38. Miriam Lichtheim points out that the autobiography emerged in Egypt during the Fifth Dynasty, in tandem with the prayer for offering, and that “during the Sixth Dynasty it attained great length, and for the next two millennia it remained in use.” The purpose of this “self-portrait in words,” she adds, is “to sum up the characteristic features of the individual person in terms of his positive worth and in face of eternity. His person should live forever, in the transfigured form of the resurrected dead, and his name should last forever in the memory of people.” See Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature, 3 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). 1: 3–4.

39. In “One of the Lessons Bordering Broadway” (1855), Whitman writes: “Rosellini, of Tuscany, has issued a complete civil, military, religious, and monumental account of the Egyptians, with magnificent plates. This work is of such cost that only wealthy libraries can possess it. There is a copy in the Astor Library in New York.” New York Dissected, 37.

40. Brooklyn Daily Eagle, December 18, 1846, 2.


42. Ibid., 5: 204.

43. Wilkinson, Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians, 3: 457.

In drawing his vituperative 1856 political tract “The Eighteenth Presidency!” to a close, Whitman turns from excoriating slaveholders to address “Editors of the Independent Press” and “Rich Persons,” instructing them to:

Circulate and reprint this Voice of mine for the workingmen’s sake. I hereby permit and invite any rich person, anywhere, to stereotype it, or re-produce it in any form, to deluge the cities of The States with it, North, South, East and West. It is to those millions of mechanics you want, the writers, thinkers, learned and benevolent persons, merchants, are already secured almost to a man. But the great masses of the mechanics, and a large portion of the farmers, are unsettled, hardly know whom to vote for, or whom to believe. I am not afraid to say that among them I seek to initiate my name, Walt Whitman, and that I shall in future have much to say to them.

The poignancy that attaches to this appeal has to do with its untimeliness, its status as what J. L. Austin would call an “unhappy” performative. Though set in type, “The Eighteenth Presidency!” was, as far as we know, never published. This is a tract whose call for its own reprinting never managed to circulate in print. By the time “rich persons” got their hands on it in 1928, the text had long since been drained of the political efficacy Whitman imagined it might accrue through spontaneous acts of reprinting. Nonetheless, Whitman’s dramatic surrender of a copyright he never held in the name of workingmen with whom he can only hope to speak helps to elucidate how the loose control over intellectual property that was characteristic of antebellum publishing contributed to the development of his characteristic modes of poetic address. In “The Eighteenth Presidency!” Whitman cedes control over his literary property in the name of a vastly multiplied, though indirect, political agency. Whitman’s direct appeal to independent editors and wealthy benefactors should
American book was one made by American workers regardless of the nationality of the writer. Moreover, as Buinicki notes, Whitman’s frequent disavowal of originality in his poems—“If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing” (“Song of Myself,” 204)—seems troublingly inconsistent with the poet’s careful superintendence of his copyrights. Examining Whitman’s pro-copyright statements as well as his negotiations with publishers, Buinicki argues that Whitman saw copyright not as a mark of personal possession but as a state-mediated link between himself and his readers, a system of regulation more reliable, more public, and more oriented toward futurity than Whitman’s private financial arrangements could ever be.

Buinicki draws most of the evidence for his argument from the 1870s and early 1880s, a pivotal period in Whitman’s career as well as a time of heightened optimism that respect for authors’ rights might serve to regulate the international trade in books. The second general revision of the U.S. copyright code, granting rights of dramatization and translation to copyright authors, was passed in July of 1870. The British Royal Commission on Copyright was formed in 1875; it published a blistering report in 1878 on the disorderly state of British copyright law, strongly recommending a bilateral treaty with the United States. Thanks in part to pressure provided by numerous European countries signing the Berne Convention in 1886, the U.S. Congress finally passed an international copyright law in 1891. While it is striking that Whitman’s postwar consolidation of his poetic corpus should run in tandem with the centralization of American publishing and the growing internationalization of the trade, these confluences do not do much to elucidate the role of literary property in Whitman’s early career, during which a far different politics of print obtained.

Indeed, throughout the 1840s and early 1850s, Whitman the journalist, fiction writer, and newspaper poet was thoroughly immersed in the culture of reprinting. Joel Myerson’s bibliography of Whitman’s contributions to magazines and newspapers bears rich witness to the unauthorized reprinting of many of Whitman’s early poems and tales, particularly those that appeared in the partisan Democratic Review, which was frequently mined for content by local newspapers. The uncopyrighted status of antebellum periodicals enabled the wider, if unpredictable, circulation of Whitman’s writing; it also enabled him freely to republish poems and tales he had first printed in local papers. Whitman’s work as a printer, writer, and editor for the New World and its rival Brother Jonathan put him at the epicenter of resistance to international copyright. Whitman’s Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate (1842) was first published as part of the cheap reprint series Park Benjamin issued as extra numbers of the New World; the publication of this temperance novel directly followed the sensational reprinting by both weekly
papers of Charles Dickens's attack on pirate publishers, American Notes (1842). Scholars continue to debate whether and when to assume that an anonymous newspaper editorial was Whitman's own, but most have ignored the impress on Whitman, and on the papers he edited, of his daily labor of cut and paste. As editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle (1846–1848) and as exchange editor for the New Orleans Crescent (1848), Whitman bore primary responsibility for selecting items for reprinting from other papers. Even later in his career, as Whitman carefully cultivated his poetic persona and multiplied the printed forms of his authorial signature, he also invested in circulating his writing without owning—or owning up to—it. Transposing strategies honed in antebellum periodicals to the postwar market for books, Whitman supplied large amounts of biographical and critical material to be published under others' names, most notably in John Burroughs's Notes on Walt Whitman as Poet and Person (1867) and Richard Maurice Bucke's Walt Whitman (1883).7

