

SOME SUBTLE SYMPATHY: CONNECTING WITH THE LIVING AND THE DEAD
IN WALT WHITMAN'S *JACK ENGLE* AND *LEAVES OF GRASS*

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation traces the arc of Walt Whitman's later fiction-writing career, illuminating a key moment in it—the publication of his recently recovered novella *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle* (1852)—and taking it as a stage for more wide-ranging discussions of Whitman's sympathies with the living and the dead. In Chapter 1, I interpret the novella's—and in particular, its twelfth chapter's—rhetoric of sincerity as encoding queerness, and its moments emphasizing sincerity and sympathy as conveying an “indescribable something” between the disidentified, via a “hard” sentimentality among queer men. Then, in Chapter 2, I loop back to provide an extended historical contextualization of *Jack Engle*, in which I situate the novella generically, bibliographically, and biographically. Given what I find to be the novella's place in the literary tradition of sentimentalism, and Whitman's little-remarked engagement with the (related) moralistic tradition of sentimental ethics, in Chapter 3, I explore Whitman's ethics in more detail. In particular, I question how the poet moves from the traditional ethics of his fiction and his early poems to what David S. Reynolds calls his “far more adventurously mystical and more erotically charged” engagements with ethics and theology, ethics that are not only open-armed but, seemingly, at peace with the very notion of sin. There is a certain symmetry between moral-sentimental sympathetic identification and Whitman's poetic commitment to embodying the Other—in both cases, there is the ontological sense that one *is*, in a sense, another person—and in both *Jack Engle* and *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman literalizes this relation by positing a porous relationship between the living and the dead. In Chapter 4, I analyze this posited relation to death and renewal by tracing Whitman's poetic relationship to the grave. First, I

review Whitman's early poetic period, noting the relationship of many of his youthful poems about death to the work of the so-called Graveyard School. Then, using *Jack Engle's* own graveyard passage (ch. 19) as a springboard, I examine how Whitman's evolving relationship to graves, graveyards, and graveyard poetry gradually subverts, and eventually transcends, the death-tropes of the Graveyard School, as well as of their American counterparts, most especially Bryant. *Jack Engle's* graveyard scene (ch. 19) provides a critical link between his earlier, more traditional engagements with the Graveyard School, while containing language and symbols that prefigure several now-famous poetic moments in "Song of Myself." Thus, the novella's recovery reveals not only Whitman's complex relationship to an influential poetic tradition of melancholy and ephemerality, but also opens a window into an important period in the development of a key poetic passage in *Leaves of Grass*. On the subject of recovery, I conclude this work with a meditation on the rediscovery of American literatures of the nineteenth century.

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Introduction

This dissertation is about Whitman's sympathies with the living and the dead. It traces the arc of his later fiction-writing career, illuminating a key moment in it, but also takes that moment as the stage for more wide-ranging discussions of Whitman's relationship to sincerity and disidentification, his role in the New York literary marketplace of the 1850s, his engagement with the genre of sentimental fiction, his prose and poetry's evolving ethical commitments, and his relationship to the grave, graveyards, and graveyard poetry. And while "resurrection" is not quite the right term to describe Whitman's shifting beliefs about the possibilities beyond death and burial, this dissertation nevertheless begins with something of a resurrection.

Last year, having rediscovered Whitman's lost wellness treatise, *Manly Health and Training* (1858), and having published it in the pages of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, I began looking for more such works. My motives, while a touch obsessive, were also rooted in a changing sense of the probabilities facing twenty-first-century archival researchers. With powerful digital tools at readers' disposal, it seemed likely enough that there could be yet more Whitman to find. He had always been a prolific writer, after all, as well as an uncaredful self-bibliographer at certain times, a suppressor of his own early works at others. For these reasons, over the century or so since his death scholars have regularly turned up "new" works he published during his highly active (and sometimes ill-documented) period as a journalist, poet, and fiction writer, in particular the 1840s and 1850s. These discoveries include published poems, short stories, travel essay series, art

criticism, local color journalism, letters to editors, and even unfinished novels.¹ More seemed possible—and ultimately, more surfaced. I see no need to recount the story in full, since much of it is too tedious to be of interest. But suffice it to say that I followed a digital paper trail from a Whitman notebook digitized by the Walt Whitman Archive (see Chapter 2 for a detailed description), to the March 14, 1852, issue of the New York *Sunday Dispatch*, held by the Library of Congress (the only archive to house this particular issue of the now-rare literary weekly). What appeared therein, when I finally gained access to its pages, was the beginning of a novel, written by Whitman and published in the spring of 1852 under the full title *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography; in Which the Reader Will Find Some Familiar Characters*. It is an anonymous work, one Whitman seems to have submitted whole. An editorial note states that “[t]he Writer having placed the manuscript *complete* in our hands we shall give such quantities weekly as to enable the reader to see the end within that time.”² Here was a sentence every archival researcher dreams of: not only the beginnings of a long-lost book, but the promise of an *entire* lost book. Still, Whitman had made such promises before—beginning and abandoning two serialized novels, *The Madman* (1843) and *The Fireman’s Dream* (1844)—meaning that this editorial note, while promising, was not to be relied upon. Therefore, it wasn’t until the remaining issues of the *Sunday Dispatch* became available that it became clear to me and several Whitman scholars and collaborators—Ed Folsom, Stefan Schöberlein, and Stephanie Blalock—that *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle* was that rarest of finds: a complete, book-length novel, written by one of America’s literary giants and then lost to history. It was shortly after that moment of

¹ The list is sizeable; a partial roster appears in Chapter 2.

² [Walt Whitman], “Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography,” ed. Zachary Turpin, *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 34 (2017), 262, emphasis mine.

insight that I experienced a second realization, that it was my scholarly responsibility to begin exploring *Jack Engle* as not only a researcher, but a reader and literary critic. This book is the fruit of that realization.

Given how recently *Jack Engle* was recovered, much remains to be written, critically, about the novel. Currently, the primary critical literature on *Jack Engle* is composed of my introductory article, written to accompany it in the pages of *WWQR* (excerpted here for Chapter 2) and scattered press coverage of the novel's place in literary history, to which may now be added this monograph. Undoubtedly, much more is to come. I am aware of several Whitman scholars at work on critical articles about the novella and/or biographical reworkings of Whitman's early career, as well as a number of undergraduate papers and graduate dissertations being written about the book. For that reason, this dissertation begins with an extended close reading of *Jack Engle* as a way of opening up the text's thematic and rhetorical concerns. In it, I take the novella's—and in particular, its twelfth chapter's—rhetoric of sincerity as encoding queerness, and its moments emphasizing sincerity and sympathy as conveying an “indescribable something” between the disidentified, via a “hard” sentimentality among men (*JE* 299). In *Jack Engle*, the sincere connection is affective, physically proximal, made (however briefly) during moments of song, prayer, or rhapsody. The libidinous bond generated and held in tension via sincere sympathy resonates with other sympathetic connections in *Jack Engle* (explored in later chapters), be they ethical, sentimental, or metaphysical.

From here, I continue in Chapter 2 with an extended contextualization of *Jack Engle*, in which, following the close reading, I go back and situate the novella generically, historically, bibliographically, and biographically. This is no easy task, given

the period in which Whitman wrote the novel. From roughly 1850 (the year after Whitman left his position at the *Brooklyn Daily Freeman*) through 1854, documentation of Whitman's literary activities is scant. Very little correspondence exists from this period, and all manuscripts written around this time are nearly impossible to date with certainty. Even Whitman's later recollections of this time are supremely unhelpful. In his episodic autobiography *Specimen Days* (1882), the entirety of his recollection of this period is that from "'51 [to] '53" he was "occupied in housebuilding in Brooklyn."³ What poetry he wrote, in notebooks, gradually grew to become *Leaves of Grass*. His scattered prose, however, remained scattered. Thus, nearly every bit of prose he wrote during his housebuilding years has had to be recovered by scholars, including travel essays found by Joseph Jay Rubin, art criticism uncovered by Wendy Katz, letters and manuscripts located by William White, and now *Jack Engle*, Whitman's second (known) novella.

This novella appeared during a period of burgeoning popularity of periodical fiction, serialized fiction in particular. 1852 is not only the year of the publication of Whitman's only known serialized novella (*Franklin Evans* having originally been published entire); it is also the year the Washington, DC, *National Era* serialized what would go on to be one of the most influential and popular books in American history: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The 1850s saw a number of influential American fiction writers, many of them originally tale writers or straight-to-hardback novelists, adopt the magazine practices of serialization: William Gilmore Simms returned to serializing in 1852 with his *The Sword and the Distaff*, and in the same year Frederick Douglass serialized his *The Heroic Slave* in his own periodical (*Frederick Douglass' Paper*); Herman Melville's only serialized novel, *Israel Potter*, appeared in 1854-1855;

³ Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days & Collect* (Philadelphia: Rees Welsh & Co., 1882-3), 20.

and E.D.E.N. Southworth's most popular novel, *The Hidden Hand*, appeared in 1859. Serial essays also proliferated during this decade, from Fanny Fern's *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853), to Henry David Thoreau's *Cape Cod* (1855), to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.'s wildly popular *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table* (1857-1858). The profitability of serialization had been proven by Dickens in England, whose *Pickwick Papers* (1836) firmly established the saleability of serialized work. Thereafter, a sizeable portion of American newspapers and literary weeklies and monthlies—many of which had printed little or no fiction before—began adopting the practice (some with reservations) as a method of retaining an active readership, as well as of dropping as quickly as possible those long fictions that did not move papers.⁴ In response, authors often adapted their serialized works to the literary tastes and politics of particular periodicals. Into this ecosystem, *Jack Engle* sprouted in the spring of 1852, more or less contemporaneously with Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Dickens' *Bleak House*.

As a serialized long fiction at a time when such literary productions had reached new heights of popularity, Whitman's second (known) novella engages many of the genres and tropes then common to serial fictions. It is a sensationalized city mystery, partially set in brothels, gambling houses, and the nighttime streets, a bit like George Lippard's Philadelphia novel *The Quaker City* (1845). It is also a sentimental romance, of the sort written by both men and women authors of the period, though the latter

⁴ For more on the impact of serialization on the American periodical literature, see Larry J. Reynolds' "From *Dial* Essay to New York Book: The Making of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*," Susan Belasco Smith's "Serialization and the Nature of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," Sheila Post-Lauria's "Magazine Practices and Melville's *Israel Potter*," and Patricia Okker's "Serial Politics in William Gilmore Simms's *Woodcraft*," all in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995). The "reservations" to which I refer are William Gilmore Simms', who, as the editor of the influential southern literary magazine, the *Magnolia*, temporarily banned novels requiring serialization in "preference to those performances, which are unique and publishable entire" (1842, italics in original; see Okker 150).

dominated the sentimental and domestic novel market of the 1850s. Indeed, women authors sold so many serialized and standalone sentimental fictions that the term “bestseller” was later coined to describe the unprecedented success of works like Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* (1854), which eclipsed the sales figures of more “literary” writers like Whitman or Hawthorne. Little wonder *Jack Engle* follows the well-worn grooves of moralistic sentimental fiction—though despite (or perhaps because of) this conventionality Whitman’s novella also hews to what Vivian Pollak has called the “composite master narrative” of Whitman’s own short fictions.⁵ It is set in New York, as his fictions almost invariably are, and focuses “predominantly on the adventures of youth, particularly young men,” who “face dilemmas about employment, temptation, family, and affection,” as Stephanie Blalock and Nicole Gray summarize those narrative elements that typify Whitman’s fictions.⁶ The primary dilemma Jack faces is whether to commit to a life of selfish financial profit, or one of generosity that precludes the opportunity to rise through the city’s social strata. (Additionally, there is a parallel mystery narrative surrounding Jack’s paternity.) Ultimately, the protagonist’s paternity and the revealed identity of his romantic interest resolve his dilemmas about both his station in life and his financial security. And crucially, Jack rejects the allures of immorality, as instantiated in the novella’s stereotypically antagonistic lawyer, Mr. Covert. In the end, Jack looks forward to “a life of health and comfort,” with “pockets that do not flutter from lightness,” even as he sympathizes with the novella’s oppressed over its oppressor—an indication of Whitman’s ongoing participation in both the literary tradition of sentimentalism and the

⁵ Vivian R. Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 46.

⁶ See Blalock’s and Gray’s “Introduction to Walt Whitman’s Short Fiction,” *Walt Whitman Archive*, 2017, <http://whitmanarchive.org/published/fiction/shortfiction_introduction.html>.

(related) moralistic tradition of sentimental ethics. In Chapter 3, I explore these ethics in more detail.

