received a vision when he was a young poet living in Greenwich Village.
5 One might here recall the famous image of big-bearded Ginsberg wearing a top hat covered with the Stars and Stripes.
The other stylistic tack that predominates in much of Ginsberg’s poetry from this period can be called the journal transcription. If the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic can exist in the form of a roughly twenty-minute howl, it can also exist in the form of a traveler’s cahiers. Ginsberg’s collection, *The Fall of America*, reads like an epic travel journal, a geographic imaging of America as a series of stopovers in random places after many hours driving and wandering per day. As with Hughes’ headlines, articles and conjunctions are often missing. The poems carry the antipoetic effect of an increased realism.

```
Old earth rolling mile after mile patient
The ground
I roll on
the ground
the music soars above
The ground electric arguments
Ray over
The ground dotted with signs for Dave’s Eat Eat
scarred by highways, eaten by voices
Pete’s Café—
    Golden land in setting sun
Missouri River icy brown, black cows,
grass tufts standing up hairy on hills.” (“Kansas City to St. Louis”)
```

The two poles of antipoetic style in Ginsberg’s writing from this period, then, are the rant and the journal. The former seems a spontaneous vocal explosion, the latter a spiral bound record, a document to be kept in boxes beneath the bed. Either of these ouroboric antipoetic-poetics carries its own idea of the representative poet.

The Ginsbergian poetic ideal is a Romantic one, to somehow distill as much of the experience of life as possible into poetry, “with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years” (“Howl”). Ginsberg here transmutes into a poetic raison d’etre the Whitmanic ouroboric of death bequeathing life
and the eating of the dead through their subsumption into vegetation. If this excision defines the job of poetry, the poet becomes an extreme, a distortion of Emerson’s idea of the “representative man.” Here, the ouroboric of speaker and subject directly infuses the poet. The poet becomes the butcher, the one who takes the poem from the bodies around him and puts them on the page. This poetic ideal calls for a wide-ranging experience in the poet, an experimental openness and wildness, and ouroborically, the poet’s subject matter determines the poet. Yet even though some critics have made much of Whitman’s sexual inhibitions about his homosexuality, whereas many readers think of Ginsberg as an incredibly uninhibited figure, the ideal of poet as butcher extends directly from Whitman to Ginsberg. In “Song of the Open Road,” Whitman advises the traveler “To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them, to gather the love out of their hearts[.]” Ginsberg takes Whitman’s admonition and makes it his job description.

Ginsberg sets himself up in Walt Whitman’s image. Amitai Avi-Ram points out that in Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California,”

Ginsberg figures his own impossible search for an authenticity that would include the body, appropriately, as an encounter with Whitman in a modern supermarket, an encounter whose playful tone sustains a tension between satirical irony and earnest tragedy.

6 See Zweig’s mention of Whitman’s references to Peter Doyle in his notebooks. Whitman writes of his “undignified pursuit of 164,” which Zweig refers to as “the nervous substitution of a number code for the initials of Peter Doyle (P is the 16th letter of the alphabet, D is the 4th), and by the reversal of genders” (193-194). Taking a different tack on Whitman’s sexuality, but for the element of secrecy, Vivian Pollak writes, “Sexual secrecy as experienced by Whitman was profoundly self-isolating and one night with one sleeping lover was not enough” (148).

7 From Whitman, we can also find an earlier reference to poetry as a violent robbery of the flesh. In A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Thoreau writes, “The talent of composition is very dangerous,—the striking out the heart of life at a blow, as the Indian takes off a scalp” (265).
Ouroborically, Ginsberg’s subjects represent for America-as-audience an America the American mainstream would rather ignore, making the speaker/poet an unelected unofficial, a butcher-representative, whose countercultural antipoetic-poetic will allow him to speak out on political and social issues.

He casts himself in Whitman’s image as a champion for his sexual orientation. He dedicates *The Fall of America* to Whitman, with an epigraphic quotation from *Democratic Vistas* about “the adhesive love,” from which Whitman says, “I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof.” As always with Whitman, the physical and spiritual must be seen as part of each other, and he sees that happening in American democracy through what he calls “fervid comradeship.”

I say democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself.

In Ginsberg’s countercultural version of the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic, an open-ended sexuality represents democracy far more than the politics of the Vietnam War, which he constantly protests and decries both in his poems and out of them.

In so many of Ginsberg’s own poems, he portrays Whitman alternately as an imagined friend and partner, someone who, one hundred years before Ginsberg, understood him, his politics, his sexual orientation, his loneliness. In “A Supermarket in California,” Whitman “is characteristically childless and lonely even though, figuratively and poetically, Ginsberg is demonstrating his lineage from Whitman in this very poem” (Avi-Ram, 111). By locking arms with this iconic figure, this American Bard, Ginsberg brings a new American centrism to what mainstream America would call the fringe
elements of his life and aggrandizes his own role in the process. The loneliness adhering to Ginsberg’s radical politics and homosexuality can be somewhat soothed by claiming a central space in America for that radicalism. In terms of the speaker/subject ouroboric, Ginsberg writes of a radicalism that is itself central to American identity and can thus point to the speaker, to the poet’s own voice, perhaps to the poet’s own loneliness, as defining America.

In “A Supermarket,” the speaker wanders the grocery store late at night with Whitman, “lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.” He asks direction of Whitman, before “[t]he doors close in an hour,” and Ginsberg and Whitman wander out into cookie-cutter suburban California together.

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

If Ginsberg might ameliorate his loneliness by associating with Whitman, and by associating his America with Whitman’s, nevertheless, in his sadness, as poignantly opposed to Whitman’s usual sense of celebration, Ginsberg assumes that Whitman saw a different America coming than the one that came. That different America would have developed democratically with its “fervid comradeship.” Perhaps, with the crude pun on Charon “poling his ferry,” this approaching America was the last America Whitman saw. Ginsberg might be happy for Whitman to think so, and only lonelier himself. Maybe even this radicalism and loneliness stand at the center of American identity.