In order to get some purchase on the challenges posed and opportunities provided by the practice of reprinting, I will focus my attention on the "second" or 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass, a volume which might also be described as the first reprinted edition. It is not only this volume's manifest secondary that makes it a fitting subject for analysis; the 1856 edition demonstrates at numerous levels a rich engagement with the advantages and disadvantages of reprinting. The 1856 edition reprints with minor revisions all twelve of the poems that appeared in the first edition of Leaves of Grass, giving them for the first time individual titles. As Jay Grossman has noted, the 1856 edition uses the word "poem" in all of the new titles, the majority of which begin with the phrase "Poem of." This formula relentlessly raises the question of ownership and allows for seemingly endless recycling. Grossman argues that in using the phrase "Poem of," Whitman insists on the status of his writing as poetry as a response to Emerson's understated praise of the first edition as a collection of "wit and wisdom," and in the face of hostile critics' attacks on Leaves of Grass as no more than "disjointed babbling."8 In recurring to this formula, Whitman also repeatedly invokes an unstable relation between subject and object, an instability that Jacques Derrida has identified as a grammatical property of the double genitive.9 "Poem of Walt Whitman, An American," "Poem of Women," "Poem of Salutation," "Poem of the Body" (and so forth) take Walt Whitman, Women, Salutation, and the Body as objects of poetic attention, but they also claim these noun-subjects as points of origin. In reissuing Leaves of Grass, Whitman appears both to seize and to abjure authority over his text. His 1856 titles aggressively announce the mutual self-constitution of the poet and the objects of his attention; at every point authorial agency threatens to slide into mere transcription.

In addition to recasting and recontextualizing the poems from the 1855 edition, Whitman also reprints large swaths of the 1855 "Preface," which was dropped from the 1856 volume, in revised and reined form as "Poem of Many into One" (later titled "By Blue Ontario's Shore"). The most visible and infamous act of reprinting that marks this edition, however, is Whitman's decision to have Emerson's expansive salutation "I Greet You at the / Beginning of / A Great Career" embossed on the spine of the volume; he also reprints this letter in its entirety in an appendix, "Leaves-Droppings," along with an extensive reply, compounding the scandal of having already printed Emerson's letter without permission in the New York Tribune. This simulacrum of an exchange of private letters, titled "Correspondence," is followed by a section called "Opinions. 1855–6," in which Whitman reprints eight reviews of the first edition of Leaves of Grass. Comprised of positive reviews written by strangers, two of Whitman's own anonymous, exuberant self-reviews, and vitriolic condemnations of the book as a "mass of stupid filth,"10 "Leaves-Droppings" recycles ephemeral periodical texts, putting them back into circulation in more durable form.

At one level, the reprinting of Emerson's letter along with a smattering of reviews merely formalizes Whitman's marketing strategy for the 1855 edition. As the reviewer for the New York Daily Times noted, a printed copy of Emerson's letter and proof slips of Whitman's anonymous self-reviews had been enclosed in the copy sent to him for evaluation.11 That all three reprinted British reviews make reference to Emerson's endorsement of the first edition suggests that a printed copy of Emerson's letter was also enclosed or tipped into the copies that were sent to foreign reviewers.12 By including "Leaves-Droppings" within the framework of the 1856 edition, however, Whitman materializes the field of circulation of his poems for all of his readers and signals the centrality of questions of circulation to the volume itself.

In "Leaves-Droppings," Whitman takes advantage of the loose connection between texts and the author's name that was characteristic of the culture of reprinting. In the antebellum U.S., anonymous reviews were frequently noted and reprinted in far-flung newspapers and regional periodicals, making gentlemanly anonymity acutely susceptible to manipulation. The untraceable origins of many reviews allowed for ventriloquism that effects numerous antebellum authors, including Edgar Allan Poe, sought to turn to their advantage.13 While the Daily Times reviewer reproves Whitman for pretending to editorial impartiality in his anonymous self-reviews, he deplores such puffery as an abuse of a system that is regulated by literary "honesty" and not by law.14 Similarly, reviewers of the 1856 edition condemned the unauthorized circulation of Emerson's letter as a violation of what the Christian Examiner calls "literary comity and courtesy."15
Strikingly, these reviewers were not concerned with the printing of Emerson’s letter per se but rather with the fact that Whitman’s placing of Emerson’s endorsement on the spine of the volume extended his praise to poems he could not possibly have seen. The publication of a private letter troubled them less than the mismatch of text and reference; Whitman’s circulation of the letter was not a breach of privacy but a kind of forgery or fraud.

In what follows I will argue that Whitman uses the occasion of the reissue of Leaves of Grass to meditate on and experiment with reprinting’s characteristic detachment of texts from their authors and from authorizing contexts. Looking first at the printed exchange of letters in “Correspondence”—a heading that recalls the spaces in newspapers and periodicals that were devoted to readers’ feedback—I will argue that Whitman strives to articulate a cultural politics that could reconcile reprinting’s populist effects with literary nationalist aims. In his reply to Emerson, Whitman directly addresses the cultural debt that Americans have incurred through unauthorized reprinting, projecting the imminent rectification of an imbalance of trade (“These States ... initiate the outlines of repayment a thousand fold” [LG 1856, 356–357]) and imagining a new kind of poet who could accommodate “foreign-born materials as well as home-born” (LG 1856, 357). Whitman also attempts in this letter to settle his complex debt to Emerson, returning his praise by placing Emerson at the origin of American “character,” a newly emergent national identity. Both in his discussion of literary nationalism and in his reciprocal recognition of Emerson, Whitman invokes an author’s lack of control over the circulation of his texts not as a crisis of ownership but as a necessary condition of origination.