In particular, I question how Whitman moves from the traditional ethics of his fiction and his early poems to what David S. Reynolds calls his “far more adventurously mystical and more erotically charged” engagements with ethics and theology, ethics that are not only open-armed but, seemingly, at peace with the very notion of sin.⁷ That is, I ask how Whitman squares his fictions—which often carefully deploy Judeo-Christian moralism and decry sins of the body—with the ethics of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in which he positions himself as the very “poet of sin.” In his shift between the two, do some elements of his engagement with moral sentimentalism carry over, or evolve, into the more unsystematic, holistic ethics of *Leaves*? Here, I argue that what carries through is the philosophy of moral sentimentalism itself, which forms the foundation of Whitman’s ethics in *Leaves*, based on a principle of universal sympathy and imagination that he would call “prudence” (likely based on Emerson’s use of the term). The connection, as I see it, is the emphasis of moral sentimentalism on sympathy, empathy, or the imagining of oneself literally merging with another person’s selfhood. In his fictions—up to and including *Jack Engle*—Whitman encourages the reader to sympathize with the poor, downtrodden, repentant, or oppressed. This is no surprise, given the tropes of literary sentimentalism, which emphasize the upwelling of readerly sympathies for characters in tragic situations, often in the service of reformist messages. *Leaves of Grass*, while in no wise traditionally sentimental or reformist, still makes use of such appeals to sympathy. These appeals derive their ethical impact from the moral-

⁷ David S. Reynolds, “From Periodical Writer to Poet: Whitman’s Journey through Popular Culture,” in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995), 43.

sentimental position that, to be ethical, one naturally engages one's conscience or moral imagination when observing the situations and actions of others. Whitman simply pushes this principle as far as it will go, or nearly so. In *Leaves*, his sentimental ethics position the speaker (and by extension, the reader) as not merely understanding, but *being*, other Americans—many of them “sinners” of one stripe or another (prostitutes, “onanists,” suicides, and so on). In doing so, Whitman programmatically evacuates the concept of “sin,” such that the term hardly signifies anything ethically immoral, allowing the poet to establish his ethics of “prudence” as one that embraces all beings and their actions, moral and immoral, in a closed cosmos. Except—as I argue—a close reading of *Leaves* reveals that while Whitman overtly sympathizes with “sinners” and recommends prudential ethical acceptance, he does not in fact accept *all* actions and actors. Indeed, in Whitman's identification of his speakerly self with other selves—“I am the hounded slave,” “I am the man . . . I suffered . . . I was there,” and so on—he tends overwhelmingly to reserve such embodiment for oppressed figures, rather than oppressors.⁸ Thus, while Whitman builds an ethics on sympathizing with even the most immoral of persons, he does not, finally, identify with or embody those who degrade others—murders, slaveholders, the domestically violent. “Whoever degrades another degrades me,” he writes in *Leaves*: this is the operative principle of prudence, because, as he adds, “whatever is done or said returns at last to me” (LG1855 29).

That we live in a closed universe, one in which every element may affect every other element, is crucial to Whitman's ethics. There is a certain symmetry between moral-sentimental sympathetic identification and Whitman's poetic commitment to embodying the Other: in both cases, there is the ontological sense that one *is*, in a sense,

⁸ [Walt Whitman,] *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, 1855), 39, hereafter parenthetically cited as LG1855.

another person. In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman literalizes this relation by positing a porous relationship between the living and the dead. In one of the more memorable stanzas of “Song of Myself,” Whitman posits that “[t]he smallest sprout shows there is really no death,/ And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,/And ceased the moment life appeared” (LG1855 17). “To die,” he adds, “is different from what any one supposed, and luckier”—the luck being, among other things, that death merges one’s identity with the entire cosmos via biological processes (LG1855 17). Whitman’s primary poetic conceit, grass, symbolizes this dynamic. The grass, he writes, resembles “the beautiful uncut hair of graves,” which may “transpire from the breasts of young men” (LG1855 16). Thus, when one dies, one “depart[s] as air,” sprouts forth as grass, is consumed by other animals, in turn consumed by other *people*, such that the speaker of *Leaves*, anticipating his own death, can look forward to being able to “filter and fibre your blood” (LG1855 56). In Chapter 4, I analyze this posited relation to death and renewal by tracing Whitman’s poetic relationship to the grave. First, I review Whitman’s early poetic period, noting the relationship of many of his youthful poems about death to the work of the so-called Graveyard School: Parnell’s “Night Piece on Death” (1721), Blair’s *The Grave* (1743), Young’s *Night-Thoughts* (1745), Hervey’s *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746) and Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard” (1751). Then, using *Jack Engle*’s own graveyard passage (ch. 19) as a springboard, I examine how Whitman’s evolving relationship to graves, graveyards, and graveyard poetry gradually subverts, and eventually transcends, the death-tropes of the Graveyard School, as well as of their American counterparts, most especially Bryant. I find that Whitman eschews the traditional symbols of graveyard poetry (headstones, skulls, yew

trees) in favor of more commonplace, organic, perishable elements (mulch, manure, grass), infusing his poetics of the graveyard with an optimistic, secular viewpoint, one that emphasizes the (perhaps paradoxical) freedom and renewal of the grave—which, he assures the reader, is “different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (LG1855 17). *Jack Engle’s* graveyard scene provides a critical link between his earlier, more traditional engagements with the Graveyard School (whose influence on his work I explore), and his later poetics of deathlessness and eternal renewal. This scene also contains language and symbols that prefigure several now-famous poetic moments in “Song of Myself.” Thus, the novella’s recovery reveals not only Whitman’s complex relationship to an influential poetic tradition of melancholy and ephemerality, but also opens a window into an important period in the development of a key poetic passage in *Leaves of Grass*.

On that note, I conclude this work with a meditation on the recovery of American literatures of the nineteenth century. It is not so much a briefing on prospects for future research as it is my attempt to succinctly answer the question, *Why recover more works by Whitman?* Though the answer(s) may be obvious, I do not treat them as such. After all, there are many more authors of the nineteenth century whose oeuvres are less trafficked, studied, and understood than Whitman’s. Nor is Whitman an author whose work lacks an overarching coherence, one that might only be illuminated by the recovery of a bibliographic “missing link.” Still, I begin by suggesting that recovering Whitman’s work is culturally and pedagogically useful, in that it complicates critical understanding of his life, writings, philosophy, and place in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace. Even a single addition to his corpus—in particular, one so unusual, relative to the rest of Whitman’s literary career—can generate a whole host of new associations,

interconnections, and unanswered questions. That said, the bibliographic concept of a complete(able) corpus is itself the subject of the majority of this chapter. In closing this dissertation, I interrogate the very possibility that any author's corpus, much less an entire "American literature," may be known with precision. A literature is, at the best of times, a hazy and shifting set of cultural and bibliographic concepts, even more so when taking into account what Margaret Cohen has called the "great unread"—that is, the overwhelming portion of nineteenth-century texts that now go totally untrafficked, unstudied, unknown. After a discussion of how to theorize, visualize, and delineate the boundaries (if any) of the great unread, I conclude by emphasizing its significance to literature and literary study, even in its textual absence. Exploring the great unread, I posit, is one of the great works of twenty-first-century scholarship, and with that in mind I anticipate the recovery of a few more specific texts by Whitman, as well as the prospects of recovery of many more known and unknown American authors. Rather than "complete" a given body of work, recovering texts can lead students and readers to a renewed attention to the American Archive, a vast (and increasingly digitized) cloud of texts and contexts in whose multiplicity may be encountered not one, but many, American literatures.

I should note that, in the interest of brevity and reduced paper usage, I have not appended the full text of *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*. Readers wishing to consult the complete text can find it online in the Winter/Spring 2017 issue of *WWQR*, at <http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2251&context=wwqr>.

Chapter 1

Slow Reading *Jack Engle*: An Exploration of Sincerity and Disidentification

A detail of *Jack Engle*'s rediscovery that is significant to this dissertation is the manner in which the novella was translated from print to pixels. It was done by hand, and by eye.

In the twenty-first century, the digitization of periodical writings of the nineteenth century is set to become an increasingly automated process—and thank goodness, given the number of texts left to digitize. Based on numbers collected from Google Books' metadata, it has been estimated that 130 million unique titles (books) have been printed in all of modern history, the vast majority of them after the year 1800.⁹ But on top of this statistic (which is almost certainly an underestimate), one must add the nineteenth-century's billions of newspapers, magazines, literary journals, yellowbacks, pamphlets, art prints, and other mass-produced texts. Automated processes—the scanning of microfilm, optical character recognition (OCR), the generation of plaintext, and the uploading of that plaintext (plus original image) to digital archives—mean that a nineteenth-century periodical text can become twenty-first century plaintext in a matter of minutes, or seconds. But not always. The medium makes a difference: Microfilm, on the one hand, can be digitized in a largely or entirely automated process, since the film may be quickly spooled through an preprogrammed scanner, digitizing what it would take dozens of technicians to do with physical texts.¹⁰ But what's left, the vast majority of

⁹ Leonid Taycher, "Books of the world, stand up and be counted! All 129,864,880 of you," *Google Books Search* (August 05, 2010). Weblog. <<http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2010/08/books-of-world-stand-upAccessed-and-be-counted.html>> Accessed May 9, 2010.

¹⁰ Thus, when users browse or search through the holdings of large digital archives—ProQuest Historical Newspapers, the Library of Congress's Chronicling America database, Google Books—the digitized texts that appear largely come from periodicals that have already been committed to microfilm, having previously been deemed of cultural value: for example, the *Port Folio*, the *Dial*, the *Democratic Review*,

nineteenth-century American periodicals that exist only as physical artifacts and holdings, must be digitized by hand, more slowly: photographed or scanned a page at a time, uploaded, reviewed, transcribed or corrected by hand. For the transcriber, this means reading not only the entire text, rather than skimming, but lingering over each sentence for minutes on end, attentively, or even over a single word, down to its individual letters, the swoops and serifs of each letter stamped into the texture of the paper, some letters ghosting away into illegibility from the leaded type having slipped, slid, or narrowly missed kissing the paper. Transcription means re-typing every word letter for letter, noting every possible typo or regionalism or eccentricity of spelling (of which *Jack Engle* has plenty), down to the smallest of typographical quirks: double em-dashes; odd indentations; ghosted blanks; even the space, traditional in nineteenth-century newsprint, between words and certain punctuation marks (semicolon, question marks, and exclamation marks). This manner of reading has its rewards. It draws one's attention not only to the details of word choice and image, and to the meanings and correspondences that connects them, but also the physicality of the text, its print as traces of the particular instant when type and paper met and parted, leaving behind a record of something momentary and carnal.

I am not a particularly fast reader as it is, but naturally reading slowly is one thing, slow reading quite another. The concept of “slow reading”—the act of deliberately reading a text as slowly and carefully as one can bear, focusing intently on the smallest detail—has existed since antiquity, but the critical term dates to the 1950s, probably borne of the “close reading” of 1940s New Criticism and related to the subsequent

Putnam's Monthly, *Harper's Monthly*, the *New York Tribune* and *Times*, the *National Era* and *Southern Weekly Messenger*, and so on.

practice of “deep reading.”¹¹ Scholars like Sven Birkets, Thomas Newkirk, Reuben Brower, and David Mikics have written extensively about slow reading, or what Brower called “reading in slow motion”: about the importance of lingering over texts not merely as a tonic for the fast pace of modern life, but as a method of cultivating a sustained attention for the text itself.¹² Paul de Man writes, in his essay on *Resistance to Theory*, recalls being transformed by Brower’s approach to reading, not because it constituted his introduction to the related concept of close reading, but because of the ethic Brower maintained about slowly interpreting a text: readers, de Man says, “were to start out from the bafflement that...singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge.”¹³ The result, even (really, especially) in its bafflement, is what Brower called “attentive criticism,” the goal of not only “read[ing] for the lustres,” as Emerson says, but also, as Mikics adds, reading “as a form of life lived at a higher pitch.”¹⁴ In this chapter, I begin by exploring *Jack Engle* as a slow reader, giving first priority to the bafflements of the text—the confusions and stumblings that turn up sedimented layers of meaning—leaving the novella’s place in Whitman’s body of work, and in literary and philosophical traditions, for Chapter 2.

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¹¹ For more on ancient slow reading practices, see David Mikics’ *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* (Cambridge: Belknap P, 2013), chapter 1.

¹² See Reuben A. Brower’s “Reading in Slow Motion,” in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader’s Approach to Literary Criticism*, eds. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1962), 3-21.

¹³ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 23.