Ferlinghetti’s ouroboric antipoetic-poetic stands no less in Whitman’s debt than Ginsberg’s does, even if Ferlinghetti played the encouraging intellectual figure to that of Ginsberg’s ecstatic prodigal son. In their public relationship to one another, Ferlinghetti
may have played Emerson, famously sending Ginsberg a telegram after hearing the first public reading of the unpublished “Howl” in San Francisco, saying, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career.” These were the words Emerson sent to Whitman, upon his first reading of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. A century later, in 1955, Ferlinghetti sent the same words to Ginsberg, but added, according to his function as publisher of City Lights Books, "When do I get the manuscript?" (Cherkovski, 99). But if Ferlinghetti’s poetry, for the most part, reads as a more intellectual body of work than Ginsberg’s, with its many allusions to literature and art, its sentiment reads as no less Whitmanic.

Ferlinghetti’s most widely read collection, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, stylistically reflects an oppositional tension between the art critic Ferlinghetti, holding a doctorate from the Sorbonne, and the Ferlinghetti who writes “oral messages” from a New York bar called Mike’s Place (“Autobiography”). The first section of poems, itself titled “A Coney Island of the Mind,” and the last section, selected from his first book, *Pictures of the Gone World*, mix artistic allusions with colloquial speech. In the first section, Jesus and God are referred to as “the king cat” and “the fantastic foolycat” (poems 5 and 7), while other poems refer to artists and writers, such as Goya, Morris Graves, Chagall, and Kafka (poems 1, 11, 14, and16). Then we come to the recurring line in poem 22, “Johnny Nolan has a patch on his ass.” The language of the poem has become the language of kids growing up on the streets.

The central section of *A Coney Island* moves most into the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic, with its stated intention of moving away from the written word, the page, toward the spoken word. The “Oral Messages” begin with a prefatory note.

These seven poems were conceived specifically for jazz accompaniment and as such should be considered as
spontaneously spoken “oral messages” rather than as poems written for the printed page. As a result of continued experimental reading with jazz, they are still in a state of change.

Ferlinghetti moves not only away from the printed page, but from any final record. The poems bear within them an ouroboric rhetorical tension between the two modes of Ginsberg’s own poetry, the rant and the document. The poems that appear in this section serve only as a snapshot of where they were at the particular point in time of publication. The oral must be the opposite not only of the written, but of the recorded. In Ferlinghetti’s oral experiment, though finalized in published form, the antipoetic-poetic cancels out any finality in the hope of maintaining spontaneity. The voice on the street, that Whitmanic model of the antipoetic-poetic, remains always a spontaneous voice. Even if recorded, even if typed on the page, even if published, the voice on the street, as it occurs the moment the reader holds its publication in his hands, differs entirely from the voice on the street at the moment it was recorded for publication. The poem, ouroborically, exists both in and out of the text.

In Jazz Text: Voice and Improvisation in Poetry, Jazz, and Song, Charles Hartman finds the voice of poetry corresponding to or incorporating jazz to be a form of fragmented “dramatic monologue.” The ostensible job of the dramatic monologue is to give the poem its speaking voice, but the voice is not as whole as it might first sound. While the poet must work out strategies within the monologue “to solve the basic question of who is talking—to alert us that it is not the poet’s own voice, and to give us a way to identify whose it is,” the voice is fragmented. “Our identification, while founded on piecemeal induction from fragmentary associations, is bound to come to us at one of these points suddenly, as a whole” (133). The various voice-shards, then, each
individually bring a sense of the wholeness of the poem. The speaker’s identity changes constantly, according to which shard we have before us for the fleeting moment, but each flux in voice is nevertheless part of the overarching voice of the fragmented monologue.

Similarly, in Ferlinghetti’s poem, “Autobiography,” the answer to the question of whose autobiography we are reading changes from one speaking segment to another. The self of each speaker interrelates with the other of each other speaker. The speaker of the poem itself contains many speakers. The speaker has thought he “was Tom Sawyer / catching crayfish in the Bronx River / and imagining the Mississippi” (60). He has heard the “Gettysburg Address,” but also the “Ginsberg Address.” He’s “been in Asia / with Noah in the Ark. / I was in India / when Rome was built. / I have been in the Manger / with an Ass” (61). Like Eliot’s Prufrock, he has “worn grey flannel trousers / and walked upon the beach,” though this was “the beach of hell” (62). Like Whitman, he says, “I hear America singing,” though he hears it “in the Yellow Pages” (63). He has seen “the Virgin” and “the White Goddess,” and has “read somewhere / the Meaning of Existence / yet have forgotten / exactly where” (66).

Thinking of “Autobiography” as a snapshot of an ever-changing voice from the street, a voice comprised of numerous voices, we can hear each speaking segment improvisingly (and ouroborically) restructure the whole of the speaker’s identity. The ouroboric rhetorical relationship obtains through the tensions of part and whole. Like a crystal or a hologram, each fragment microcosmically reformulates the macrocosm of the poem itself. Each speaking segment functions as synecdoche. As the poem tells us, “I am a part / of the body’s long madness” (64). The speaking segments continually and contradictorily unsettle each potential answer to whom this speaker might be. We can
only say the identity of the speaker is the “autobiographer,” though this single entity is, simultaneously, many.

Because the identity of such a poem remains fluid and lies in, or changes with, process, particularly the processing of the speaker’s voice from one shard to the next, the poem’s contradictorily monological multivocality and apparent improvisation depend on each other. Hartman writes, “The differentiation of the voice of the poem, its discovery of its own potential multiplicity is a point arrived at, not begun from” (142). There is no teleology determining everything in the poem from its endpoint. Moving with the flux of improvisation, the speaker makes fun of any attempt to say who he is, caricaturing the romantic stereotype of the wildness of the poet:

I have leaned in drunken doorways.
I have written wild stories
without punctuation.
I am the man.
I was there.
I suffered
somewhat.
I have sat in the uneasy chair (65).

The famous wildness of a poet like Ginsberg (or Whitman, whom Ferlinghetti partially quotes here, from “Song of Myself,” Sec. 33), who surely leaned in many a “drunken doorway,” conflates with the image of the modernist writer, writing without punctuation. The identity of the speaker emerges through an improvising flux from the shards of contradiction and self-mockery. Ouroborically, the entities conflated cannot be reconciled, and the poem allows no final resting place for the back and forth between the ecstatic and the sarcastic. Yet as noble and clever as Ferlinghetti’s experiment may be, the overall effect has much less tension than the work of Ginsberg or Hughes. The flux of various voice-shards seems other than merely frozen in snapshot. Rather, it seems
predetermined for jazz accompaniment, not an outgrowth of organic conversation-as-jazz.