Finally, I will sketch how Whitman’s fascination with processes of circulation that are beyond his control is reflected in some of this volume’s more radical experiments with poetic address. In “Leaves-Droppings,” Whitman responds to the dependence of his authorial reputation on the opinions of anonymous strangers by including them in the volume, making their outrage and praise manifestly a part of his poetic project, while circulating his own self-validating prose anonymously among them. In many of the poems that are new to this volume, Whitman claims a similar latitude in throwing his voice, establishing authority over his poems through complex acts of distancing and disavowal. In poems such as “Poem of Salutation” (retitled “Salut au Monde!” in 1860) and “Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness” (known as “Respondez!” in the 1867 and 1871 editions), Whitman repositions Leaves of Grass as a response to a call that originates elsewhere. Whitman’s experiments with address in these poems point to a keynote of the 1856 edition which is often lost in account of his poetic achievements in this volume—that is, Whitman’s willingness to cede mastery in favor of an exploration and revaluation of passivity, secondarity, and responsiveness.

Reprinting, Self-censorship, and the Origins of a National Literature

Whitman’s printed letter to Emerson is perhaps best known for its attack on the effeminacy of American literati, whom he describes as “a parcel of helpless dandies” (LG 1856, 353). This attack draws reprinting into its orbit so far as it condemns American authors for their eager emulation of foreign writers: “no one behaving, dressing, writing, talking, loving, out of any natural and manly tastes of his own, but each one looking cautiously to see how the rest behave, dress, write, talk, love—pressing the noses of dead books upon themselves and upon their country—favoring no poets, philosophes, literates here, but dog-like dandlers at the heels of the poets, philosophes, literates, of enemies’ lands” (LG 1856, 353). Whitman’s account of the American literary man as a kind of foreign gentleman on native soil is literary nationalist enough for Whitman to have been identified with Young America, both by contemporaries such as Bronson Alcott and by modern literary critics. And yet Whitman is also notably enthusiastic about what he elsewhere in the letter calls “that huge English flow, so sweet, so undeniable” (LG 1856, 348). Whitman delights in “the lists of ready-made literature which America inherits by the mighty inheritance of the English language” (LG 1856, 347) and repeatedly invokes the democratizing potential of such “schooling cheaply procured” (LG 1856, 349). Although he himself would rather circulate bodily among “the young men, to discover the spirit of them and to refresh (himself)”, he regards “authors, publishers, importations, reprints and so forth” as the next best thing to affectionate presence: “they do the indispensable service, outside of men like me, which nothing else could do” (LG 1856, 347).

Indeed, Whitman’s extensive catalogue of recent developments in printing, which has been read as a paean to technological progress, is more precisely taken as praise of the multiplicity and dispersal of American literary institutions, an invocation of the seemingly agentless power of the decentralized mass-production of print.

The twelve thousand large and small shops for dispensing books and newspapers—the same number of public libraries, any one of which has all the reading wanted to equip a man or woman for American reading—the three thousand different newspapers, the nutriment of the imperfect ones coming in just as usefully as any—the story papers, various, full of strong-flavored romances, widely circulated—the one-cent and two-cent journals—the political ones, no matter what side—the weeklies in the country—the sporting and pictorial papers—the
monthly magazines, with plentiful imported feed—the sentimental novels, numberless copies of them—the low-priced flaring tales, adventures, biographies—all are prophetic; all waft rapidly on. (LG 1856, 349)

Whitman doesn’t simply praise a burgeoning market for print, he emphasizes the democratizing potential of cheap print, singling out formats such as newspapers and periodicals that depended on reprinting for much of their content.

Whitman’s measured tone, his “composure” (LG 1856, 348) in the face of “the swarms of reprints” (LG 1856, 349) contrasts markedly with Charles Dickens’s anxiety at the spectacle of unauthorized reprinting. As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, the imprint trade forced Dickens to attend to the author’s lack of control over conditions of publication, not just in America but as a matter of course. For Dickens, reprinting threatened to dissolve the cultural presumption of authorial control, a fiction that served both to consolidate publishers’ power and to protect authors from their readers. 17 Whitman, however, unabashedly celebrates American reading; he is eager both to submit to that sweet English flow and to circulate among workingmen newly imaginable as readers. Unlike many literary nationalists, Whitman does not call for tighter regulation of the press but rather for looser self-regulation on the part of literary elites. Whitman’s pleasure in the promiscuous circulation of cheap print and his confidence that the debt incurred by reprinting would eventually be repaid finds its opposite in this manifesto in the utter failure of frank language about sex to circulate in print or even for sex to be spoken about in literary circles. Whitman’s enthusiasm for the relatively unregulated American press is set in charged but unexplained juxtaposition with his indictment of the anxious self-censorship of provincial authors.

While Whitman stops short of drawing strong connections between these parables of self-regulating circulation, he stakes out a position that is clearly distinct from Whig support of international copyright, which characteristically ranged against the licensiousness of the reprint trade, 8 and from the Democrats’ advocacy of the writing of American authors so long as such literary protectionism did not threaten the prosperity of American publishers. 9 Whitman calls instead for the disbanding of self-censoring, self-sequestering literary elites, enjoining them to be “bards of ensemble” rather than “a class set apart, circling only in the circle of themselves” (LG 1856, 354). Whitman is ultimately more concerned with the stifling effects of social convention than he is with the regulation of print; the “filthy law” he urgently desires to repeal is an unwritten one—the consensus that sex is “unmentionable and to be ashamed of” (LG 1856, 355). In Whitman’s lexicon, stigma attaches to the enforcement of social norms, not to their violation; filthiness inheres in shame, not in sex, while a lack of faith in the body shows itself in “foetic polite face” (LG 1856, 355). Given Whitman’s irritation at the general “silence or obedience” of literary elites, who he thinks “have long connived” (LG 1856, 355) to exclude sex from representation, one can begin to see how the unrestrained circulation of poets and cheap print among the people might promise to produce a more robust and representative national literature.