¹⁴ See Mikics, *Slow Reading*, 6. “I read for the lustres” is from Emerson’s “Nominalist and Realist” (*Essays: Second Series*), and “attentive criticism” is from Brower, “Reading in Slow Motion,” 16.

I should note that I have two very different impressions of this book. The first is of an exquisite sincerity—that is, of the sense that Whitman has created a text that took itself seriously, not unlaughingly so, but seriously in the sense that each passage is dedicated to conveying depth of meaning, without falling back on self-conscious winking or nudging about the novella’s sentimentalism or conventionalisms. That said, it is one thing for a fiction to avoid irony, and another for it to merit the label of “sincere.” How can fiction be sincere? I doubt it is controversial to suggest that *non-fiction* can be sincere, which is not to suggest that it always is. Philip Lopate has worried, rightly, that there is “such a thing as a rhetoric of sincerity,” which he equates with a tone of feigned vulnerability—but Lopate concludes that at least “the skilled reader will turn away in disgust.”¹⁵ I wonder. If sincerity in non-fiction were what Lopate calls “[t]he spectacle of baring the naked soul,” and if that were in turn something that could be falsified (i.e., made fictive), then there is little reason to disqualify fiction from the sincere.¹⁶ If anything, the fiction-writer is at least as honest, in a higher-order way, about baring the vulnerabilities of experience, by having chosen a medium in which the truth-as-lived is not aimed at, so much as aesthetic truth. Thus, sincerity in *Jack Engle* seems to me less the extent to which Whitman approaches the story without irony (though that is part of it), and more the *purity* of its moments of vulnerability, those scenes or sentences in which the protagonist’s connection to others is at its most tangible, empathic. And indeed the word “sincere” derives from the Latin from pure, or clear.¹⁷

¹⁵ *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, ed. Philip Lopate (New York: First Anchor Books, 1995), xxvi.

¹⁶ Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay*, xxvi.

¹⁷ See the etymology of “sincere, *adj.*” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition.

This may be why, while transcribing *Jack Engle*, in all likelihood slower than Whitman had composed it, I often felt a kind of elation at the clarity of its moments of sensory embodiment. At that speed, it is difficult to maintain any clear sense of plot, or even of character dynamics. It is evident from the outset that *Jack Engle* is a tale of hidden identities and moral decisions, but to read it word by word gives instead a more impressionistic sense of scene, figure, and form. It was an almost physical experience, as Karen Sánchez-Eppler has suggested of the act of sentimental reading in general.

“Sentiment and feeling,” she writes

refer at once to emotion and to physical sensation, and in sentimental fiction these two versions of *sentire* blend as the eyes of readers take in the printed word and blur it with tears. Reading sentimental fiction is thus a bodily act... This physicality of the reading experience radically contracts the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading, as the feelings in the story are made tangibly present in the flesh of the reader. The assurance in this fiction that emotion can be attested and measured by physical response makes this conflation possible.¹⁸

Little wonder that I found reading *Jack Engle* slowly a sensuous act, particularly its moments that emphasize the physicality of a singular moment in time. After all, Sánchez-Eppler posits that sentimental fiction is “an intensely bodily genre,” in which “bodily signs are adamantly and repeatedly presented as the preferred and most potent mechanisms both for communicating meaning and for marking the fact of its

¹⁸ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), 26-27.

transmission.”¹⁹ The contraction of “the distance between narrated events and the moment of their reading” might, indeed, account for the sense that the novella maintains an earnestness of tone and attention. After all, irony—the remove from which an author may indirectly or directly assert some consciousness of the conventionality of their productions—requires a certain distancing of author (and reader) from the moment of the text. In slow reading *Jack Engle* and this irony, whether or not it is present, does not obtain. This closeness may be what Sánchez-Eppler is describing in her phenomenology of reading, in which one relishes particular moments or descriptions, such as those contained in the experience of slowly reading *Jack Engle*, be they transportingly sincere or arrestingly clichéd. Indeed, below I explore the relations between sincerity and cliché, since these modes do not preclude one another.

This leads me to my second impression of *Jack Engle*. After the transcription process was complete, and with the opportunity to read the book more quickly, with an eye to plot arc and characterization, the impression I had was of a relatively ordinary sentimental novel, conventionally romantic and sensationalized, a New York city-mystery tale hardly distinguishable from the hundreds of such novels serialized every year in the US in the 1850s. Perhaps the difference between the two impressions comes, in part, from the materialities of the text: in my first reading, I engaged with images of *Jack Engle* as originally situated in weekly installments of the *New York Sunday Dispatch*, sandwiched between editorials and advertisements for baldness cures. The second time through, I engaged with a more “stripped” plaintext version—a text abstracted from the print object itself and reproduced in Times New Roman 12-point font on a white field, open to manipulation. However, while a good lesson in how physical

¹⁹ Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, 27.

texts resist readers in ways that digital texts do not, I doubt that this difference explains everything. After all, on experiencing other texts as digital image first, physical object second, the impressions are not inevitably reversed. So how, then, to further explain the disjunct? How can a work of literature read at two speeds leave two so very different impressions? Sincere and vulnerable on the one hand, trite and conventional on the other?

I point the reader to a scene in *Jack Engle* that may offer the beginnings of an answer—or that at least helps to clarify the stakes of the question. It is the “revival meeting” of Chapter 12’s synoptic subheading, a meeting in which the narrator (Jack) describes a scene of religious fervor and song.²⁰ Read quickly, with attention primarily to the scene’s place in the text as a whole, this chapter may seem at first rather out of place; readers may be struck by its seeming inability to convince that any relevant interaction has occurred between characters or affected the driving conflict. However, by re-reading it slowly, some of this scene’s sincerities may be teased out, by paying attention here not only to the individual details of the scene but to its moments of connection and vulnerability, when the boilerplate of the sentimental recedes within moments that prioritize the mystical, the mysteries of revelation.

Jack Engle is a tale driven primarily by its mysteries—by the question of the protagonist’s paternity, the secret doings of his employer (Mr. Covert), the identity of one of Jack’s romantic interests (Martha), as well as the question of whether his upbringing or his adult influences will sway Jack to moral or immoral acts. “Here is a consideration,” writes Whitman on this last point, “that the theorist on the evils of society might build a

²⁰ [Walt Whitman,] “Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography,” ed. Zachary Turpin, *WWQR* 34.3/4 (2017), 297, hereafter cited parenthetically as *JE*.

big structure upon” (*JE* 271).²¹ Yet, another mystery—or meta-mystery, if it may be called that—is that there are several scenes throughout the novella that leave behind this mystery-structure, or briefly loop off, oxbow-like, to examine elements that seem to have little to do with the primary conflicts of the tale. Chapter 12 is just such interlude. It is a flashback scene, in which Jack Engle and his friend, Tom Peterson, exit momentarily any discussion of the Covert’s schemings—which are, as of the previous chapter, fairly plain, as he is investigating Jack’s paternity with the notion of stealing his (and Martha’s) fortunes. This plot structure is largely suspended in Chapter 12, whose primary act seems to be to capture the phenomenological essence of a Methodist revival meeting, and, in painting the actions of the minister—Tom’s father, Calvin—to capture his sincerity, thereby exceeding the “many portraits of religious fanatics...[t]he world has been favored with” previously (*JE* 297). The chapter also puts Calvin’s sincerity into relation with Jack’s, which varies by the moment. Sincerity seems, indeed, like the operative quality or stance in this chapter, and Whitman’s manuscript jottings for this part of the novella confirm as much: “Introduce some scene in a religious revival meeting—/ Make a character of a ranting religious exhorter—sincere, but a great fool.”²²

The chapter itself pivots on sincerity, both tonally and thematically. The chapter prior, Chapter 11, ends with an explanation: Calvin Peterson, an exceedingly pious man and the father of Jack’s childhood friend, once housed a boarder who knew (but did not reveal) the secret of Jack’s paternity. Thus, Chapter 12 opens with a closer look at Calvin himself. From the beginning, the narrator, Jack, remarks that portraits of revivalists often resort to irony, or to depictions of the revivalists as themselves insincere, saying what

²¹ For more on this subject, see the third chapter of this dissertation.

²² See the notebook titled, for convenience, “a schoolmaster,” available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*. <<http://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/notebooks/transcriptions/loc.04588.html>>

they do not appear to believe in the interests of gaining something from their audience. Jack notes that these portraits “are generally wrong in one point; they do not make the enthusiast sincere. While in reality the religious enthusiast is always sincere” (*JE* 297). He adds that what may contribute to the perception of insincerity are the traditionally flat characterizations of revivalists in literature, which leave out the nuances of human character: the revivalist “is like all human specimens, a compound of both good and evil. As far as the enthusiasm of religion goes, it is not necessarily bad, but rather the reverse. Only it cannot altogether change other main portions of the character of the individual; they remain and give their stamp as before” (*JE* 297). These sentences act as a warning to the reader: though this revivalist, Calvin Peterson, may act like a “great fool,” he is also to be taken seriously, as a realistic portrait of a complex personhood. (For what it is worth, the chapter’s subtitle suggests that Calvin is “a character drawn from life” [*JE* 297].) But realism differs from sincerity, particularly in sentimental literature.

The sincerity, or lack thereof, of sentimental fiction has been a matter of contention among its readerships for practically as long as the tradition has existed. In part, this is because sentimentalism is often associated with an appeal to readerly emotion, and, as June Howard points out, “the emotion involved [may be] characterized as affected and shallow, or as excessive.”²³ Is sentimental fiction any less sincere or true to the experience of the moment than other literatures? If so, is it evacuated of its potential to reach, reform, or reward readers? Louise Glück has asked similar questions about poetry, and she cautions early against conflating “sincerity” or “honesty” with “authenticity.” “The idea of honesty is a form of anxiety,” Glück writes. “We are calmed by answerable questions, and the question ‘Have I been honest?’ has an answer. Honesty

²³ June Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?” *ALH* 11.1 (1999), 65.

and sincerity refer back to the already known,” after all.²⁴ The trouble, she argues, is that the reader has no real access to such referents. Thus, when the reader senses dishonesty in a poem by Frost (her example), Glück would argue that the he is looking for an obligation that simply isn’t there:

We are unnerved, I suppose, by the thought that authenticity, in the poem, is not produced by sincerity. We incline, in our anxiety for formulas, to be literal: we scan Frost’s face compulsively for hidden kindness, having found the poems to be, by all reports, so much better than the man. This assumes our poems are our fingerprints, which they are not. And the processes by which experience is changed—heightened, distilled, made memorable—have nothing to do with sincerity. The truth, on the page, need not have been lived. It is, instead, all that can be envisioned.²⁵

Glück’s formulation is a thorny one when applied to sentimental fiction, given its less frustrated relation to truth, its being less likely to be cast as an authorial “fingerprint.” Nevertheless, Glück’s suggestion, contra Lopate, is that imaginative writing can be sincere *and* feigned, provided it explores “the processes by which experience is changed—heightened, distilled, made memorable.” By this formulation, the “authenticity” of Chapter 12 of *Jack Engle* consists in its value to the reader, while the “sincerity” of Calvin Peterson’s performance, within the chapter, has less to do with his ability to reflect Whitman’s own views, and more to do with the sense that Calvin (or Jack, or Whitman) exposes some inner reality, even if he cuts an absurd or unbelievable figure, even if his words are unpopular. Does the writer or speaker expose himself? As I

²⁴ See Glück’s “Against Sincerity” in *The American Poetry Review* 22.5 (1993), 27.

²⁵ Glück, “Against Sincerity,” 29.

will argue, the stakes of self-exposure in this chapter are, for Whitman's speaker, such that sincerity of affect—that is, unironic efflorescence of the self—authorizes queerness as a state of relation to others. Another way to say this is that Jack, in his relation to the open ardor of a revivalist preacher, is described in queer terms, terms which hint at Jack's libidinous disidentification. Thus, sincerity comes across as a signpost of nonheteronormativity.

Chapter 12 almost immediately addresses the issue of whether Calvin's revivalism is sincere. Is he just a "fashionable preacher," as Whitman once jotted in an 1850s notebook, or is he "a sincere devotee"?²⁶ Jack offers as evidence of his sincerity the fact that, even at home, Calvin cannot "turn off" his spirited concern for the souls of his children, even at the expense of familial closeness: "Calvin had none of the softer sentiments," Jack notes; "or if he had, they were, in him, made hard and heavy in appearance" (*JE* 297). This distinction, the notion of a "hard" sentimentality, complicates June Howard's notion of sentiment as graded by depth—shallow or excessive—while also recalling Glenn Hendler's investigation of Whitman's history with Washingtonian sobriety discourse, with its similar affective dynamic between male softness and hardness.²⁷ Calvin's love for his son is hard: "His affection for his family regarded their immortal welfare more than their temporal good; and the latter sometimes felt the effects of this partiality" (*JE* 297). But, Jack adds, "[i]n respect to the simple virtues of honesty and integrity Calvin was like a guileless child," thus "it would be unjust to this man to deny that his strongest desire tended to what he considered the greatest and most

²⁶ See Whitman's notebook—now titled "No doubt the efflux," for convenience—at the *Walt Whitman Archive*, leaf 9 recto < <http://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/notebooks/transcriptions/loc.00025.html>>.