The “Oral Messages” take much of their ouroboric antipoetic-poetic structure from jazz itself, as they were meant to accompany it. Whereas these poems contain a sense of spontaneity that lends to their quality of spokenness, they share this sense and quality with jazz. The lack of a unified speaker in a poem like “Aubiography” can be compared to the multivocality of jazz, even if the poem itself cannot be called multivocal to the same extent that Hughes’ *Montage* can. The sense of spontaneity doesn’t quite equate with an achievement of spontaneity. In Hughes’ *Montage*, the poetry becomes the music, whereas in Ferlinghetti’s “Oral Messages,” the poetry accompanies the music.

In a jazz orchestration, the band states a theme and each player gets his turn to improvise on that theme. Likewise, the “Oral Messages” speak through this kind of musical dispersal of voice. The poems each state a particular theme and then play variations on that theme. They often quote “riffs” from other poets in what might today be called sampling. Similarly, they sample, or reference, a wide gamut of then contemporary American culture. The first page of the poem, “I Am Waiting,” for example,” refers to John Steinbeck, T.S. Eliot, Billy Graham and Elvis Presley. Whitman quotations and references are plentiful, such as the “Junkman Obbligato” lines, “looking like Walt Whitman / a homemade bomb in the pocket.” In such vocally dispersed, jazz-like poems, the variations will evolve the initially stated theme into something quite different by the last stanza. Yet the voice of the speaker remains at a remove from the music he accompanies. The voice in Hughes’ *Montage* interacts with and acts from
within the community-as-musical-conversation, whereas the voice of the “Oral
Messages” frequently speaks as a clever reporter visiting the community to get the scoop.

“I Am Waiting” perfectly portrays this jazz-like vocal dispersal, as well as the
ouroboric back-and-forth between the ecstatic and the sarcastic. The title itself states the
theme that recurs throughout the poem, often with the addition of “a rebirth of wonder.”

    I am waiting for my case to come up
    and I am waiting
    for a rebirth of wonder
    and I am waiting for someone
    to really discover America
    and wail
    and I am waiting
    for the discovery
    of a new symbolic western frontier
    and I am waiting
    for the American Eagle
    to really spread its wings
    and straighten up and fly right [.]

Each stanza begins with a modulation of the title. In the second stanza, “I am waiting for
the Second Coming.” In the third, “I am waiting for my number to be called.” Then, “I
am waiting for the Great Divide to be crossed” and “I am waiting for the day / that
maketh all things clear.”

Throughout this series of variations on the title, the speaker has moved from
cynicism (“waiting / to see God on television / piped onto church altars”) to an expressed
need for true rapture (a play on the millenialist Christian term “the Rapture” or “Second
Coming”). The poem ends,

    and I am waiting
    for the last long careless rapture
    and I am perpetually waiting
    for the fleeing lovers on the Grecian Urn
    to catch each other up at last
    and embrace

200
and I am awaiting
perpetually and forever
a renaissance of wonder.

The variations have moved the theme along to a new place at the end, revealing the poem’s cynicism as masking a great spiritual need for wonder.8

Ferlinghetti’s primary ouroboric tendency leans not toward the interaction of speaker and subject so much as to that between the speaker’s own senses of cynicism and wonder. Ferlinghetti aims for and achieves an urbane sophistication, while Sandburg seeks to create a voice of salt-of-the-earth populism. Both have ouroboric tendencies and pay homage to Whitman, but Hughes appears to be the true inheritor of a Whitmanic rhetorical ouroboric. Ferlinghetti’s urbanity makes him too secure to give self to the other and accept the other as self in return. He doesn’t seem to have much to lose. Hughes, however, needs us to understand that he is “the darker brother,” and he becomes the voice of the community by giving us the community’s voices.

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8 Similarly, Ginsberg’s poem “America” asks the question that may be central to the poet’s semi-sarcastic, semi-ecstatic style: “America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?”
CHAPTER 9
THE RHETORICAL OUROBORIC IN WHITMAN’S WAKE;
OR, THE OUROBORIC INTERRELATION OF SPEAKER AND SUBJECT
SINCE WHITMAN. PART TWO:
PARRA, THE BLACK ARTS, AND SPOKEN WORD

The Antipoet of Chile: “Hi to Everyone”

Though the Beat Generation owed a great deal to Whitman, the discussion of the politically engaged antipoetic-poetic that follows him would be incomplete without mentioning his influence on Spanish-speaking poets. Both the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca and the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda wrote an “Ode to Walt Whitman.” In Lorca’s strange poem, he seems to share the Whitmanic longing for democracy that brings with it a new male relationship of “fervid comradeship.” He faults urbanization and industrialization for not allowing this apparently pastoral democratic male “comradeship” to come about. “A dance of walls now shakes the meadows, / and America is inundated with machines and tears.” Such comradeship he seems to see as natural, as natural as meadows, while the homosexuals of cities he calls “faggots.”

Neruda’s poem claims that Whitman taught the South American poet “to be an American,” saying “everything that came forth / was harvested by you.” The Spanish-speaking poet most obviously working with an antipoetic-poetic, however, would be the Chilean, Nicanor Parra, who is called, in fact, “the Antipoet of Chile,” and who called his 1985 collection of poems Leaves of Parra.