Whitman’s solution to the problem of an imitative literary culture returns again and again to figures of reprinting, as if the only remedy for this disease is more of the same. At times, his literary nationalist program seems to be mostly a matter of readressing literature to a new audience, a way that is arguably paved by reprinters’ circulation of elite literature in cheap formats: “What is to be done,” Whitman maintains, “is to withdraw from the precedents and be directed to men and women—also to The States in their federalness” (LG 1856, 350). Reprinting itself provides a figure for understanding how the old world might less threateningly be brought into relation to the new: “The genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small, compared to our genius;” “Old forms, old poems, majestic and proper in their own lands here in this land are exiles” (LG 1856, 351). For Whitman, the road to an authentically national literature clearly goes by way of cut and paste. Even the original expression Whitman passionately invokes in this manifesto comes to look like collage, as much a mode of reading as it is of writing. As Whitman enigmatically proclaims, “Expressions do not yet serve, for sufficient reasons; but that is getting ready, beyond what the earth has hitherto known, to take home the expressions when they come and to identify them with the populace of The States” (LG 1856, 348–349). Reprinting and original American expressions do not stand in opposition to one another, they are continuous. Although the process of transition from one to the other is everywhere mysterious, reprinting clearly helps to generate a national literature; it serves as “nourishment” to the national body, on the brink of emerging from an extended period of latency.

In addition to proposing a solution to and prophesying the imminent end of American cultural indebtedness, the 1850 edition works hard to discharge Whitman’s debt to his deferentially acknowledged “Master,” Ralph Waldo Emerson. Critics have rightly focused on Whitman’s use of an excerpt from Emerson’s letter on the spine of the volume, but Whitman’s extended reply to Emerson in “Leaves-Droppings” indicates more than simple appropriation, the scandal of transforming private praise into a public strategy of self-promotion. Whitman’s lengthy letter concludes with an indirect attempt to attribute his text to Emerson, to place Emerson at the origin of his poetic program, to sign his text with Emerson’s name. What intrigues me is the ways in which this countersignature is modeled and made possible by the loose regulation of literary property, the development of a publishing system that installed a lag of indeterminate duration
between publication and attribution, one that promoted readerly appropriation at the expense of authorial control.

While Emerson had greeted Whitman at “the beginning of a great career,” Whitman insists in return that the promise of a commensurability between the American continent and its literature—a literature founded on “that vast basis of the supremacy of Individuality” (LG 1856, 357)—was foreseen by Emerson, returning responsibility for Whitman’s vision to Emerson himself. In an extended analogy with maritime exploration, Whitman blurs the distinction between accident and origination, returning Emerson’s personal greeting in the form of a second person address that also blurs the distinction between author and reader:

Those shores you found. I say you have led the States there—have led Me there.
I say that none has ever done, or ever can do, a greater deed for the States than your deed. Others may line out the lines, build cities, work mines, break up farms; it is yours to have been the original true Captain who put to sea, intuitive, positive, rendering the first report, to be told less by any report, and more by the mariners of a thousand bays, in each track of their arriving and departing, many years after you. (LG 1856, 358)

In this passage, credit for discovery is subsumed into ordinary navigation; Emerson’s heroic deed is invisibly inscribed in the routine comings and goings of those who come after him. That this moment of attribution is also an aggressive assertion of Emerson’s lack of control over his legacy becomes unmistakable in Whitman’s closing address, in which Whitman nominates himself as the people’s representative and as the executor of Emerson’s literary estate: “Receive, dear Master, these statements and assurances through me, for all the young men, and for an earnest that we know none before you, but the best following you; and that we demand to take your name into our keeping” (LG 1856, 358). What kind of an assurance could possibly be offered by this reply, sent not through the mail like the first edition but broadcast to the world in full confidence that it would find its way to Emerson? What kind of custodianship is implied by the “demand” that Emerson’s name be taken into Whitman’s and other young men’s “keeping”? Credited with a book he did not write and saddled with responsibility for its poetic program, Emerson is put on notice that the afterlife of his writing is helplessly and permanently out of his hands.

Textual Authority and Poetic Address in the 1856 Edition

Much of the audacity of Whitman’s reply to Emerson lies in his insistence that the work of the “Master” is subject to a field of circulation that is beyond his control, an assertion that the paratexts of the 1856 edition perform in their rhetorical ex-cessiveness, in their techniques of readdress, and in the manifest incommensurability of personal greeting and printed response. Emerson’s problem was, of course, Whitman’s desire: if Emerson could not control the circulation of his texts or reputation, Whitman’s struggle in 1856 was to distribute his poems to a wider public than he was able to reach with his first edition. Whitman’s indirect claims to authority, his disavowal of originality, and his framing of his poems with a partially fabricated history of their reception can all be seen as attempts to increase the circulation of his poetry by projecting it as already in circulation. I want to suggest, however, that these are not only publishing strategies, they are also poetic strategies. In Whitman’s experiments with poetic address—his poems’ shifting stance toward their utterances—we can see how his concept of literary recognition might look like, splitting, suspending, and subordinating the lyric “I” so as to restore the emergence of his poetic voice. While these modes of address might be seen as attempts to recharacterize the voice that speaks to us so imperiously from the pages of the 1855 edition, they are also techniques for launching that voice into a print culture that had for the most part failed to recognize it.

Compared with the 1855 Leaves of Grass, which sets up the expectation of first-person address, Whitman’s experiments with the delayed delivery or avoidance of the “I” in the 1856 edition are striking. The first poem of the reprinted edition—“Poem of Walt Whitman, an American” (known as “Song of Myself” after 1881)—is manifestly both by and about the poet. The announcement of Whitman’s name in the poem’s title, combined with the truncation of the name on the copyright page from “Walter” to “Walt,” appears to bring both poet and poetic speaker squarely into line with the person who claims title in the book-as-object. And yet the poems that follow work in complex ways to disavow responsibility for this poetic enterprise. Unlike the first edition, which follows the opening poem with one that intensifies the urgency and intimacy of the address to the reader—“Come closer to me, / Push close my lovers and take the best I possess” (89), Whitman disrupts this sequence in 1856 with two new poems that take up familiar themes and tropes but with some distance: “Poem of Women” (later called “Unfolded Out of the Foldes”) and “Poem of Salutation.” “Poem of Women” provides a back-story for the self who speaks so forcefully in the initial poem, denying her both originality and singularity. “Unfolded only out of the inimitable poem of the woman can come the poems of man—only thence have my poems come” (LG 1856, 101). This poem offers priority to women in exchange for a kind of exposure; the poems that are “unfolded” in this volume may disclose, expand upon, or make dangerously plain the repressed subject of sex, but they will remain passive, secondary, and multiple—thoroughly dependent on the singular gestational power of “woman.” Strikingly, the poem avoids first-person address, deferring the
emergence of the poet’s “I” and confining it to a set of parallel clauses which restore a measure of equivalence to the otherwise subordinated love between men: “Unfolded out of the strong and arrogant woman I love, only then can appear the strong and arrogant man I love” (LG 1856, 101). The poem concludes its exploration of the sexual origins of individual identity in the neutrality and generality of the third person: “First the man is shaped in the woman, he can then be shaped in himself” (LG 1856, 102).