²⁷ Glenn Hendler, "Bloated Bodies and Sober Sentiments: Masculinity in 1840s Temperance Narratives," in *Sentimental Men: The Politics of Affect in American Culture*, ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999), 125-148.

enduring benefit of those whom he most cared for” (*JE* 297-298). The mention of sentiment here, and in particular the important detail that Calvin “had none of the softer sentiments,” is instructive. Whitman may be trying to distance his portrait of Calvin from the reformist traditions of sentimental fiction, which often aim to effect a political or social change in the reader. Calvin’s portrait, in other words, is likely not meant to reach the reader’s emotions to reform them to Methodism, but rather to offer a vulnerable moment of revivalism, one that in turn reveals something of Jack’s own affective response to vulnerability. However, if the author cannot rely on the so-called “softer sentiments” to establish a sympathetic or empathic connection with the reader (a concept discussed more in Chapter 3 of this dissertation), how might he establish a character’s or scene’s apparent sincerity?

Whitman begins by simply stating this sincerity outright: referring to Methodist revivals in general, Jack states that “[w]hile I was quite a boy, and Tom too, we would often go to the Methodist meetings.—Calvin Peterson was one of the shining lights here; and I have seen some pretty impressive spectacles under his exhortations. That there was a good deal of real devotional feeling, there could be no doubt” (*JE* 298). But there must be *some* doubt, for Jack has just stated that revivalists are often construed as insincere folk. Perhaps in response to such doubt, the reader is immediately treated to an extended depiction of this “devotional feeling,” as Jack shifts from assertion of fact to sensory impressionism. “A New York revival meeting!” Jack says fervor; “How strongly the impression remains upon me of one of these!” (*JE* 298). Something about the impressibility of Jack’s feelings is tangible, shareable, made distinct by their material sensations. Though the novella is

already told in retrospect (with the narrator's "now" sited just after the story's actions), the reader is taken further back than recent memory, to Jack's teenaged years, to relive his sensations more directly: "It was an agreeable autumn night, neither hot nor chilly. The windows of the church were partially open," he says of the Methodist church (*JE* 298). Jack does not recall the building's architecture, or recount the name of the church. He does not extend the plot of his paternity-mystery to this chapter. Instead, he hews to sensuous descriptions, lingering on the sensation of being in a fall night that resists description as warm or cool. Such a feeling—of the perfect balance of evening temperature, such that it is hard to give a name to—is a transitional state, a liminal moment between the warmth of early fall and the cold of autumn passing into winter. Whitman is particularizing here, keying to the little non-normative details, those familiar unfamiliarities, like the windows' being half-open, that put the reader in the scene with more immediacy.

In the next paragraph, he goes a step further by switching briefly to second person, and present tense. "You enter the door," he says,

scanned sharply by a man who held the knob inside; you had felt his pressure as you opened the door, for he admitted no one quickly and gave you a solemn and satisfied stare, from head to foot. Perhaps he would, by signs, direct you to some part nearer the altar where you could find a seat by crowding closely. (*JE* 298)

This is not the "you" of apostrophe, which is used severally throughout *Jack Engle*, usually as the narrator memorializes a character who is dead or absent: for example, "The Lord love you, Tom Peterson, wherever you are this day!" (*JE* 302). No; this "you"

invokes the reader, puts her within another physical moment of liminality, caught in the act of opening a door. Like the evening air that is neither hot nor cold, but both, or neither, this moment is not an illustration of some repeated act, generalized; instead, it captures a single liminal instant.

The actor, Jack (inhabited in turn by the reader) even shifts to past-perfect tense for a half a sentence: “You enter at the door, scanned sharply by a man who held the knob inside; you *had felt* his pressure as you opened the door, for he admitted no one quickly and gave you a solemn and satisfied stare, from head to foot” (*JE* 298, emphasis mine). In shifting from past tense to the present, particular instant—“You enter at the door”—and then immediately to a momentary pluperfect—“you had felt his pressure as you opened the door”—enacts a brief moment of finding oneself *in medias res*, a confusion not unlike being arrested by a glance. This memory within a memory describes a sensory layering that emphasizes the impressibility, even indelibility, of feeling, even a feeling so vanishingly fleeting. This dynamic—concreteness and ephemerality—is confirmed further by the following sentence, with its conditional verb: “Perhaps he would, by signs, direct you to some part nearer the altar where you could find a seat by crowding closely” (*JE* 298). But it is a moment at the door—in which, hand on the knob, Jack is arrested in coming face to face with another man—that suggests that this chapter is more than a mere portrait of revivalism. It is a crossing of a threshold, into a realm of sincerity and self-honesty, of loving attention to other men as they are—and in that regard, it reminds me of “Good-Bye My Fancy,” Whitman’s final poem in his 1891-92 “death-bed” edition of *Leaves of Grass*: as the speaker contemplates being separated from his lover in death, he envisions reaching to open the door to oblivion and finding himself,

somehow, face to face with his lover after all: “May-be it is yourself now really ushering me to the true songs, (who knows?)/ May-be it is you the mortal knob really undoing, turning—so now finally,/ Good-bye—and hail! my Fancy.”²⁸ To open a door and—hail!—being arrested by an unexpected man is, for Whitman, an erotic act, a shock of closeness. Jack (and the reader), frozen in the act of opening the door, are left wondering whether the moment will resolve, and doorman will allow entry.

He does. Here the “you” instant passes, the brief spell broken, as subsequent sentences revive the first person and past tense, the voice of the supposed autobiography: “With hands thrown in the air, and head turned upward, I saw Calvin Peterson, his face all wet with perspiration; and it was his voice I heard” (*JE* 298). The voice says: “Come down, O, Lord! O, come down this night! Come right down here, O, Lord!” as Calvin begins to pray (*JE* 298). What follows feels like the chapter’s climactic moment, not because it is a decisive instant re Jack’s experience of the revival meeting, but because it seems to me to elaborate the terms on which sincerity operates in the novella’s discourses: in sentimental embodiments, of course, but also in *Jack Engle*’s erotic rhapsodies. In particular, Calvin’s speech is a moment in which Whitman closes the gap between conventional sentimental embodiment and queer libidinousness via the sexual undertones of the moment, having begun just before, when Jack finds himself arrested, attended, surveyed from top to toe, by the doorman. What is to come next is not necessarily overtly sexual—though to be fair, Calvin, perspiring, is about to beg to be “touched with fire”—so much as layered with carnal meanings that further the potential of sincerity for the novella.

²⁸ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-92), 422.

As he appears before Jack (and the reader), Calvin begins to deliver “a violent, declamatory, passionate appeal to the Creator, who was spoken to in an earnest but familiar style,” with Calvin’s fervent wish being that God’s presence be felt in the room (*JE* 298). His emphases on passion, violence, and presence all further authorize the carnality of the moment, the desire to be “touched” or inhabited. Not only is Calvin “passionate” and “earnest,” but, as Jack immediately reemphasizes, “Calvin’s prayer [was not] without feeling” (*JE* 298). Feeling defines the Calvin’s prayer, or the (ostensible) truth of feeling, since “[m]ost of all,...he wished an indescribable something, which appeared to be the most important requisite in making men what they should be” (*JE* 299). He gives this “something” voice by asking God to “[t]ouch our hearts with fire,” to ““send down thy spirit to be here, and dwell in the midst of us. Thy spirit is what we most need, and having that, we have all.’ &c. &c” (*JE* 299). It is as if Calvin is invoking the need for a purity of passion, one that is literally honest to God. Jack, in his emphasis on Calvin’s earnestness and sincerity in this chapter, seems to share this concern—an interesting departure of sorts, considering that his narratorial tone throughout some of the novella tends toward archness or irony, his voice toward judgment, toward valuations of other characters as, say, “ridiculous,” as when Jack describes his mentor, Wigglesworth as having “a good soul, ridiculous old codger that you were” (*JE* 263). This shift when viewing Calvin signals a change in thematic attentions, though without necessarily deflating the preceding judgments as somehow insincere.

Indeed, as with my second reading/impression of *Jack Engle*, it is tempting to think of the novella as an insincere production, one that—despite its conventional preface

suggesting its basis in reality, and despite its prioritization of empathy and generosity over self-centeredness—wasn't written without some winking acknowledgment of its status as pulp or kitsch. This evaluation gains further significance when taken in light of June Howard's description of the common stigma of sentimentalism as simultaneously shallow and excessive. But, if we acknowledge as much, we must interrogate the source(s) or consequence(s) of the novella's relationship to insincerity and sincerity. Within the circuit of *Jack Engle*'s narrative, leaving aside authorial stance or intention, when and how does this novella elevate sincerity—of emotion, of motive, of feeling and action—over wryness or cynicism, or even alongside them? And why? Chapter 12 is a prime example of a scene built upon the spectacle of sincerity, which culminates in Calvin's prayer, and upon the dynamic between the earnest and arch, the un-self-aware and self-aware. Even as Calvin "struggle[s] violently" in his supplication that their hearts be touched with fire, Jack is already moving out of the moment of attention, out of the moment of sincerity, distancing himself at first from the purity of Calvin's earnestness with an offhand "&c &c": "'Thy spirit is what we most need, and having that, we have all.' &c. &c" (*JE* 299). These etceteras seem to return Jack to a brief instant of ironic detachment, in that they convey a certain impatience with Calvin's rhetoric, an inability to remain attentive to his specific words while faced with his general demeanor, his candor and unselfconsciousness. It is as if he is resisting the affective reach of Calvin's vulnerability. But this detachment does not hold, as Calvin's speech gathers in intensity. If anything, Calvin's fervor overwhelms Jack from here on with affective and carnal rhapsody.

As it does, elements of the figurative begin to filter into Jack's recollection of Calvin and his parishioners, as the latter are compared to a locomotive and trees: "Toward the last of his prayer, Calvin struggled violently; for he had got the steam up, and was under full headway. The other men inside of the altar, and around it, they too swayed their bodies like trees in the wind" (*JE* 299). These figurations give Calvin's presence an implacability, the imposing sense that his ardor is irresistible. Jack seems entirely aware of this dynamic, as he notes again the sincerity of Calvin's prayer: "even if it all were without the formality and literary refinement of some other devotional outpourings—as it came thus fresh and genuine from the heart, why can we not suppose that it was as effective in the estimation of the Deity as even the most polished and elegant supplications?" (*JE* 299). It is as if Calvin is Emerson's religious zealot, mentioned in his essay "Friendship," so sincere that he forces a directness of relation that is both uncomfortable and refreshing:

I knew a man who under a certain religious frenzy cast off...drapery, and omitting all compliment and commonplace, spoke to the conscience of every person he encountered, and that with great insight and beauty. At first he was resisted, and all men agreed he was mad. But persisting—as indeed he could not help doing—for some time in this course, he attained to the advantage of bringing every man of his acquaintance into true relations with him. No man would think of speaking falsely with him, or of putting him off with any chat of markets or reading-rooms. No man would think of speaking falsely with him, or of putting him off with any

chat of markets or reading-rooms. But every man was constrained by so much *sincerity* to the like plain dealing.²⁹

Calvin, a similarly sincere revivalist, dispenses with social pleasantries—dispenses even with any close relationship with his son, Tom—but with the result that he magnetizes audiences with his sincerity. Jack’s attitude toward Calvin is, like Emerson’s, one of a certain helpless fascination with his ability to drop all but “true relations,” even at the risk of seeming half mad. For, in the circuit of Calvin’s influence, it is the *being* that matters more than the seeming. As Emerson adds: “To stand in true relations with men in a false age is worth a fit of insanity, is it not?”³⁰

Calvin’s appeal, his embodiment of sincerity, grows further as Jack witnesses next an outpouring of joyous song from the revivalist and his congregation. It “was the best part of it,” Jack admits, “[f]or they sang with a will; and loved best the wild, almost grotesque tunes that there are so many of in America. What a strange charm there is in the human voice—so far ahead of instruments, to produce certain effects!” (*JE* 300). There is, again, an emphasis on unself-consciousness and abandon—indeed, Jack goes on to remark that the “cultivated ear” might hear discords, but that the overall effect is one of joy and harmony (*JE* 300). It is as if the parishioners’ sincerity harmonizes with Calvin’s in the act of song, finally demands the same of Jack, a pure, if brief, attention to affective union, its beauty and simplicity, without any narratorial overhearing of oneself or judgment of taste.