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1 Though Ginsberg and Lorca share Whitman’s idea of democracy bringing forward this “fervid comradeship,” Ginsberg, an essentially urban poet, would be one of those Lorca called “faggots.” Ginsberg has similar notions about industrialization and nature, though he sees nature as always redeemable from the grime of industrialization, as in “Sunflower Sutra.” Incidentally, the speaker in Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California,” while accompanying Whitman by the groceries, briefly sees Lorca over “by the watermelons.”
Whereas Sandburg’s populist poems often come across as too sentimental, Parra’s “antipoems” manage a dynamic ouroboric tension between populism and cynicism. If the antipoetic makes ordinary objects extraordinary, if it makes the voice of the ordinary person suitable to speak poetry, then where does the line of the poeticization of the mundane end? Parra says, “to piss is to make poetry / as poetic as strumming a lute,” and as if that’s not enough, he includes “or shitting poeticizing farting.” Indeed, if anything and everything has become poetic subject matter for the poet, then there’s no getting away from it. He ends this poem, “Apropos of Nothing,” by saying,

DESTROY THIS PAPER after reading it
poetry is tailing you
and me too
it’s after all of us

Elsewhere he tells us the “greatest truths of the twentieth century” are to be found “On the bathroom walls,” and calls this “Vox Populi” and “Vox Dei.” Has the truth of God and God’s speaking through human beings been desecrated by its appearance on the wall of the toilet stall, or has the toilet stall been sublimated by the voice of God speaking through the words of the coarse scribblers who’ve marked this place as their territory? Parra doesn’t tell us.

Yet if in Sandburg and Hughes, the poet seems to have gotten out of the way of the poem, Parra, even more than Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, perpetually inserts himself into the poem. His particular antipoetic-poetic depends upon it. His most antipoetic poems are as cynical and self-conscious as the antiart of the Dadaists. Could anything, for example, be less poetic than a poem that gives us numbered instructions on how to read antipoetry? The first instruction is “In antipoetry, it is poetry that is sought, not eloquence.” If Whitman’s poetry isn’t stripped down enough to respond to de

203
Tocqueville, perhaps Parra’s instructions might do the job. After all, as number five tells us, “The poet speaks to all of us, without discrimination.” And if that declaration doesn’t seem democratic enough, perhaps number nine will: “Hi to everyone” (“Note on the Lessons of Antipoetry”).

Also numbered, one through four, are the “Works by the Author,” in which he claims in four different ways to have written the Bible. The poem plays with the Romantic tradition of male poets with enormous ambition to try to write their own canon, their own Bible. Perhaps Leaves of Grass would be the perfect example. Parra, as a cynical minimalist, might be doing the same thing. He tells us he’s written “The Bible, Just Kidding.” Then,

3
Forthcoming
The Bible, Seriously

4
Works in progress
The Bible, Seriously Kidding

Parra’s ambition to write a great poetic corpus, a “Bible,” always finds itself attended, step for step, by his self-reflexiveness, which manifests itself through his cynical sense of humor. Just as Ginsberg wants to write a “holy litany,” but can’t escape America’s “silly mood,” Parra’s poetic corpus, his Leaves of Grass, might ouroborically and appropriately be titled, “The Bible, Seriously Kidding.”

Though Ferlinghetti seems more generous with his feelings, Parra’s own reserve seems to stem from a self-mockery that greets his own poetic ambition, to which the poet admits, with folded arms and a knowingly sinister half-smile. Whether or not Parra’s cynicism oscillates with a need for rapture the way Ferlinghetti’s does, he won’t show us.
In fact, the speaker mostly engages the reader only inasmuch as he-the-speaker represents the reader mocking the speaker. But Parra is quite serious about not taking himself seriously. His poetic self-mockery preempts the reader only to allow the reader to laugh with him…at himself—a most democratically anarchical rhetorical ouroboric.

**Self-Dialogue: Black Arts, Hip Hop, Spoken Word**

The different streams of the antipoetic-poetic that have followed in Whitman’s wake have taken poetry in a number of unexpected directions. Parra acknowledges a direct influence from Whitman, but his work often seems more postmodern than most poets who claim Whitmanic heritage. Though several twentieth-century American poets have obvious transcendental tendencies, those poets could be traced back to the Transcendentalists or European Romantics just as easily, if not more easily, than to Whitman.2 The most obvious direction of the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic moves toward spokenness. The poetry of Sandburg, Hughes, and the Beat Generation tends toward a spoken quality. Additionally, as we have seen, poets have at once become increasingly concerned with ordinary and underrepresented lives and have tried in numerous ways to allow this new subject to become the speaker(s). Ouroborically, this works best when the speaker can in some way lose himself in and become part of the ensemble of his subject(s). Then the poet becomes part of a larger discourse, as indeed “Hughes was

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2 Harold Bloom called A.R. Ammons “the most direct Emersonian in American poetry since Frost.” His long poem, “Garbage” proclaims “garbage has to be the poem of our time / because garbage is spiritual […]” Likewise, many of Theodore Roethke’s poems bear a Transcendentalist heritage. In “A Walk in Late Summer,” he writes, “Body and soul transcend appearances / Before the caving-in of all that is; / I’m dying piecemeal, fervent in decay; / My moments linger—that’s eternity.” Closer to the present, the poets Jane Hirschfield and Pattiann Rogers bear distinct Transcendentalist traces. In Hirschfield’s “Ripeness,” “Ripeness is / what falls away with ease,” is what “will take itself from you” and “is also harvest.” For Rogers, “we are the only point of reversal” in God’s eye, “the only point of light / That turns back on itself” (“Inside God’s Eye”). Meanwhile, Mary Oliver has been called a contemporary Transcendentalist, yet her lines often seem reminiscent of Whitman: “I want you to stand there, far from the white tablecloth, / I want you to fill your hands with the mud, like a blessing” (“Rice”). In the poem, “My Friend Walt Whitman,” she calls him “the brother I did not have.”
obviously an influential model for those artists and intellectuals imagining what a ‘Black Art’ might be” (Smethurst, “‘Don’t Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat’: Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement,” 1229). Ferlinghetti’s “Oral Messages” and the voices of the street in Hughes’ *Montage of a Dream Deferred* can be seen as direct progenitors of the emergence of poetry as the spoken word itself, direct forebears of the Spoken Word movement.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Beat movement opened up to a whole new group of Black American performative poets. LeRoi Jones, who would become Amiri Baraka, began to publish and perform poems that incorporated non-verbal approximations of sound effects, both musical and otherwise. As one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, the artistic arm of Black Power, Baraka wrote and performed angry, in-your-face, voice-of-the-street poems. Nikki Giovanni, who began her poetic career with the Black Arts Movement, has expressed poetic ideas that strangely seem both radically political and transcendental. In *Sacred Cows*, she writes, “Poetry is but a reflection of the moment. The universal comes from the particular” (57). That understanding of the universal and the particular doesn’t dampen the immediacy of an early poem like “My Poem”:

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i am 25 years old
black female poet
wrote a poem asking
nigger can you kill
if they kill me
it won’t stop
the revolution
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Other performers from the same scene produced records instead of publishing books.
Growing out of the Beat movement, those poets associated with Black Arts gravitated toward the performative and the spoken. As James Smethurst points out in *The Black Arts Movement,*

The interest of the Beats and other schools of the literary avant-garde (especially some notion of an American voice), the idea of natural breath as determining the length of a poetic line rather than some variation of traditional metrics, popular culture, and non-Western literary and dramatic forms informed emerging Black Arts attempts to represent and re-create a distinctly black voice on the page and in performance. (264)

As we have seen, the idea of this distinctly black voice, so often a cultural nationalist one, as a spoken voice, comes from the continuing arc of much twentieth-century poetry to find the American voice. Paradoxically, the search for the distinctly black voice, is aided and abetted as much by Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti as it is by black poets, such as Hughes or the Beat poet Bob Kaufman.3

Recorded performers like Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets, who recorded their poetic pieces with only their voices, congas and bongo drums, are now often considered the harbingers of Hip Hop. The Last Poets released their first album, self-titled, in 1970, demanding revolution and calling black people to pick up arms.

Niggers would fuck fuck if it could be fucked. But when it comes to fucking for revolutionary causes Niggers say *FUCK!* ... revolution. Niggers are scared of revolution. (“Niggers are Scared of Revolution”)

In the same year, Gil Scott-Heron first recorded his Spoken Word piece, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” These developments in the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic blur the

3 Kaufman’s poems were often influenced by jazz with the idea of orality as well. Smethurst likens him to Ginsberg and Hughes in this regard (269). But Kaufman saw the sources of poetry as “the oral and automatic,” which indicates how much his poems veer toward surrealism, differing greatly from the voiced clarity of ideas in much of the other poetry considered here (Foye, ix). Intriguingly, Kaufman took a Buddhist vow of silence for ten years, beginning with President John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 and ceasing with the end of the Vietnam War in 1973 (Smethurst, 266).
separation between poetry, the voices on the street, and street music. The difference would become the genre division between Hip Hop, as music, and Spoken Word, as poetry.

That blurring on the Spoken Word side alone can be seen in the ambiguity surrounding the question of what to call these artists. In the Spoken Word movement, the term “Spoken Word artist” can be heard almost as much as the title “poet.” Since the rise of New York’s Nuyorican Poets’ Café in the 1970s, similar nightclubs around the country have followed its example, and scores of Spoken Word artists do their best to make a living by producing their own CDs and books and traveling the national, and indeed now global, Spoken Word circuits. Most of these artists will achieve varying degrees of fame within their circuits, while those on the outside will never hear of them (Anglesey, “introduction”).

Others like Willie Perdomo and Saul Stacey Williams, who says Ginsberg on his deathbed kissed him three times on the forehead (Williams, biographical note), have become well-known. In Perdomo’s “Nigger-Reecan Blues,” people ask “Willie,” “What are you, man?” The poem takes the form of a dialogue, with various people asking Willie if he’s Puerto Rican, Indian, “a mix of something like / Portuguese and Chinese?” And as the American *vox populi* no longer speaks only English, not that it ever entirely did, the speaker answers in Spanglish,

> If you look real close you will see that your spirits are standing right next to our songs. Yo soy Boricua! Yo soy Africano! I ain’t lyin’. Pero mi pelo is kinky y curly mi skin no es negro pero it can pass…

Often enough, whether the individual’s work is better known in book form or album form seems to determine the title of “poet” or “Spoken Word artist.” I’m going to use the
portmanteau phrase “Spoken Word poet” to discuss two artists primarily known for their work on the page, Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, and another artist primarily known for his recorded work, Carl Hancock Rux.

Giovanni’s early poetry with the Black Arts Movement details the growing anger and race consciousness of the street. Black and white, she tells us in “A Short Essay of Affirmation Explaining Why,” have entirely different blabs of the pave.

Honkies always talking ’bout
Black Folks
Walking down the streets
Talking to themselves
(They say we’re high—
Or crazy)

But recent events have shown
We know who we’re talking
To

The black person’s blab of the pave has begun to talk to itself and has resulted in a revolutionary fervor. This self-conversation provides yet another answer to de Toqueville, in his assertion that in a democracy, “I need only contemplate myself” (564). The contemplation of the self has led to identity politics and identity empowerment.

This self-contemplation and self-empowerment rely on a self-discourse, an oppositional relationship between *I* and *You* within the self. According to Phillip Brian Harper, Black Arts poetry does not so much exploit the obvious *us* vs. *them* dichotomy of black vs. white, so much as it acts as a revolutionary *I* calling the *you* of the black community toward it (250). So Black Arts poetry speaks, not as a monologue, but as a

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4 “[T]he strategy necessarily deployed by Black Arts poetry to establish a strong black nationalist subject […] is founded on the oppositional logic that governs the pronominal language characteristic of the work. That opposition is thematized in the poetry, not in terms of the us vs. them dichotomy that we might expect, however, with us representing blacks and them whites; rather, it is played out along the inherent opposition between I and you, both these terms deriving their referents from within the collectivity of black subjects.”
self-dialogue. The self can be both the individual self of the black person, or the collective self of the black community.

The community self-dialogue exists in the form of the speaker calling the community to an account of itself and a new action.

Thus, the project of Black Arts poetry can be understood as the establishment of black nationalist subjectivity—the forcible fixing of the identity of the speaking I—by delineating it against […] the you. (Harper, 250)

The speaker, then, creates himself against the subject, which is the you. This use of the you recalls David Leverenz’s statement that in Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” “‘You’ becomes the platform for the poet’s progress toward metamorphosis” (32). In Giovanni, however, the speaker makes no such progress, but demands the metamorphosis of the community to whom she speaks. The speaker’s existence as speaker depends on calling you, the black community, to revolution.