“Poem of Salutation” picks up on this deferral and the offloading of credit and responsibility for origins, beginning with a startling apostrophe: “O take my hand, Walt Whitman!” (LG 1856, 103). This instance of self-address is profoundly dislocating, particularly in light of the title’s equivocation as to whether salutation is its subject or its source, the poet-speaker’s chosen mode of address or a speaking personification. A “Poem of Salutation” might reasonably be expected to greet the reader, but, bizarrely enough, it begins by addressing the poet in our stead. But whose hand is it, then, that is being extended to Walt Whitman for him (and us, by proxy) to grasp? And what is the relation of this salutation to the greeting embossed on the spine that authorizes the volume as a whole?

The lines that follow provide little direction. Unlike “Poem of Walt Whitman, an American,” which offers a measure of fixity and security in insisting on the logical priority of poet to reader (“And what I assume you shall assume” (LG 1856, 51), “Poem of Salutation” is unmoored in space and time. The dislocation of the initial address to Whitman is followed by lines in which the poet is urged to concur in praise of a series of strategically indefinite objects of attention: “Such gliding wonders! Such sights and sounds! / Such joined unended links, each hooked to the next! / Each answering all, each sharing the earth with all” (LG 1856, 103). These exclamations court banality in the service of temporal indistinctness. If the sights and sounds the poem celebrates are decisively but vaguely praised for having the character they have, this is so that the lines can refer backwards, commenting approvingly on wonders we have already seen, while also reaching forward to the sights and sounds to which the poem will soon expose us. Rather than establishing the poetic “I” as the source of and filter for the poem’s observations, “Poem of Salutation” places both poet and reader in the middle of a series without origin or end. We are bystanders, caught up in a riot of responsiveness, “each answering all.”

In addressing himself in “Poem of Salutation,” Whitman suspends the narcissistic drama of ordinary apostrophe in order to reauthorize his poetry as a response to provocation from without. Jonathan Culler has described the solipsism of apostrophe as the calling card of a lyric subject who either “parcells out the self to fill the world, peopling the universe with fragments of the self . . . or else . . . internalizes what might have been thought external.” While self-apostrophe might be thought to be a further driving inward of this already dangerously interior poetic genre, the effect of Whitman’s self-address is to put the poem into dialogue with forces that precede and exceed it.24

“Poem of Salutation” subsumes long stretches of characteristically Whitmanian observation into the structure of call-and-response: “What widens within you, Walt Whitman?” (LG 1856, 103); “What do you hear, Walt Whitman?” (LG 1856, 104); “What do you see, Walt Whitman?” (LG 1856, 106); and “Who are they you salute, and that one after another salute you?” (LG 1856, 107). While with this last question, the poem finally settles into a set of observations and recognitions that appear to be initiated by the poetic speaker, the poem never shakes the spectral presence of the disembodied voice that set it going. The speaker’s responsiveness to a variety of prompts provides an alibi for the immense historical range and global scope of the poem, as if Whitman realized that world geography, civilization, and religious history could not convincingly be addressed from a single vantage point. If the “hand” offered to Whitman at the start of the poem provides a kind of tether that allows him to pass “in compassion and determination around the whole earth” (LG 1856, 120), it also serves as a reminder that there is an outside to even the global poet’s vision. The comprehensive claims of “Poem of Salutation,” which produces a sense of arrested motion from its distanced and shifting perspective,25 are tempered by the speaker’s niggling awareness of oversight by others: “And you everywhere whom I specify not, but include just the same! / I salute you for myself and for America!” (LG 1856, 118–119).

In “Poem of Salutation,” Whitman strives not only to claim the power of lyric address for himself but to locate such effects outside of the figure of the poet, prior to his calling. Here, and in “Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness,” Whitman refuses the presumptive solitude of what Virginia Jackson has identified as a property of “lyric reading”26—our retrospective insistence that nineteenth-century poems produce the voice of a solitary speaker turned away from his listeners, who then reprise the poet’s isolation in acts of solitary reading. While I won’t attempt in this essay to disentangle Whitman from all the snare s set by this reading formation, it is worth noting that the dialogic framework of “Poem of Salutation” is picked up and echoed in a number of other poems in the early editions of Leaves of Grass, poems in which the poet channels other voices (“RESPONDED! RESPONDED!”; “Clear the way there, Jonathan!”), or in the frequent stretches of longer poems comprised of rhetorical questions directed to the reader. Whitman is interested in forms of intimacy that emerge from the space of circulation, not in those that precede it or attempt to circumvent its limits.