But more than that, Calvin’s affect—his sweating, beseeching, and physical commanding—demands that “indescribable something” that reads, in the text, like an

²⁹ See Emerson’s essay on “Friendship” in *Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 347, emphasis mine.

³⁰ Emerson, “Friendship,” 347.

authorization of queer desire (*JE* 299). Consider the song: a traditional hymn about the choice between Calvary and Gethsemane, “intended,” Whitman writes, “to describe a contest between the soul’s inclination to religion on the one side and worldly pleasure on the other” (*JE* 300). It is, much like the novella itself, a product of both convention and invention. Whitman likely heard or read it somewhere; he copied it on paper sometime before 1855 (see Figure 1 below). The text that appears in *Jack Engle* is taken in modified form from this manuscript, in which Whitman seems, for unknown reasons, to have fiddled with the wording of the hymn (a traditional Christian song dating to the 1840s if not before).³¹ The words, as Jack recounts them, even so many years after having heard them, are: “O, come my soul, and let us take,/ An evening walk becoming thee,/ But whither dost thou choose, we shall take our course,/ O, to Calvary or Gethsemane// But Calvary is a mountain high,/ ’Tis too difficult a task for me,/ And I have heard there are lions in the way,/ And they lurk on the path to Gethsemane” (*JE* 300).

³¹ Manuscript image taken from the *Walt Whitman Archive*’s Integrated Catalog of Walt Whitman’s Literary Manuscripts. See “A Soul Duet” (Archive ID: tex.00014), image 1 <<http://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/figures/tex.00014.001.jpg>>. The original manuscript may be found in the Walt Whitman Collection of Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, at the University of Texas at Austin.

A Soul Duet
 (a Dialogue between ^{the two parts of the Soul} ~~the two parts of the Soul~~)
 Come I my soul and let us take
 And ~~we~~ ^{evening} walk ~~becaus~~ ^{down} there
 But whither dost thou choose we shall ~~take~~ ^{find} our course
 Up to ~~pleasant~~ ^{pleasant} ~~Waters~~ ^{Waters} or to Calvary
 Up to ~~Calvary~~ ^{Calvary}
 O Calvary is a mountain high like
~~No~~ ^{a dreary road} ~~a task for thee~~ ^{for a youth like me}
 To eat or to drink ^{more} would ~~out~~ ^{out} my taste
 An ~~evening~~ ^{evening} sleep ~~would~~ ^{would} ~~out~~ ^{out} my taste
 I am better ~~than~~ ^{to climb} ~~Mount~~ ^{up the mountain} Calvary.
 * (Bring us verse)
 There is ^{in up} ~~no~~ ^{time} so good time so good as you
 To travel this mountain you can see
 When old age comes on with its great load
 How then can you climb Mountain Cal
 I ~~had~~ ^{rather} have peace and ease ^{life's} ~~case~~
 Than to be ~~afflicted~~ ^{persecuted} ~~thus~~ ^{by} thee
 And I have heard them say ~~there~~ ^{there} are lions in the way
 And they lurk in the mountain Calvary
 There ^{is} ~~is~~ a straight but ^{and} narrow road
 And lions lurk there ~~for~~ ^{for} thee
 But you shall have a guard ^{you} the angel
 Shall ~~conduct~~ ^{protect} ~~you~~ ^{up} ~~over~~ ^{all} Calvary

Figure 1: "A Soul Duet," holograph manuscript archived in the Walt Whitman Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Image from the Walt Whitman Archive online, Archive ID# tex.00014.

Jack's comment: "Such were the two opening verses of this popular old camp-meeting song, which then went on to describe, in a manner worthy of John Bunyan, the struggle in the heart between the loves and lusts of the flesh as opposed to the dictates of duty. These strong, even vulgar, allegories always seize hold of the general feelings; and as for me, I love them yet" (*JE* 300).

What about the hymn pulls at Jack's "general feelings"? And why include this song at all? To verbalize "the struggle in the heart between the loves and lusts of the flesh as opposed to the dictates of duty" is, perhaps, to adequately summarize the primary conflict of *Jack Engle*. But I suspect it does more than that. This song—this scene—this chapter—express in miniature the novella's equation of sincerity with an authorization queer libido. It is a relation that gathers resonance the more it is pursued. The beginning of the hymn, for example—"O, come my soul"—is reminiscent of Whitman's later poem of inscription, in *Two Rivulets*, describing the relation of body to soul. "Come, said my Soul/ Such verses for my Body let us write, (for we are one,)" he insists, adding of this inexhaustible relation that "Ever with pleased smile I may keep on,/ Ever and ever yet the verses owning—as, first, I here and now,/ Signing for Soul and Body, set to them my name."³² The dialogue between body and soul—or, as Whitman says in the revised title of the manuscript above, the "Dialogue between Pleasure and the Soul"—is one that sets soul in seeming opposition to those "loves and lusts of the flesh" before revealing their inseparability (*JE* 300). In Chapter 12 of *Jack Engle*, the moment of song—the chapter's true climax—dramatizes again Jack's liminal sexual status, his hesitation between chastity and carnality, reserve and frankness, passing and being sincere (self-honest),

³² See "Come, Said My Soul," *New York Daily Graphic* (December 25, 1874), later reproduced, with Whitman's signature, on the title page of the 1876 printing of *Leaves of Grass*.

heteronormative relations and the “true relation.” The hymn itself enacts this relation, with its binary choice between Gethsemane (Hell, passion, the physical, the queer) and Calvary (Heaven, abstinence, the metaphysical, the normative)—and to a contemporary reader, the remainder of the hymn (in Whitman’s manuscript) certainly has further resonances, as in the assertion that “’tis a *straight* and narrow road” to Calvary.³³ In any case, the two stanzas of the song do not resolve for the singer which path he will take—nor, interestingly, does Whitman transcribe it fully, with its scared-straight finale in which the speaker says “Alas! I know what to do/ Greatly have you alarmed me/ In sin I’m going on till I fear I am undone/ Lord help me to climb Mount Calvary.”³⁴ Here, in the manuscript Whitman does not fully make use of, is the suggestion of being warned off of pleasure, of denying one’s own identity and needing help in becoming something one is not, of leaving behind the community of pleasure: “Your gay companions ere long will be gone,” Whitman also writes in manuscript, “[s]hort sighted ones could they but see.”³⁵ Thus, even as Jack is drawn closest by Calvin’s magnetism, affected most by his physical presence, he is also being repulsed by the magnitude of his sincerity, of the sincerity—the out-ness—of the many men swaying to Calvin’s song. And indeed, here the tension breaks, and the scene is over. The “strong, even vulgar, allegor[y]” ends, and in the next paragraph Jack describes the congregation leaving, “exhausted” (*JE* 300).

Though this scene is rather short, it’s encoding of queerness into the act of sincerity has a surprisingly long reach within the narrative of the novella. Consider that Jack follows his admission of exhaustion with a note that such revivals were quite

³³ See Whitman’s “A Soul Duet” manuscript in Figure 1, as well as at the *Walt Whitman Archive* online, Archive ID# tex.00014.

³⁴ Whitman, “A Soul Duet” manuscript.

³⁵ Whitman, “A Soul Duet” manuscript.

formative for him and his friend: “Tom Peterson and myself, boys of fifteen and sixteen years, used to go of a Sunday evening, and sometimes during the week, to these assemblages” (*JE* 300-301). Yet he adds, as if emphasizing that the sincerity of these meetings did not take, that “[s]ince we were grown up, however, both Tom and I were more delicate about going; for Tom had a very natural idea that his father did not make any great accessions to his dignity by his conduct at these revivals” (*JE* 301). In other words, being open about his passions makes the father, Calvin, less dignified than the son, with his ironic distance and self-denial. Jack refuses to be penetrated by it all—and I use that word deliberately; it is Whitman’s word for letting in sincerity, since later in the same chapter notes of Wigglesworth (now a Methodist convert thanks to these revivals) that he evinced a “religious fever which had now altogether penetrated him” (*JE* 301). Instead, Jack seems suspended throughout the book in what José Esteban Muñoz has called “disidentificatory identity performances.”³⁶ If identifying means accepting normative or majoritarian mores, and counter-identifying involves rejecting them, disidentifying, for Muñoz, is identifying both for and against society (or neither for nor against). Disidentification is thus both resistance and conformism, a “strategy of resistance or survival” in which the subject maintains a liminality that neither confirms nor denies.³⁷ This concept, of the unchaining of identification from mimesis, can be traced back to Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, in which she specifies that “to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identifying *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are...in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation,

³⁶ See Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 7.

³⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.

diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal.”³⁸ In *Jack Engle*, these tensions—Jack’s identification both with and against sincerity, with and against revivalism, with and against queer affect—may be felt throughout the book as a pervading disidentification with normative “loves and lusts of the flesh.”

There is, for example, Jack’s early description of himself in Chapter 1, in which, besides enumerating his own manly measurements, he notes that he “looks mighty sharp at the girls as they go home through Nassau street from their work down town” (*JE* 264). This assertion is hardly reflected in the text; not only does Jack avoid ogling any women, but in the one moment when he does peruse (or cruise) those walking the pavement of Broadway, his impressions are of men and boys first, women as an afterthought: “How gay that throng along the walk! Light laughs come from them, and jolly talk—those groups of well-dressed young men—those merry boys returning from school—clerks going home from their labors—and many a form, too, of female grace and elegance” (*JE* 337). There are similar disparities and implicit “disavowals” (to use Sedgwick’s word) that make it hard to read Jack’s female interests as sincere. They are there, of course; they exist within the narrative. But they often cancel one another, as when Jack spends months trying to plant “a burning kiss” on Inez’s lips (*JE* 294), only to reveal barely twenty-five pages later that

My feelings toward the Spaniard could not be called by any means a profound love; at least so it seemed to me. For the only test I could imagine, gave that supposition a denial—I imagined how I should feel if Inez were to leave the city and never return; and, much as I liked the girl, I felt that her departure wouldn’t break my heart. (*JE* 308)

³⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2008), 61.

Similar whiplash occurs in Jack's characterization of his growing affinity for Martha, his second and final female love interest and the woman with whose past his is bound.

Having recounted the revival, and also realized who Martha is, Jack's is immediately from Inez's physicality to Martha's, in particular her "affectionate eyes, and...nimble fingers," her "placid expression, and the goodness of heart, and the willingness to oblige" (*JE* 308). Then, two days later in the story's chronology, the "profound love" he hadn't found with Inez blossoms for Martha in an instant, while he and Martha are detained in a police box during a chase scene:

I had never seen a woman's conduct more admirable; and, from that moment, my attachment—for such a feeling had already taken root on my mind—was colored with an esteem and respect which made it indeed true love. Previously, the sentiment had perhaps been composed more of pity and sympathy for the wrongs which were encompassing her; but the demeanor she exhibited in these incidents, proved her worthy of a more solid regard, and warmer friendship. (*JE* 327)

Compare Jack's diction of "true love" here, his "esteem" of and "solid regard" for a woman and her "warmer friendship," with the way he enthuses over his closest male friend, Tom Peterson, in Tom's belated full "introduction" to the reader:

Tom Peterson was about the cleverest, finest, manliest fellow I ever knew... Tom had all the best qualities of the hero of my childish admiration,...added to which he possessed the cultivation which results from going to school, mixing a good deal with fellows, seeing life as it is to be seen in a great city like New York, and, most of all, from a warm

generous heart, and a disposition to the enjoyment of life. His temper was happy and cheerful; his laugh, when he opened his mouth, and showed those great white teeth, was real music, that you couldn't get from fiddles or pianos. And when he laughed heartily, it was impossible not to think of the sunshine, or something of that sort. Tom was a handsome dog withal, and used to take the feather out of my cap a little too often for my equanimity, in our acquaintance among the girls. But then he was always so good-natured about it, and not a bit vain or greedy, that one couldn't remain angry long[.] All my boyish confidences, and troubles and revenges and speculations, were known to Tom Peterson—I wonder that I haven't introduced him in this writing before. (*JE* 302)

A wonder indeed! The ebullient adjectives and long, rapt physical description, complete with repetitions of “he” and “his” and the name “Tom,” all combine to give the impression of a greater sincerity of affection, and a countervailing love interest. And Tom, in fact, seems also to disidentify in certain similar ways. While the reader is made privy to the fact of “Tom’s intimacy with a lady”—Rebecca, who turns out to be a madame’s daughter—Tom does not return her favors, nor her “unmistakably loving glance[s]” (*JE* 303, 304). He does not reject her precisely; having “found means to inform him of her feelings,” Rebecca discovers, in place of attraction, that “it was not exactly the nature of young Mr. Peterson to pack up his valise and leave in the first boat” (*JE* 306). Yet, as Tom later confides to Jack, there is that “indescribable something” that is missing (*JE* 299):

“As to Rebecca,” [Tom] wound up, “while I cannot feel indifferent to her, still you need not think I am in love. At least not yet.—The woman I love must be ——; but never mind what. The night is late, and the best move we can make is for each to get himself to his virtuous bed.” (*JE* 306)

Whatever Tom’s em-dashes represent is not overtly revealed; this episode is never referred to again. The last we see of Tom’s female love interests—during a sort of summary roll call of characters’ fates in the final chapter—Jack notes that the “pleasant intimacy” between Tom and Rebecca is at an end, and that “[w]hether Mr. Thomas Peterson consoled the excellent and really fine-hearted girl, I cannot aver of my own knowledge; but it was evident that they rapidly became great friends with one another” (*JE* 354, 357). And what of Tom’s relationship with Jack? Here is how Jack describes his eventual marriage to Martha: “It was natural enough,” he writes, “that the love which had its rise in my mind toward the young Quakeress, should take a course usual in such matters,” and after noting that his “attachment was returned,” Jack “forego[es] the infliction of a courtship” on the reader (*JE* 353). He also mentions that his nephew often inquires “whether I will not hurry and make ‘that little playfellow’ for him...whether it is already begun, and will only be satisfied with my direct assertion to that effect” (*JE* 356). (Note that Jack does not actually confirm that the “playfellow”-making has in fact begun.)