As the artistic arm of the Black Power Movement, Black Arts constantly challenged the black person to revolutionary fervor. Just as the Last Poets lambasted black people “uncommitted” to “the cause,” by saying “Niggers are scared of revolution,” Giovanni asked,

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man

In what’s probably Giovanni’s most famous, if only because most controversial, poem, “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro,” the self-conversation has
become as existential as it is radical. The poem’s title⁵ establishes the conversation as between the black person and the Negro, a difference that reflected Stokely Carmichael’s origination of the phrase “black power,” which soon replaced the usage of the word “Negro,” as used by Martin Luther King. Yet another party exists in this self-conversation, and that is the “nigger.”

Can you kill a white man
Can you kill the nigger
in you
Can you make your nigger mind
Die
Can you kill your nigger mind
And free your black hands to
Strangle

The black person is what the Negro can become, and the “nigger” is what the white man has made him. The “nigger” must be done away with, and the death of the white man brings with it the death of the “nigger.”⁶

The apparently simple and straightforward message of “The True Import” masks an intricate existential complexity that finally folds in on itself. Giovanni’s Black Nationalist calls for revolution tend toward the reification of the variability of black life, in much the same way the rallying cries at the beginning of Drum-Taps do, as we saw in Chapter 7. Yet at least on the surface, a relationship of oppositions does obtain, as the title itself signifies. The Negro occupies the pivotal position between “black man” and “nigger.” Nevertheless, the poem deals with categories, not individual lives. White

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⁵ It might also be noted how the intellectual phrasing of the poem’s title relates to the street voice of the poem. Smethurst writes, “In fact, despite the fairly common attribution of anti-intellectualism to Black Arts, an almost obsessive concern with the theorizing of the relationship of the African American artist and his or her formal practices to the black community (or nation) was one of the distinguishing features of the movement” (The Black Arts Movement, 68).

⁶ Frantz Fanon, who influenced many black radicals, theorizes this idea in The Wretched of the Earth, amongst other places. “On the logical plane, the Manicheism of the settler produces a Manicheism of the native […] For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler” (93).
people must be reified as “the white man,” and his reification allows for his textual murder. An apparent ouroboric relationship between subject and speaker, each infusing the other, is short-circuited, because the two entities fail to bring each other to life. The speaker, the I, exists only inasmuch as the you exists to speak to, to challenge. The speaker cannot allow the subject to speak back, as we might say Hughes’ multiple subjects do.7 Instead, the speaker takes the role of a battle cry.

The American poetry that most directly relies on spoken language emerges in a kind of revolutionary fervor, not merely to transcribe voices on the sidewalk, but to join those voices in clamoring for fundamental change, even in the form of violence. In Nikki Giovanni’s poems of the late 1960s, that street voice asserts its own democracy in lieu of an actual multivocal intracommunity democracy. It speaks and will be heard, whereas the vote, though necessary, if left to suffice for a democratic voice, might be seen as a mere substitute for or channeling off of democracy.

the barrel of a gun is the best
voting machine
your best protest vote
is a dead honkie
much more effective than a yes
for gregory or cleaver

It should be added that poetic lines that describe the same might also speak louder than a few protest votes for the Black Panther Party.

Sonia Sanchez’s poetry often carries a further depth, even if, in her 1969 poem “blk / rhetoric,” this is primarily the added depth of the doubt. She asks,

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7 Smethurst writes that though “Some Black Arts activists did sharply criticize Hughes and his basic commitment to integrationism as well as his use of popular culture […] Hughes’ writing had long linked the struggles of African Americans with anticolonialism, particularly, though not exclusively in Africa,” just as radical black American movements saw their own separatism as a necessary corollary to anticolonialism (1231).
who's gonna make all
that beautiful blk / rhetoric
mean something.

like

i mean

who’s gonna take
the words

blk / is / beautiful
and make more of it
than blk / capitalism.

As Harper notes, “Sanchez’s call—prefaced as it is by her urgent question and attended by the entreaty to her listeners in the final line [“pleasereplysoon”]—is more pleading than Baraka’s, which is unabashedly imperative” (238). Sanchez gives thought to the morning after the revolution, and asks her interlocutor to deconstruct, or at least question, the mythologizing rhetoric.

Sonia Sanchez’s work from a decade later adds dimensionality to the revolutionary vox populi. The revolutionary zeitgeist has largely passed and Sanchez can speak with more than the voice of rage. She tells her reader, “do not speak to me of martyrdom.” She says, “I don’t believe in dying / though I too shall die.” Nevertheless, she’ll “breathe” the “breath” of Malcolm X, “and mourn / my gun-filled nights.” Neither should we speak to her “of living,” because,

what might have been
is not for him/or me
but what could have been
floods the womb until i drown.

A potential alternate self died with Malcolm X, she tells us, yet strangely that blocked potential self still grows in the womb. Sanchez speaks of an ouroboric regeneration. What will be must always be haunted by what could have been. Is this the voice of the street?
The voice has become so reflective, much more the voice of self-conversation than
Giovanni’s revolutionary fervor from a decade prior.

For Sanchez, the revolutionary voice must be the same voice that speaks for
community. The poet has a role there, a responsibility to speak. The poems work as
performance pieces, addressing the family and the neighborhood, so that the speaker fills
an important social role.

    i say. all you young girls molested at ten
    i say. all you young girls giving it up again & again
    i say. all you sisters hanging out in every den
    i say. all you sisters needing your own oxygen. (“Song No. 2”)

The speaker punctuates the direct address at the beginning of each line. Even reading the
poem from the page, the reader hears it spoken.

    The page and the stage feed into one another in a rhetorical ouroboric.
Additionally, the speaker and subject(s) infuse one another in a clear extension of the
ouroboric relationship of self and other. The speaker speaks for the community, for these
“young girls,” by speaking with them, so that they have voices through her voice.

    i say. step back sisters. we're rising from the dead
    i say. step back johnnies. we're dancing on our heads
    i say. step back man. no mo hanging by a thread.
    i say. step back world. can't let it all go unsaid.

The saying functions as an act. Each line functions as a dance that pushes back the
“sisters,” the “johnnies,” the “man,” and the “world.” This self-conversation exists
between the speaker and her community, and the speaking is ourobocrically existential,
linking speech and act in the ouroboric image of a “rising from the dead.”