A brief look at “Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness” will show how Whitman’s experiments with poetic address in this edition work to characterize his
poetic voice as one that emerges from a play of discourses and voices that are already in circulation. As in "Poem of Salutation," Whitman inaugurates this poem with a direct address that seems to come from nowhere, setting the poem up as a response to an authoritative demand of mysterious origin. In this poem, however, Whitman turns back to reflect on the conditions of poetic address, both exercising and questioning the poet's power to will new states of affairs into being. The double genitive of the poem's title gives some indication of just how complex the speech situation of this poem is. Nakedness could be the personified origin of these propositions and of the poem itself, particularly given Whitman's insistence in his letter to Emerson that "the body of a man or woman, the main matter, is so far quite unexpressed in poems" (LG 1856, 356). In this reading, the poem constitutes what nakedness might say if it finally given a chance to speak. Then again, what holds these propositions together could be their claim to strip American society of its pretensions; nakedness could be a property of these diverse and contradictory statements, rather than serving as their point of origin. Either way, it is crucial to note Whitman's elaborate refusal to allow this poem to coalesce around a stable and coherent lyric "I." Critics have tended to domesticate the strangeness of this poem by catching up its wild, centrifugal energies, tracking the array of propositions back to Whitman, and assimilating the poem to the canon as a rare inversion of Whitmanian optimism. And yet "Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness" delights in testing the limits of social order and in imagining lifting a variety of constraints on discourse, including the assumption that a poem proceeds from and reinforces a single point of view. These are not statements initiated and controlled by the central figure of the observing poet, what Whitman describes in "Song of Myself" as "Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd" (211). The poet's voice emerges in this poem in reaction to the inversion and negation set loose by forbidden subjects of discourse.

The poem begins with an incomprehensible demand that will in later editions serve as its title, an urgent call, in fractured French, for a response to a question that goes unasked: "Respondez! Respondez!" (LG 1856, 316). Read in the context of the sequence of poems, this demand could easily refer to the Invocation that concludes the poem that precedes it, "Lesson Poem" (later "Who Learns My Lesson Complete?"): "Come! I should like to hear you tell me what there is in yourself that is not just as wonderful" (LG 1856, 315). However, while "Lesson Poem" provides a plausible context for this utterance, it explains neither the sudden shift from genteel invitation ("I should like") to impatient demand ("Respondez!") nor the poem's swift turn to explore the paradoxical mix of permission and compulsion that is implicit in this demand:

Let every one answer! Let all who sleep be waked! Let none evade—not you, any more than others!
Let that which stood in front go behind! And let that which was behind advance to the front and speak!
Let murderers, thieves, tyrants, bigots, unclean persons, offer new propositions!
Let the old propositions be postponed! (LG 1856, 316)

The poem begins by calling for the lifting of ordinary constraints on speech, commanding readers to reply to the poet and granting socially marginalized persons access to an imaginary podium, but the list of propositions quickly disrupts the premise of inversion on which it is initially based. Although the poem invokes the gospel promise that "The last shall be first" (Matthew 20:16), its propositions will not proceed with the measured, compensatory tones of biblical justice. Rather, the poem stages a kind of takeover of its apparatus; as soon as "murderers, thieves, tyrants" and others are invited (and commanded) to offer new propositions, it is no longer clear what rules will govern the making of statements. Are the fias that follow these lines with strict grammatical parallelism the new or the old propositions, those that have been called for or those that have been postponed? On whose authority does this poem proceed?

In "Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness," Whitman courts the energy released by the carnivalesque overturning of social norms. The poem's propositions are deliberately inconsistent and range widely in subject and tone: they are righteous, radical, fanciful, outrageous, absurd, revolutionary, and inconsequential. While some sound like Whitman and are presumably statements he would endorse ("Let contradictions prevail! Let one thing contradict another! And let one line of my poem contradict another!" [LG 1856, 317]), others are self-parodying in their extravagance ("Let him who is without my poems be assassinated!" [LG 1856, 318]), and still others read like the proposals of an overly eager, reform-minded disciple ("Let us all, without missing one, be exposed in public, naked, monthly, at the peril of our lives! Let our bodies be freely handled and examined by whoever chooses!" [LG 1856, 319]). But these propositions cannot, finally, be made sense of by reference to Whitman, in part because of their sheer diversity and in part because the trope of inversion, through which the reader is prompted to endorse the opposite of what is proposed, does not consistently hold. While we may heartily reject the proposals of tyrants ("Let freedom prove no man's inalienable right!" [LG 1856, 318]) or those of genteel reformers ("Let nothing remain upon the earth except teachers, artists, moralists, lawyers, and learned and polite persons!" [LG 1856, 318]), some of these propositions do not bear reversal, either because we are inclined to endorse them or...
because they are absurd. For example, the collapse of the proposal for monthly bodily exposure leaves us not with a counterassertion we can rally behind but with the status quo. Other propositions defy the rule of misrule by commanding states of affairs that actually seem to obtain: “Let the theory of America be management, caste, comparison!” (LG 1856, 317); “Let priests still play at immortality!” (LG 1856, 318); “Let there be money, business, railroads, imports, exports, custom, authority, precedents, pallor, dyspepsia, smut, ignorance, unbelief!” (LG 1856, 319). While the first two of these propositions can activate dissent through the reader’s cynical agreement with their claims, the last inspires only bafflement or resignation. In his varied use of the poet’s flat, Whitman explores the limits of inversion for the accomplishment of social change and the insufficiency of the counterfactual as a description of the work of poetry. After all, if the state of affairs a proposition attempts to call into being already exists, the poem’s declarations are redundant; they may be drenched in irony, but their performative force collapses into mere description. This is to say, if such a proposition works as critique, it fails as poetry or at least as an instrument for calling into existence alternative worlds.

If “Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness” succeeds in questioning the power of poetic address, it does offer a figure for poetic voice that is more in line with the 1856 edition’s interest in responsiveness and receptivity. One of the effects of the poem’s lifting of restraints on speech is to invest readerly silence with a wealth of possible meanings. Each proposition can be seen not only as an experiment in the limits of the sayable or imaginable but also as an inquiry into what prevents such things from being said. While the opening lines of the poem suggest that unresponsive readers may be inattentive, cowardly, or oppressed, the sheer number and variety of these propositions implies that readerly reticence has multiple sources, some of them admirable and desirable. The liberties these propositions take with social norms point to a range of regrettable impediments to speech—modesty, passivity, habit, social conditioning, conventionality, and conservatism. In provoking readers to resist their terms, however, these propositions also suggest that readers’ silence might conceal reservoirs of unarticulated sympathy (“Let the sympathy that waits in every man, wait!” [LG 1856, 317]), a becoming modesty or self-restraint (“Let men among themselves talk obscenely of women!” [LG 1856, 319]), the ordinary citizen’s capacity for social and political leadership (“Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest!” [LG 1856, 317]), and, by accrual, a vast array of unrepresented opinions, ideas, and responses.