By comparison, in the same final roll call Jack insists that “Tom Peterson’s friendship—the noble and always welcome young man!—has not been lost to me by marriage,” and that “Tom finds leisure of a Sunday to come out in the stage to the cottage where we...have settled ourselves, at a little distance from the city—and where we spend

the summer. May your life be sunshiny, Tom Peterson, and the end of it a long while away!” (*JE* 355). Again, Whitman’s choice of diction and syntax is telling. While describing his attachment to Martha, Jack maintains a legalese-like register, in which long clauses and standard phrases take the place of direct assertions—and this from the man who admits to finally having “cut any further connection with the law,” the law whose “eternal procession of chapter ones, title twos, and section threes, have [no] other result than to make my brain revolve like this earth” (*JE* 354, 275). The language of law is, to Jack, a lie. It is “confabulations,” and the lawyer himself “an unprincipled man, with boundless selfishness and avarice” (*JE* 275, 280).

What does this say, that this sort of diction is what defines Jack’s description of heteronormative libidinousness? Whereas his declarations of affection for Tom are so straightforward and full of ecstatic superlatives—he is “the cleverest, finest, manliest fellow I ever knew,” with “all the best qualities”—so direct and vulnerable, so sincere (*JE* 302)? Couched, even, in the revivalist’s language of beseeching and prayer: “The Lord love you, Tom Peterson, wherever you are this day!” (*JE* 302). At the very least, it hints toward a rhetoric of sincerity as encoding queerness, of sincerity as conveying an “indescribable something” between the disidentified, via a “hard” sentimentality among men (*JE* 299). In *Jack Engle*, the sincere connection is affective, physically proximal, made (however briefly) during moments of song, prayer, or rhapsody. It hides nothing, yet conceals by being, paradoxically, something that might be feigned. It is revelatory yet also distancing. Sincerity may attract or repel.

In his lifetime, many critics chose the words “sincere” or “insincere” to describe their perception of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. So did friends. Bayard Taylor, before he

changed his mind about Whitman's poetry, wrote him to thank him for his sincerity, equating it with an unflinching carnality:

I value, above all things, sincerity in literature; hence I am not one of those who overlook your remarkable powers of expression, your broad, vital reverence for humanity, because some things you have said repel them. The age is over-squeamish, and, for my part, I prefer the honest nude to the suggestive half-draped.³⁹

The directness of Whitman's engagement with libidinousness was often reflected in these critical terms, as in an anonymous editorial in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, praising not only Whitman's "most arresting literature," but also "his manhood, his elemental sincerity, his heroic nudity of ideas."⁴⁰ This is not to suggest that all of Whitman's poetry *is* perfectly sincere, but rather to shed light on the ways in which sincerity, even in its seeming nakedness and freedom, can encode secrecy or enact a form of closeting. I will close with Whitman's own thoughts on "free expression," conveyed to his friend and late-life scribe Horace Traubel: "For myself I have never had any difficulty in deciding what I should say and not say. First of all comes sincerity—frankness, open-mindedness: that is the preliminary: to talk straight out."⁴¹ The sincerity of Emerson comes to mind, Whitman adds, "Emerson, with his clear transparent soul: he hid nothing, kept nothing back, yet was not offensive: the world's antagonism softened to Emerson's sweetness." When Traubel ventures that "[i]t's far better to have a thing rightly said than

³⁹ See letter from Bayard Taylor to Walt Whitman (November 12, 1866), available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*. <<http://whitmanarchive.org/biography/correspondence/tei/loc.00871.html>>

⁴⁰ "A Poet of Democracy," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (October 24, 1910), 10:1.

⁴¹ See Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 3 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 57, available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

softly said,” Whitman “heartily acquiesce[s]”: “Yes, always, always.”⁴² Yet for all his clearness and transparency, Emerson kept secrets, and Whitman too. Indeed, Whitman would tease Traubel for years with what he called his “Great Secret,” which he was never to reveal. Perhaps, in slow reading *Jack Engle* and tracking its depictions of affective relations, it is possible to see in Whitman’s recovered fiction a rhetoric of sincerity that is both secretive and open, “rightly said” *and* “softly said.”

⁴² *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 3:57.

Chapter 2

Whitman's Secret Fiction in Bibliographic Context

Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost.

—“*Continuities*” (1888)

In the autumn of 1850, a newspaper called *The New-Yorker* was set to debut in Manhattan.⁴³ For “six and one-fourth cents per week” subscribers were offered the latest news, plus “a series of Nouvelettes or Stories, of the highest merit, in advance of any other publication.” Perhaps prematurely, it was promoted as “the best Family Paper in the Union.”⁴⁴ As a literary daily, *The New-Yorker* was going to need a steady stream of good fiction to maintain a readership—and indeed, its editor, Carlos D. Stuart, received plenty of mail from writers offering stirring tales at modest prices. One author, a novelist and short-story writer from Brooklyn, sent a letter on October 10 volunteering a particularly wide range of services. Did Stuart, he asks,

have any sort of “opening” in your new enterprise, for services that I could render? I am out of regular employment, and fond of the press—and, if you would be disposed to “try it on,” I should like to have an interview with you, for the purposing of seeing whether we could agree to something. My ideas of salary are very moderate.

Would you like a Story, of some length for your paper?⁴⁵

⁴³ Not to be confused with the now-popular weekly magazine, which was founded in 1925. Stuart's *New-Yorker* (co-edited with William Fairman) was a daily paper, collected each Saturday and augmented with tales under the banner *Weekly New-Yorker*. It folded within a year.

⁴⁴ *The American Advertiser*, 5th ed. (New-York: Prall, Lewis, and Co., 1851), 104.

⁴⁵ Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, 1842-1867, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 38, emphasis in original.

After requesting a reply through the post office, the fiction writer signs off: “Yours, &c Walter Whitman.”

Though he rarely identified as an author of fiction, the fact remains that by the age of thirty, Whitman had published a popular novella and more than twenty well-received—and in some cases, widely republished—short stories and novellas.⁴⁶ In their time, his tales appeared alongside Hawthorne’s, Poe’s, Cooper’s, and Child’s, in some of the premier literary magazines in the United States, including the *Democratic Review*, the *Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine*, the *American Review*, and the *Union Magazine*. Counting reprints, Whitman’s tales saw publication in more than two hundred periodicals across the country. Even his temperance novella, *Franklin Evans* (1842), an early effort he would later detest, sold 20,000 copies—making it the bestselling literary creation of his lifetime.⁴⁷ Whitman’s years of engagement with fiction, and his popular and commercial successes as a writer of stories, are enough to make one wonder, as Stephanie M. Blalock does, “why and how Whitman left fiction writing to pursue poetry.”⁴⁸

It is a deceptively simple question. There is the instinct to point to *Leaves of Grass* as the full and final answer, to see it as a creative work that could only have come from the pencil of a committed poet. By this logic, Whitman put away fiction because he “had” to. It is tempting to think so. Indeed, Whitman is now so deeply dyed in the wool of American culture that it is difficult *not* to think so. How else to explain his shift from

⁴⁶ For an exhaustive listing of these reprints, see Stephanie M. Blalock’s “Bibliography of Walt Whitman’s Short Fiction in Periodicals,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 30.4 (Summer 2013), 181-250. The bibliography is also available, in full (and regularly updated), on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org).

⁴⁷ The statistics quoted here originate in Blalock’s “Walt Whitman’s Early Fiction in Periodicals: Over 250 Newly Discovered Reprints,” *WWQR* 30.4 (Summer 2013), 171-180.

⁴⁸ Blalock, “Walt Whitman’s Early Fiction,” 179.

rather conventional newspaper poetry in the 1840s, to a revolutionary new prose-poetics, with free-verse effusions like “Blood-Money” (1850), “Resurgemus” (1850), and, eventually, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)? Surely something must have gotten left in the dust, and critics from Edgar Lee Masters to Paul Zweig have long assumed that that something was Whitman’s fiction. According to them, Whitman was no good at fiction-writing—or, at the very least, it was insufficient for his expressive needs. After all, even poetry, Whitman writes, “can merely hint, or remind, often very indirectly, or at distant removes. Aught of real perfection, or the solution of any deep problem, or any completed statement of the moral, the true, the beautiful, eludes the greatest, deftest poet—flies away like an always uncaught bird.”⁴⁹ The fiction-writer, presumably, is left even more birdless.

While tidy, such reasoning is prey to what Henri Bergson calls “illusions of retrospective determinism,” the fallacy that because something happened, under the circumstances it had to happen.⁵⁰ Further, it is simply too easy to underestimate the breadth of Whitman’s literary experimentation in fiction, and to downplay the extent to which his fictions inform his poetic development. It always has been. Still, the fact remains: *Leaves of Grass* did not have to be, and came close enough not to being, poetry. In Whitman’s notebooks pre-dating *Leaves of Grass*, we read the thoughts not of a decided poet but a young man in flux, an artist in search of the right artistic mode. How does one “personify the general objects of the creation and give them voice,” he writes to himself, “every thing on the most august scale—a leaf of grass, with its equal voice”? In a “Novel?—Work of some sort / Play?— instead of sporadic characters—introduce them

⁴⁹ Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, 2 vols., ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 2:558.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Timothy Garton Ash’s *History of the Present: Essays, Sketches, and Dispatches from Europe in the 1990s* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), xvii.

in large masses, on a far grander scale ... A spiritual novel?"⁵¹ That *Leaves of Grass* might have emerged as fiction or drama is a detail of its inception that tends to go unrecalled.

To make matters worse, it has never been clear what, if any, fiction-writing Whitman may have done during the initial composition of *Leaves*, in the early 1850s.⁵² Both publicly and privately, his silence on the matter was total. Indeed, beyond asserting that newspaper rejections clinched his transition away from prose, Whitman rarely mentioned any supplementary writing he may have done during those years. His late-life interviews are almost perfectly unhelpful in this regard: "I got a bee in my bonnet," he says in a typical example, "and took to the pen. I soon published 'Leaves of Grass.'"⁵³ That is all. Thus, when it comes to relating Whitman's fiction-writing to the development of *Leaves of Grass*, scholars have always been at a handicap. Traditionally, fiction and lyric poetry are designated as two nearly discrete phases of the poet's life, with little in the way of simultaneity. However, new bibliographic evidence complicates this view of Whitman's career.

During the three or so years spent composing the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the poet wrote a great deal of fiction, and not merely fragmentary story drafts here and

⁵¹ See Whitman's "med Cophosis" notebook (ca. 1852-1854) in *Daybooks and Notebooks*, 3 vols., ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 3:775. Also available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

⁵² Until now, Whitman was thought to have published his last story—titled "The Shadow and the Light of a Young Man's Soul"—in 1848. A moralistic tale of a country teacher, the story appeared in the June issue of the *Union Magazine of Literature and Art*. When collecting *The Early Poems and the Fiction* of Whitman, editor Thomas L. Brasher suggested that "other of Whitman's tales may later be discovered," but he warned that "the odds are against a tale being first published after 1848." See Walt Whitman, *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, ed. Thomas L. Brasher (New York: New York University Press, 1963), xv, xvii.