    The “blab of the pave” has become the self-empowering discourse of a
community. In “Love Poem (for Tupac),” Sanchez demands that more voices join this
discourse, asking “where have the fathers buried their voices?” She blames fathers for their conspicuous absence, indicating that the power of this community discourse is so important, so powerful, that a missing voice can result in the deaths of children.

where are your fathers?
i see your mothers gathering
around your wounds folding
your arms shutting your
eyes wrapping you in prayer

where are the fathers?
[...]
what have they taught you
about power and peace?

The voice of the poet calls for the missing voices of fathers in the community. The speaker seeks to use her voice for regeneration, to grow new life from death. Sanchez uses the death of Tupac Shakur to show how the very dynamic of “power and peace,” the structural maintenance of the community, collapses from missing voices.

Though primarily considered poets, Giovanni and Sanchez are performers as well, “Spoken Word artists”; their work has been recorded and might just as well be listened to as read. Spoken Word poet Carl Hancock Rux, though he has also written fiction and drama, is better known for his albums, Rux Review (1999), Apothecary Rx (2004), and Good Bread Alley (2006). Recorded performance pieces have also been collected and published, most notably in anthologies like Listen Up! Spoken Word Poetry and Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets’ Café. Rux certainly reflects the influence of Hip Hop, but the influence of several other musical genres, from jazz to rock, can also be found. In beginning to break down the distinctions between the oral and the written, the spokenness of Spoken Word poetry such as Rux’s likewise allows the boundaries between poetry and other art forms to be blurred.
Rux picks up Giovanni’s dialogue on the meaning of the word “nigger” in his signature poem “No Black Male Show,” but his poem speaks of an ouroboric tension between Giovanni’s “black man” and “nigger” collapsed into the single term “nigga.” Rux calls for a bilingualism that accesses the necessity for the black American to be “bilingual” in different forms of American English. The difference is the gap between speaking urban black vernacular and standard English, and the bilingualism is an ouroboric fluency not only of them, but of the fluid state of language between them. The word “nigger” occupies a precarious place in that gap.

And the niggas who don’t know we all the same nigga
Are the niggas who can’t speak nigga bilingually
And that’s a damn shame
Because if all us who’re the same nigga
Spoke the same nigga language,
We wouldn’t have to be the nigga somebody made us to be.
We could be our own nigga,
A new nigga, who’s one nigga,
Living the same urban reality,
And then and only then can niggas
Who think they ain’t niggas at all
And don’t want nothing to do with nigga music,
Nigga poetry and niggas period,
Well, until they learn bilingual nigga,
They can’t even have conversations with niggas
Bout no longer being niggas,
Or perpetuating that word:
Nigga.

Speaking “nigga” bilingually means appropriating the word, taking charge of it. The word has been made taboo in standard English (read “white”), and only being black can now give one the credibility and authority to use the word. But using the word means more than just that. It means speaking the language. What’s at stake in having exclusive legitimacy to speak a word and a language is the self-empowerment that comes from having agency in the discourse. Discourse agency means using the words in such a way
that their very meaning and position in the discourse have been altered. To speak “nigga”
bilingually means to decide, as a black American, what the word “nigga” means, and by
extension, how or when or whether the word should even be perpetuated.

Stephanie Smith discusses the “underlying paradoxical common sense that words
are powerful yet also ‘just words.’” This contradiction

not only allows for the ongoing incendiary power of a word such
as nigger to spark conflict but has also weakened the power of
“the” word—the strength of the speech act—altogether. (125)

The power of the word depends on its discursive positioning and the identity of its user.

As Smith says about both Whitman and Frederick Douglass, even though

Whitman [was not] called a fag, a queer, or a queen, whereas
Douglass had to deflect, dodge, or otherwise defend himself
against the word nigger more frequently that any other insult
[…][s]till both men made their lives out of words and into
words. (136)

Perhaps nothing carries as much power in discourse as the creation of one’s own
language within a discourse.

Speaking “nigga” bilingually, altering the discourse around the word “nigger,”
also means having agency in the discourse of black poetry, Spoken Word, and Hip Hop.
In ouroboric rhetorical terms, it means that the discourse-as-subject must infuse the
speaker, and the speaker then, knowledgeably and self-reflexively, becomes part of the
discourse. Rux criticizes the commercialization of Hip Hop, which effectively moves the
control of Hip Hop as art form and discourse from the poet and the artist to the record
producer. Commercialized, Hip Hop becomes whatever it’s marketed as being.

As if Hip Hop was never a valid form,
As if it was last year’s leopard-print gogo wear,
As if it was modern-day prophecy on a revolutionary tip,
90210 blue-eyed Bloomingdale’s billionaire babes
Dressed in red and blue bandanas.

There may as well be no difference from that Hip Hop created merely for merchandising and daytime television talk shows.

See, postmodern upper-echelon middle America cannot understand
How the proletariat can be on Jerry Springer
Talking out loud bout they business,
Personal affairs.
Who really cares beyond the ratings?

Nor does he place exclusive blame on the producer for this, but speaks sternly to the Hip Hop performer, to the Spoken Word artist, and to the fan of Hip Hop and Spoken Word.

Yes, you be dreaming of record deals and winning poetry slams.
Warning: the slam judges don’t know the difference
Between a sestina and a simile.

When the publishing and recording industries control the discourse and the language of Hip Hop and Spoken Word, the art of these forms, their validity, will always be second to marketability.

Warning: Broadway’s only interested in you posthumously,
Warning: publishers aren’t buying books ’bout nothing but your tragedy,
Warning: the record companies want to buy you and your publishing rights with free Hilfiger gear,
For the poem your father died for,
Want to mix it to machine drum samples that drown out the verse,
Want uninformed theory bout revolution,
Want to edit all terse language that may offend the money people,
Want to dress you in spandex,
Put a Glock and a blunt in your hand,
And stand you under a Philip Morris sign at a bar mitzvah bash.

Whether or not the last line presents a remnant of the anti-Semitism of Black Arts Movement poets like Giovanni and Baraka, or the angry complaints of Malcolm X that Jewish Americans owned all the businesses in the black ghetto, the point of the critique
must be obvious. Whoever controls the discourse of the art form controls its content and
its claims to validity.