The poem begins to lay the groundwork for a social and political program that would get beyond simply overturning social norms through a series of parentheticals scattered throughout the poem, all of which begin with the exclamation “Say!”:

Let none be pointed toward his destination!
(Say! do you know your destination?) (LG 1856, 316)

Let the theory of America be management, caste, comparison!
(Say! what other theory would you?)

Let them that distrust birth and death lead the rest!
(Say! why should they not lead you?) (LG 1856, 317)

Both an expression of astonishment and a call for response, “Say!” and the open-ended questions that follow allow for a significantly gendered mode of address to the reader than the hectoring command with which the poem begins. While both “Respondze!” and “Say!” essentially ask for the same thing, Whitman’s parenthetical questions recharacterize the poet as a quizzical onlooker and potential interlocutor, an addressee rather than a speaker with the power to command the attention of those he addresses. In “Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness” Whitman cultivates incoherence in his list of statements, enjoying rather than policing the cacophony. Resolutely avoiding the lyric “I,” he develops a grammatical and graphic structure through which he can introduce the voice of the poet as a welcome aside, a commentator on the play of propositions. The poet plays a stabilizing but not a regulatory function in this poem, shifting the work of judgment onto readers who are encouraged to generate more satisfactory propositions of their own.

Putting “Walt Whitman” into Circulation

Whitman’s renegotiation of poetic address in “Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness” and in “Poem of Salutation” suggests the insufficiency of first-person address to provoke the kind of response he wanted from his readers. Critics have long mediated on the ways in which the poems of the 1856 edition accommodate the failure of the first edition, speculating, for example, that Whitman’s orientation toward posterity in “Sun-Down Poem” (later known as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”) is in part produced by his turn away from his contemporaries. This poem recalls “Poem of the Propositions of Nakedness” in its reliance on the poet’s fiat, although “Sun-Down Poem” manages to stage a successful metalepsis—casting a vision of the future into the past and the past into the future—by extending the poet’s fiat across time. If the “Propositions of Nakedness” collapse because they command a state of affairs that may in part already exist, the commands in “Sun-Down Poem” demonstrate the poet’s power by claiming identity across temporal difference, confirming Whitman’s experience as a back-projection of our own.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that Whitman’s experiments with poetic address in the 1856 edition constitute an abandonment of his contemporaries,
particularly since he uses some of the same techniques of self-estrangement we have seen in these poems in the active promotion of his book. We have become so habituated to the idea of the coincidence of poet and speaker, Walt Whitman and the lyric “I,” that we fail to see how Whitman uses ventriloquism to stage his emergence onto the literary scene. Returning to “Leaves-Droppings” with Whitman’s poetic experiments in mind, we can see that his interventions into cultural politics make use of the very same techniques. Rather than making the case for his poetry on literary nationalist grounds, Whitman caricatures this position in order to distinguish his own “composure” in the face of reprinting from the frenetic tone of “such propositions” (LG 1856, 348). In asserting the imminence of the transition from reprinting to original authorship, Whitman slips into an elaborate, extended apostrophe to the nation: “America, grandest of lands in the theory of its politics, in popular reading... collapses quick as lightning at the repeated, admonishing, stern words, Where are any mental expressions from you beyond what you have copied or stolen? Where are the born thongs of poets, literats, orators, you promised?” (LG 1856, 348). Whitman cultivates some confusion as to where his own voice leaves off and this one begins, perhaps because of the erotic violence of the position he ventriloquizes: “Strangle the singers who will not sing you loud and strong. Open the doors of The West. Call for new great masters to comprehend new arts, new perfections, new wants. Submit to the most robust bard till he remedy your barrenness. Then you will not need to adopt the heirs of others; you will have true heirs, begotten of yourself, blooded with your own blood” (LG 1856, 348). Nevertheless it is crucial to note that Whitman dissociates himself from this position in much the same way that he distances himself from the many and varied “Propositions of Nakedness.” Whitman doesn’t want to author this call for “new great masters”—or, more precisely, this call for a call—so much as to situate his poetry within the play of such calls and anticipated responses.

Michael Warner has called our attention to the way in which Whitman’s poetry “continually exploits public sphere discourse conventions as its conditions of utterance,” trading on the “necessary anonymity and mutual non-knowledge of writer and reader.” In the culture of reprinting, such discourse conventions included the expectation that uncopyrighted texts—foreign works and most newspaper and periodical articles—could and would circulate without the supervision of the author. In the 1856 edition, Whitman exploits the powerful deauthorizing and reauthorizing potential of a publishing system that relied on unauthorized reprinting to reach a new class of readers only just coming into a sense of themselves as a reading public. If the deference of an emergent mass readership to the opinions of literary elites made it difficult for Whitman to reach the very readers he desired, anonymous reprinting made it possible for him to stage forms of recognition that could potentially galvanize the dissemination of his poems.

In concluding, I’ll quote a brief excerpt from one of Whitman’s reprinted self-reviews to show how his claims for the novelty of his lyric “I”—the decisive break with genteel literary norms he desired to effect—depends on a kind of ventriloquism that makes it difficult to tell the difference between poetic strategies and publishing strategies. This review dramatizes Whitman’s entry onto the literary scene as an episode drawn from the metalectic fantasy of “Sun-Down Poem,” giving voice to Whitman’s extraordinary ambitions under the sign of a rebuke. This review also makes an excerpt from the poem we will come to know as “Song of Myself” sharply visible as a direct address through an elaborate self-apostrophe:

Meanwhile a strange voice parts others aside and demands for its owner that position that is only allowed after the seal of many returning years has stamped with approving stamp the claims of the loftiest leading genius. Do you think the best honors of the earth are won so easily, Walt Whitman? Do you think city and country are to fall before the vehement egotism of your recitative of yourself?