⁵³ See the interview "A Visit to Walt Whitman," published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (July 11, 1886), 10. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

there.⁵⁴ Whitman wrote novels, too. The first, that “Story of some length” he offered to Stuart, is known as *The Sleepwalker* (1850), a book Whitman loosely adapted from *The Childhood of King Erik Menved* (1828, trans. 1846), a long and somewhat repetitive historical romance by Danish novelist B. S. Ingemann. Now lost, *The Sleepwalker* was almost certainly a completed novel, as Whitman’s own letters attest. Before offering it to Stuart, he had pitched it to the editors of the New York *Sun*, estimating that the book “would make about 65 leaded short columns”—that is, would fill three full newspaper columns a day for twenty-two days. Whitman thought his adaptation “most interesting, romantic, and full of incident,” but evidently the *Sun*’s editors did not agree.⁵⁵ They declined to publish the novel, and Stuart seems to have passed on it as well.

True to what we know of him in the 1850s, Whitman did not give up but began again. By this time, starting another novel must have felt fairly routine to Whitman; besides *Franklin Evans* and *The Sleepwalker*, he had begun, and evidently abandoned, two additional novels in the mid-1840s, “The Madman” (1843) and “The Fireman’s Dream” (1844).⁵⁶ From his years as a journalist, he had become rather adept at whipping up “something *piquant*, and something solid, and something sentimental, and something humorous—and all dished up in ‘our own peculiar way’.”⁵⁷ Evidently, sentimental plots

⁵⁴ Several survive today in manuscript, each named for the leading words of its first page. See, for example, “Of a summer evening,” “distinctness every syllable,” and “This singular young man,” in Whitman’s *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols., ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 1:46-52; hereafter abbreviated as *NUPM*. Currently, these handwritten manuscripts are housed in Duke University’s Trent Collection of Whitmaniana.

⁵⁵ For quotes, see William White’s “Whitman’s First ‘Literary’ Letter,” *American Literature* 35.1 (March 1963), 84.

⁵⁶ The latter tale was only discovered in 1982, under the full title “The Fireman’s Dream: With the Story of His Strange Companion, A Tale of Fantasie.” For the complete text, plus commentary from its discoverer, Herbert Bergman, see “A Hitherto Unknown Whitman Story and a Possible Early Poem,” in the *Walt Whitman Review* 28 (1982), 3-15.

⁵⁷ Whitman promises as much to the readers of the *New York Aurora*, for which he’d become editor in 1842. Quoted in *The Journalism*, Volume 1, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J.

came naturally to him. In the handful that survive (penciled into a handmade red notebook), lovers reunite, sinners redeem themselves, and unrepentant thieves and murderers come to ironic ends.⁵⁸ They are just the sorts of moralistic, briskly straightforward plots he'd once made a good living on. For example:

a schoolmaster ^while intoxicated, was married to a woman, by certain persons to cover their own guilt.

Money (bills) taken from a person who was down (died) of the smallpox, carried the contagion; and those who took it died of the same dis.— . . .

Introduce a character (pick-pocket—bad) who goes to California in haste, to escape detection and punishment for crime—After a short while they receive a letter—or read in a newspaper—an account of his being hung⁵⁹

None of these fragments has any known connection to published material. The same, however, can no longer be said of the red notebook's last and longest plot. In its entirety, it reads as follows:

Introduce Jack's friends—two or three—

Recchia (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 105; as well as David S. Reynolds' *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 98. Italics in original.

⁵⁸ This notebook is traditionally titled "a schoolmaster," after its first words; for convenience I refer to it here as Whitman's red notebook, for its distinctive handmade covers. After the poet's death, it was collected by Thomas Biggs Harned, one of Whitman's friends and literary executors, and later donated to the Library of Congress. Today, a full transcription of the notebook, complete with page images, is available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. Considering the publication date of the novella discussed in this chapter, this notebook was almost certainly composed in 1852. The dates of its two pasted-in *Tribune* clippings (leaf 3, recto) just precede the first installment of the "new" novella, in one case by only two days; both appeared in the *New York Tribune*, on March 5 and (as noted by Whitman himself) March 12, respectively. For now, they have no clear connection to this or any other text. Perhaps Whitman clipped them as seeds for future story ideas.

⁵⁹ These lines appear on leaf 2, recto and verso, of the red notebook.

An elderly ~~man~~woman comes to the office to secure Covert's services ~~for~~
in behalf of ~~his~~er son, who is arrested for

Martha, is the ward of Covert, inheriting property, so situated as to
require the services of a limb-of-the-law.—(Her ~~mother~~, ^{aunt}, the Old
Quaker lady) is dead— and Martha lives in Covert's house, in the
situation of half servant—

Jack, on going to Covert's house, ^{^one evening} recognizes the like
portrait of the Old Lady—it affects him to tears⁶⁰

Make Wigglesworth

Some remarks about the villainy of lawyers—tell the story of Covert's
^{^father's} swindling, about the house in Johnson st—damn him

Make Wigglesworth tell Jack a good long account of Covert and his
character and villainies

(Covert ~~has licentious feelings toward Martha and wishes to effect a~~
marriage with her—also for the sake of her property

—He is divided in his libidinous feelings between Martha, and Miss
Seligny

⁶⁰ This transposition is set off from the text for clarity.

—The main hinge of the story will be Covert's determination to embezzle Martha's property—by means of withholding deeds, wills documents, &c &c—and Jack Engle, who early discovers that intention—being pervaded by a determination ~~th~~ to foil him—

With this view, he applies himself with zeal to study law, and watches with great sharpness—

The story of Martha ~~shall be~~ is that her ~~father~~ ^{^Uncle}, wealthy ^{^who had} ^{adopted her} a fine hearted man, (but possessed of a frightfully passionate temper,)—under the influence of his passion, commits homicide—(the victim is Jack's father)—He is arrested the shock is too much for him—while in prison,—he ~~divides his~~ makes a will,

dividing his property equally between Martha and the offspring of his victim— or the latter failing, it was all to go to Martha.—

The widow left Philadelphia, (where these sad events happened,) and came on to New York.—In consequence of the nature of the affair, she gradually withdrew from all her ^{^relations and} former friends, (she was extra

sensitive) and lived with Martha, shut out from the world and

Introduce some scene in a religious revival meeting—

Make a character of a ranting religious exhorter—sincere, but a great fool. Make Wigglesworth “get religion,” through Calvin Peterson

Dont forget Seligny (describe Tom Peterson fine young fellow

Smytthe

Pepperich Ferris⁶¹

If so intricate a plot sounds like the basis of something longer than a mere tale, that is because it is. In 1852, ten years after the publication of *Franklin Evans*, Whitman wrote a short novel based on these notes, titling it (in full) *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography; in Which the Reader Will Find Some Familiar Characters*. It was appeared in six anonymous installments, from March 14 to April 18, in Manhattan’s *Sunday Dispatch* newspaper. Then, it was forgotten. Now, nearly 165 years after its original publication, *Jack Engle* finds its place once more in Whitman’s writings—a recovery that begs the question of how it was lost in the first place.

Unlike *Franklin Evans*, which was reprinted and excerpted several times during the 1840s, as well as mentioned in a literary notice or two, *Jack Engle* received little or no public response.⁶² In fact, the novella seems to have enjoyed no literary afterlife at all—not a reprint, excerpt, literary review, letter to an editor, or listing among rosters of current literature. Even in the *Dispatch* itself, the story was neither promoted nor

⁶¹ NUPM 1:97-99. All dashes and marks are Whitman’s; page breaks have been eliminated. This text may be viewed in full, complete with page images, on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

⁶² For an explanation of the rather complex dissemination of *Franklin Evans* during Whitman’s lifetime—much of it directed, during the 1840s, by the poet himself—see Stephanie M. Blalock and Nicole Gray’s “Introduction to *Franklin Evans* and ‘Fortunes of a Country-Boy,’” available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

commented upon. The reading public's inattention could be blamed, in part, on Whitman's anonymity; as was his practice with other *Dispatch* pieces, he published *Jack Engle* under no byline. His name, had it appeared, would undoubtedly have attracted some attention. Equally relevant, I suspect, are the circumstances of the novella's promotion—or lack thereof. In a literary market already positively flooded with periodical fiction, *Jack Engle* appeared to uncommonly little fanfare. By the time readers of the *Dispatch* got their hands on it, just three literary notices had announced *Jack Engle*, all a single day in advance, all in New York newspapers: the *Tribune*, the *Herald*, and the recently founded *Daily Times*. To those eagle-eyed readers who spotted them, the ads grandly promised “A RICH REVELATION”:

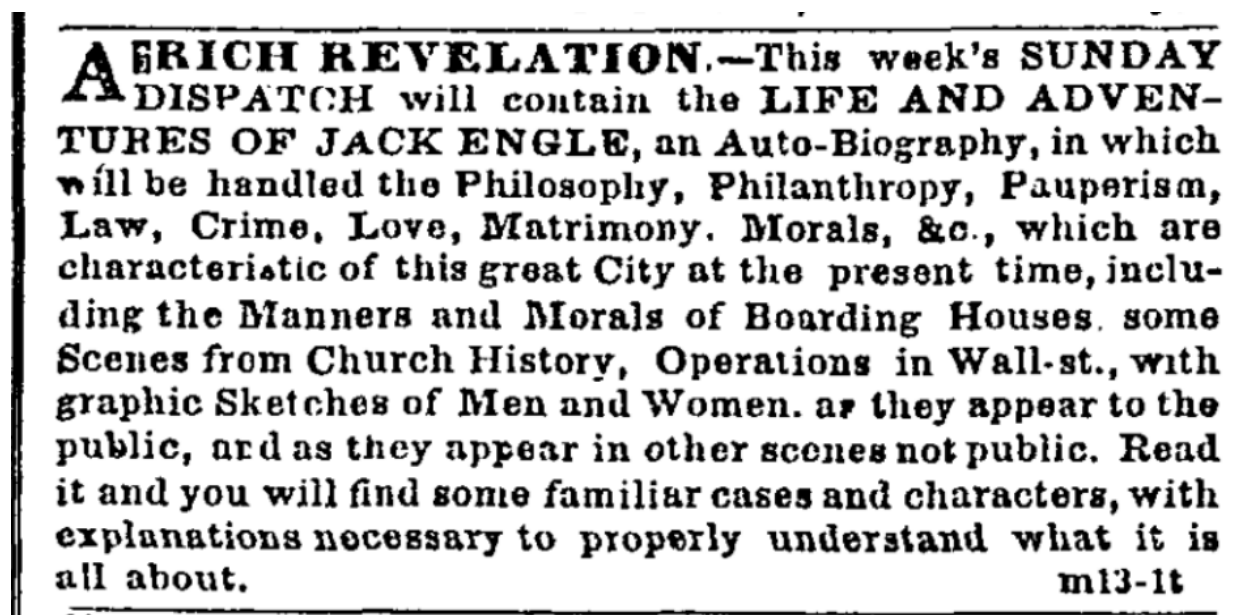


Figure 2: Newspaper notice for Jack Engle, published in the New York Daily Times, March 13, 1852, page 3. Image reproduced with the permission of ProQuest Historical Newspapers. The printer's abbreviation at bottom (m13-1t) means “March 13th, one time.”

Such notices are typical of the *Dispatch*, which rarely promoted its fiction at much greater length. Founded in 1846 by editors Amor J. Williamson and William Burns,

the *Dispatch* advertised itself as “the largest Three Cent Paper published in the United States,” containing “more original matter in one number than some of the bloated vehicles of literature do in one month.”⁶³ This may have been true. As a densely printed literary weekly, the *Dispatch* featured page after page of new tales, memoirs, serialized novels, and travel narratives. That said, like many papers that lived and died in the buzzing newsprint ecosystem of antebellum New York, it was a hardscrabble concern: quickly typeset, cheaply printed, and typo-prone. The *Dispatch*’s budget seems to have only barely extended to advertising. Thus, to its detriment, *Jack Engle* appeared unsigned, practically unheralded, and riddled with typographical errors.

Most detrimental of all, though, Whitman seems to have mentioned his novella to no one, certainly never in extant correspondence or interviews.⁶⁴ His lifelong reticence on the matter left even Whitman’s closest friends, disciples, and literary executors unaware of *Jack Engle*—men who almost certainly would have republished the novella posthumously, had they known about it. In retrospect, this makes some sense. As he committed himself to the profession of poetry, Whitman fashioned his public image to be that of an easygoing poet (rather than some hard-scribbling ex-journalist), a myth that has had an exceedingly powerful effect on Whitman’s subsequent reception. Indeed, its coherence depended on the poet’s elision of several of his major midlife prose efforts—another prime example being “Manly Health and Training” (1858), a prose series lately recovered and published last year in *WWQR*. As with *Jack Engle*, Whitman’s silence effectively buried it.⁶⁵ With the recovery of each new text, scholars may further

⁶³ “The Sunday Dispatch For To-Morrow” [classified ad], *New York Herald* (March 28, 1846), 7.