Rux’s ideas on speaking “nigga” bilingually and having agency in the discourse of Spoken Word and Hip Hop descend from similar concerns about democratic poetry in Whitman’s time. After de Tocqueville wrote that democratic poets would necessarily be puny and reflect the dullness and insignificance of these “object[s] of mediocrity” (561) that are democracy’s ordinary citizens, Whitman’s creation of an “antipoetic” poetry, based on and yet appropriating for itself the democratic tendencies de Tocqueville loathed likewise took control of a particular discourse. To seize the vice that another spies in you and appropriate it as a virtue means rearranging the terms of the discourse. Whitman doesn’t just say to de Tocqueville that his assertions are untrue. He doesn’t argue on de Tocqueville’s terms at all. He sees the ordinary as extraordinary, and the antipoetic becomes poetic. In the discourse agency of the poets of the Black Arts Movement and Spoken Word poets such as Rux, one of the ugliest words in the English language becomes reappropriated by poetic means toward altering the discourse of identity.

Inevitably, this creation of new terms would have an enormous impact on Black American poetry. As Hutchinson notes,

Whitman “has in his inimitable way described the degrading effects of European literature upon America. This degradation holds with added force when we apply it to modern literature and the negro [quoting Kelly Miller, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University, from an 1895 speech]. The degradation of black culture is one effect of America’s continued colonial dependence upon European standards, a dependence Whitman strove to break, thus pointing the direction for black poets as well. (“Whitman and the Black Poet,” 53)
The discourse agency and separation from corporate marketing that Rux wants for Spoken Word and Hip Hop artists would allow for the speakers of that discourse and the creators and performers of those art forms to determine for themselves whom they might be in this discourse and art. The antipoetic-poetic extends, in a fully developed extension of the ouroboric rhetorical relationship of speaker and subject, to an art form that is aware of being discourse and a discourse that’s aware of being an art form.

Whereas Hughes’ *Montage* gives us the poet as ensemble member of the community-as-musical-conversation, Rux gives us the speaker as active agent of discourse, aware and dynamic. Active discourse agency becomes what Whitman called “[self] identification”—“the interior consciousness, like a hitherto unseen inscription, in magic ink, beams out its wondrous lines to the sense,” so that “the soul emerges, and all statements, churches, sermons, melt away like vapors” (“Democratic Vistas,” 965).

Speaking “nigga” bilingually means determining one’s own role in the discourse about oneself, and Rux consciously crafts his role as Spoken Word poet through his poetry about itself as discourse. Hardly a “puny” poet. Self-reflexive and democratic, this poetry can hardly be called “dull” or “insignificant.”

A great number of modernist poets influenced by Whitman’s antipoetic-poetic must be left out of this arc tracing spokenness from Whitman to Spoken Word. In his 1906 remembrance, *Days with Walt Whitman*, the English socialist Edward Carpenter says that “others would build here and there upon it, but [Whitman] had struck the main lines” (14). Similarly, the modernist Ezra Pound makes “A Pact” with Whitman:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman--
I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root--
Let there be commerce between us.

The tension here feels Whitmanic in theme and process, as the organicism of “sap” and “root” clashes with the colder language of business and “commerce.” Meanwhile, if one modernist poet claimed to “make friends” with his “pig-headed father,” another American modernist, Hart Crane, was paying excessive dues to Whitman, while hardly mentioning T.S. Eliot, the modernist poet he so self-consciously wrote against.⁸

    yes, Walt,
Afoot again, and onward without halt,—
Not soon, nor suddenly,—no, never to let go
    My hand
        In yours,
    Walt Whitman—
        so—
    (“Cape Hatteras”)

Crane expresses his allegiance to Whitman, often while tending toward the figurative density and fragmented rhythm of modernism.

    By 1960, Louis Simpson’s short volume At the End of the Open Road more prosaically echoes Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” by declaring Whitman’s open road to end in post-World War II suburbia and “the used-car lot.” The speaker of “Walt Whitman at Bear Mountain” will demand of Whitman’s statue, “Where is the nation you promised?” and reiterate what was perhaps even more true in Whitman’s day than in 1960, “As for the people—see how they neglect you! / Only a poet pauses to read the inscription.” Simpson’s Whitman responds, as we might easily imagine, that he

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⁸ Despite stylistic differences like his use of rhyme and preference for archaisms, Crane, competing with Eliot, has been said to read much more like him in his fractured and dense verse, than he does Whitman (Bloom, “introduction”).
warned us “it was Myself / I advertised,” and adds perhaps too glibly, “And those who have taken my moods for prophecies / Mistake the matter.” The speaker laments as much for a demotion of Whitman the Prophet to Whitman the Moody Old Man, as he does for an America he blames Whitman for not having delivered.

Though many other poets could be addressed, and though the discourse betwixt Whitman and the century of American poets following him could be shown to hyperlink between uncountable connections ad infinitum, the ouroboric antipoetic-poetic of spokenness and the ouroboric rhetorical relationship of speaker and subject, extending from that of self and other, demand primary attention here. This lineage extends through Sandburg’s populism, Hughes’ musical capture of the voices of “community in transition,” Ginsberg’s howling and Ferlinghetti’s “Oral Messages,” Parra’s antipoetry, and the self-dialogue that moves from the Black Arts Movement to Hip Hop and Spoken Word. In his narration of the WNYC public radio broadcast, “Walt Whitman: Song of Myself,” Carl Hancock Rux says he imagines Walt Whitman, alive today, would “marvel at Hip Hop for its vernacular energy and outlaw posture.” The true antipoetic-poetic of democratic poetry turns out to be the human voice, per se, self-determining, fully humanized through the ouroboric interrelationship of discourse-as-subject and speaker, speaking out loud.


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Tim Gilmore was born in Jacksonville, Florida on June 24, 1974. He earned his B.A. and M.A. in English at the University of North Florida, and his Ph.D. in English at the University of Florida. His poetry and fiction have been published in *exquisite corpse*, *Thunder Sandwich*, *Jack* magazine, and *Fiction Fix*. His collection of poetry, *Flights of Crows, Poems 2002-2006* was published in 2006 by Conversation Piece Press. He has two beautiful and brilliant daughters, Emily Brogan Gilmore and Veda Sophia Gilmore. His partner, Jo Carlisle, has provided him with the constant support and discourse that he hopes he likewise provides her.