I am the poet of the body,
And I am the poet of the soul
The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
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.
I chant a new chant of dilation or pride,
We have had ducking and deprecating about enough,
I show that size is only development. (LG 1856, 372)

In the context of this review, the powers claimed by the poet clearly depend on the splitting, dispersal, and subordination of the lyric “I.” Reading with or without the awareness of Whitman’s authorship, one cannot help but agree with the reviewer, who concludes this short excerpt by confirming his initial diagnosis, exclaiming “It is indeed a strange voice!” (LG 1856, 372). It is a strange voice, but not because it violates literary conventions, flies in the face of social norms, or stakes too much on its own egotism but rather because of the elaborate structures of estrangement Whitman deploys in order to convince us of his directness and simplicity. In the 1856 Leaves of Grass, Whitman exploits reprinting’s detachment of texts from their authors and from authorizing contexts in order to orchestrate a rupture with literary elites who had failed, by and large, to register the breach. Reprinting Leaves of Grass became
an opportunity for Whitman to develop techniques for extending his poetic voice, using poetic and publishing strategies that draw our attention elsewhere for an account of origins, cultivate a range of possible responses, and allow a voice we will come to recognize as Whitman’s to emerge in their very midst.

NOTES
4. For a legislative history of international copyright in the postbellum period, see George Haven Putnam, ed., The Question of Copyright (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1866), 40–65.
6. Jerome Loving analyzes the texts Whitman likely selected for reprinting when he was exchange editor at the New Orleans Crescent. See his Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 114–149.
7. For evidence of Whitman’s heavy hand in the production of Bucke’s adulatory biography and critical history, see Stephen Railton, Walt Whitman’s Autograph Revision of the Analysis of Leaves of Grass (New York: New York University Press, 1974) and Quentin Anderson’s “Whitman’s New Man” printed as an introduction to that volume (11–53).
10. Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Brooklyn, 1856), 383. Although this edition is rare and unavailable in print form as a scholarly facsimile, page images and transcriptions can easily be accessed electronically at the Walt Whitman Archive, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, www.whitmanarchive.org. Further references to this edition will be noted by page number in the text following the year of publication.

[ M E R E D I T H L . M C G I L L ]
York: New York University Press, 1992). Nathanson explores how Whitman's apostrophes embody voice and seek to overcome temporal distance; I'm interested in the distancing effects of Whitman's attempts to throw his voice in the 1856 edition. In this regard it is interesting that Nathanson turns to two poems new to the 1856 edition—"Poem of the Road" (later "Song of the Open Road") and "Poem of You, Whoever You Are" (later "To You")—to qualify his claims, noting that Whitman's apostrophes accentuate as well as attempt to overcome generality and anonymity. See Nathanson, 356–357.

25. A general themes of passivity, echoing the speaker's position at the start of the poem, is produced by the very great distance from which he must view world geography and civilization, a distance that abstracts pattern and stasis from motion and history. This tendency toward arrested motion stretches from the inclusion of details, such as mariners who are carried past geographical landmarks or left waiting at the wharves, to the speaker's general interest in settings and not actions, his fascination with the inscriptions left behind by history.


27. Critics have found it difficult to resist identifying this poem as an example of the "terrible negative voice" of social critique Whitman called for in his letter to Emerson (LG 1856, 352). For readings that proceed along these lines, see Betsy Erkkila, Whitman the Political Poet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 138–140, and David Reynolds, Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 357–359. As with "Poem of Women," Whitman had difficulty fitting this poem to the architecture of later editions of Leaves of Grass, making it one of the "Chants Democratic" in the 1881 edition and revising it so that it could take its place as one of the "Marches Now the War Is Over" in 1871 before dropping it from the volume altogether.

28. For a reading of "Respondeat!" that emphasizes Whitman's "ironic valorization of corrupt social practices" see James A. Berger, "Whitman's Rejection of 'Respondeat!',' Essays in Literature 19, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 221–230, quote 225.


When Henry James reviewed Drum-Taps, he lamented that Whitman's "essentially prosaic mind" was incapable of poetry because he refused to filter experience: "To become adopted as a national poet, it is not enough to discard everything in particular and to accept everything in general, to amass erudity upon erudity, to discharge the undigested contents of your blotting-book into the lap of the public." Willa Cather agreed with James that a poet must "select the poetic." But Whitman, she continued, "never bothers to do that, he takes everything in the universe from fly-specks to the fixed stars." Whitman had counted precisely this type of criticism. Reviewing his own work anonymously in 1855, he wrote admiringly about its nondiscriminatory inclusiveness: "Things, facts, events, persons, days, ages, qualities, tumble pell-mell, exhaustless and copious." If amassed debris was inherently antipoetic to Cather, James, and others, for Whitman it was crucial to his anti-poetic poetry. Yet debris was at one pole in Whitman's creative process, and order was at the other: the two were in dialectical relationship throughout Whitman's career, though early critics such as James and Cather often noticed only the debris. Opposing Whitman's impulse toward "form and union and plan" was the forces—some beyond the poet's control—of scatter, disintegration, and chance. Whitman's writings, both within and beyond Leaves of Grass, encompassed the growth and dropping of leaves, sprouting and shedding, living and dying.

Haphazard and antihierarchical, debris was fascinating to Whitman and fundamental to his view of poetry and existence. It is not surprising that debris would be of interest to one who wrote so often in opposition to the refined, the polished, and the ornate. Whitman famously praised materials often regarded as trash—"all kinds of light reading, novels, newspapers, gossip, etc., [because they] serve as manure for the few great productions." In the poem ultimately titled...