⁶⁴ It is worth noting that, of Whitman’s correspondence written prior to 1860, very little survives today.

⁶⁵ “Manly Health and Training” may be read in its entirety in *WWQR* 33.3/4 (2016), 184-310. See also Zachary Turpin’s “Introduction to Walt Whitman’s ‘Manly Health and Training,’” 147-183.

reconstruct how he curated the reception of *Leaves of Grass* while cultivating his own celebrity.⁶⁶

Such texts have been coming to light for decades. This is not even the first time a big, anonymous Whitman publication has been unearthed in the *Dispatch*. In 1973, Joseph Jay Rubin discovered “Letters from a Travelling Bachelor,” a lengthy travel-writing series published therein between October 1849 and January 1850.⁶⁷ More recently, scholars have found that Whitman submitted a number of shorter pieces to the *Dispatch*, too. In 2015, for example, Wendy Katz located “An Hour at the Academy of Design,” a piece of art criticism signed “W.W.” and published in the newspaper on April 25, 1852, just one week after the conclusion of *Jack Engle*.⁶⁸ Collectively, these covert publications prove that the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was just one of several literary outlets Whitman experimented with in the early 1850s. It is certainly possible—even probable, given how quickly Whitman could write—that there is more fiction left to find.

The story of *Jack Engle* will seem both vaguely familiar and exceedingly strange to readers, I imagine. Formally, it is a short novel (or long tale) of about 36,000 words, a story of coincidence, adventure, and the incompatibility of love and greed.⁶⁹ Though formulaic at times (like many of Whitman’s earlier fictions), *Jack Engle* is also beautifully lyrical, occasionally hilarious, and peopled throughout with charmingly eccentric characters. It is some of the better fiction Whitman produced. Readers familiar with *David Copperfield* or *Bleak House* will recognize much that is Dickensian in it;

⁶⁶ For more on this subject, see David Haven Blake’s excellent study, *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ These letters may be viewed online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*. To learn more about their rediscovery, see Rubin’s *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), 311-354.

⁶⁸ See Katz’s “Previously Undocumented Art Criticism by Walt Whitman” in *WWQR* 32 (2015), 215-229.

⁶⁹ For comparison, *Franklin Evans* runs to about 50,000 words as originally published. “Arrow-Tip” (later revised and republished as “The Half-Breed”) was formerly thought to be Whitman’s next-longest work of fiction; it is roughly 16,000 words in length.

indeed, *Jack Engle* was likely directly influenced by Dickens' novels. Not only was *Bleak House* published the same month, but also, much later, Whitman would admit to feeling "great admiration" for Dickens, "very great: I acknowledge him without question: he will live."⁷⁰ However, the novella is perhaps even more indebted to sentimentalism, which was easily the most popular genre of the day, thanks to the extraordinary output of writers like Fanny Fern, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Maria Susanna Cummins, and Lydia Sigourney. (And, arguably, Dickens.) The humanistic and reformist elements in sentimental fiction resonated particularly strongly with antebellum readers, as attested by sales figures: Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), for example, firmly established the mass-market appeal of sentimentalism by selling fourteen editions in just two years. Even more impressive was the eventual response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a masterpiece of sentimental reform fiction that would sell millions of copies, becoming the bestselling novel of the nineteenth century. That Whitman chose to write in the sentimental mode is thus hardly a surprise.

As a fiction writer, Whitman himself is probably best categorized as a sentimentalist. The influence of this tradition on his writings has only recently garnered much attention, probably due, as Mary Louise Kete has suggested, to the general critical underemphasis of Whitman's fiction. Regardless, his stories nearly always foreground "sentimental topoi," which Kete notes include "death, broken families, childhood innocence, and transcendent love"—to which I would add themes like bodily suffering,

⁷⁰ *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2 (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), 553, hereafter referred to as *WWWC*. Though Whitman never met Dickens, he wrote about him as early as 1842, shortly after Boz's first voyage to the US, and may even have helped contribute to a forged Dickens letter disparaging American greed. For more, see Martin T. Buinicki's "'Boz's Opinions of Us': Whitman, Dickens, and the Forged Letter" in *WWQR* 21.1 (2003), 35-38.

empathy, and social reform.⁷¹ In Whitman's fiction, such themes yield character resolutions that are almost invariably neat: the guilty are punished, the greedy impoverished, the innocent or repentant redeemed, and the parted reunited by coincidence. *Jack Engle* rarely veers from these well-polished tracks, though when it does the detours can be quite surprising.

As the story's plucky orphan and protagonist-narrator, Jack recounts his early life as one of hardship: "You have doubtless," he writes,

supposing you to have lived in or ever visited New-York, seen there many a little vagabond, in dirty tatters and shirtless. They generally wander along in men's boots, picked up somewhere, whose disproportionate size makes it necessary for them to keep their feet sliding along, without lifting from the ground. The shuffling movement thus acquired sometimes sticks to them through life.⁷²

The reader is given to understand that Jack would be shuffling even now, had his life not been relieved by the generosity of others. Those kindest to him are the poor (shopkeepers,

⁷¹ See Kete's "Sentimentality," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, 626. For critical engagements with Whitman's sentimentality, Kete recommends Michael Lasser's "Sex and Sentimentality in Whitman's Poetry," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 43 (1966), 94-97; and M. Jimmie Killingsworth's more recent "Sentimentality and Homosexuality in Whitman's 'Calamus' Poems," *ESQ* 29 (1983), 144-153; to which I would add Kete's own *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Other in-depth discussions include Michael Moon's "Rendering the Text and the Body Fluid: The Cases of 'The Child's Champion' and the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*," in his *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 26-58; Glenn Hendler's "Bloated Bodies and Sober Sentiments: Masculinity in 1840s Temperance Narratives," in *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 125-148, later integrated into his *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Michael Milner's "The Fear Passing the Love of Women: Sodomy and Male Sentimental Citizenship in the Antebellum City," *Arizona Quarterly* 58.2 (2002), 19-52; Adam C. Bradford's *Communities of Death: Whitman, Poe, and the American Culture of Mourning* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2014); and Jason Stacy's "Washington's Tears: Sentimental Anecdote and Walt Whitman's Battle of Long Island," *WWQR* 27.4 (2010), 213-226.

⁷² "Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography; in Which the Reader Will Find Some Familiar Characters," *Sunday Dispatch* 7.16 (March 14, 1852), [1].

clerks, office boys, and fellow orphans) or marginalized (dancers, madames, gambling house owners). As in Dickens, Jack's adoption is a key episode, one that will propel him into the complicated adult world of employment, crime, and romance. His entry into the study of law provides the necessary conflict: true to Whitman's plot notes, Jack's employer, the aptly named Mr. Covert, is gradually revealed to be an unrepentant villain, scheming after the inheritance of his ward—that is, his adopted daughter—Martha. With the help of a merry band of friends, Jack sets out to save Martha, whose past he finds intriguingly bound up with his own. I will leave the remainder of the novella, and its many pleasures and peccadilloes, to the reader.

The tale of Jack's maturity, of his "life and adventures," anticipates a genre that American writers like Horatio Alger, Jr., would later push to its apotheosis: the rags-to-riches story—or anyway, "rags to respectability," to borrow a phrase from Alger scholar Gary Scharnhorst and editor Carl Bode.⁷³ Like Alger's dozens and dozens of novels about impoverished ragamuffins, Jack Engle tells the tale of an orphan whose "luck and pluck" lift him from poverty and land him in love.⁷⁴ However, Jack earns respectability less by a good work ethic or acts of virtue than by his sincere empathy with the poor and downtrodden. Generosity—of spirit and specie—strongly divides the sympathetic characters in the story from the unsympathetic. Whitman leaves little ambiguity as to who is good and who bad: the former are grocers, street-sweepers, clerks, maids, dancers, orphans, and reformed alcoholics; the latter, lawyers, bankers, politicians, and social

⁷³ See Gary Scharnhorst's *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger, Jr.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 83; and Alger's *Ragged Dick and Struggling Upward*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin, 1985), ix.

⁷⁴ *Ragged Dick* is undoubtedly the most famous of these stories, of which Alger wrote nearly one hundred in all. The phrase "luck and pluck" originates in an Alger novel of the same name (1869), which in turn led to an eight-book *Luck and Pluck Series*, with such Darwinian titles as *Sink or Swim* (1870), *Strong and Steady* (1871), *Strive and Succeed* (1872), and *Bound to Rise* (1873).

climbers. Their fates shake out accordingly. For that, this novella may also be classified as social reform fiction.⁷⁵ What it is not, though, is an exemplum of self-reliance. In *Jack Engle*, self-made characters are just as often thieves as they are honest tradespeople. In the scramble to rise beyond poverty, Whitman ranks cooperation and generosity far above hard work. Indeed, work ethic hardly seems to matter at all in *Jack Engle*. The titular character more than once admits to being a loafer, congenitally unsuited for nine-to-five work—an autobiographical detail, to be sure.

Still, *Jack Engle* is hardly the “Auto-Biography” its subtitle promises—or anyway, it is not a very strict one. In a brief preface, Whitman assures the reader that his “narrative is written in the first person; because it was originally jotted down by the principal actor in it, for the entertainment of a valued friend.”⁷⁶ The suggestion of truth is common to many of Whitman’s tales, as well as much moralistic fiction in general. See, for example, his early story “Bervance: or, Father and Son” (1841), which begins with the claim that, “almost incredible as it may seem, there is more truth than fiction in the following story.” In “Revenge and Requital: A Tale of a Murderer Escaped” (1845), another villainous-lawyer tale, Whitman frames the narrative as one of “mainly true incidents (for such they are).”⁷⁷ They are not, of course. The suggestion of truth is doubtless intended to drive home the moral, though one wonders why it is necessary,

⁷⁵ For more on Whitman’s political affiliations with the Hunkers and barnburners, and his related reform journalism, see Jason Stacy’s *Walt Whitman’s Multitudes: Labor Reform and Persona in Whitman’s Journalism and the First Leaves of Grass, 1840-1855* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁷⁶ “Jack Engle,” *Sunday Dispatch* 7.16 (March 14, 1852), [1].

⁷⁷ See *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, 80, 317. Whether the incidents of *Jack Engle* are indeed “mainly true” I take up later in this essay. For Whitman’s most in-depth preface alleging the truth of a tale, see his introduction to “Some Fact Romances” (1845), in *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, 319.

since, as the narrator of *Franklin Evans* notes, “the grandest truths are sometimes plain enough to enter into the minds of children.”⁷⁸

While *Jack Engle* is billed as “mainly true,” Whitman does not claim to be its protagonist, as he had a decade before in *Franklin Evans*: “Reader, I was that youth.”⁷⁹ Instead, he offers the novella as the reminiscences of another, with himself—or the narrator, if there is a difference—acting mainly as editor. “From that narrative,” Whitman adds, with a touch of irony, “although the present is somewhat elaborated, with an unimportant leaving out here, and putting in there, there has been no departure in substance.”⁸⁰ There is an echo here of what Hawthorne, in his “Custom-House” preface, had referred to with irony as “the authenticity of the outline.”⁸¹ Whether or not Whitman’s preface gives his own tale some authenticity, or tinges it with narratorial unreliability—or both—is hard to say.⁸² The problem lies in determining whose tale it is supposed to be, exactly. Whitman’s notebook establishes his authorship of *Jack Engle* beyond any doubt, but his anonymity and the story’s layered voices—including an odd prefatory mention of “sources other than that above”—distance him significantly from any “Auto-Biography.” As in Whitman’s “Bervance,” an unidentified narrator appears only to introduce another voice. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the opening narrator and the author are even meant to be the same person, since the author never declares

⁷⁸ *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, 126.

⁷⁹ Of course, when *Franklin Evans* saw republication in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle and Kings County Democrat*, its updated byline—the pseudonym “J.R.S.”—contradicted this claim.

⁸⁰ “Jack Engle,” *Sunday Dispatch* 7.16 (March 14, 1852), [1].

⁸¹ See Hawthorne’s prefatory sketch, “The Custom-House,” in *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. William Charvat et al., *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 33.

⁸² From the earliest examples onward, novelistic prefaces have tended toward epistemological destabilization. Kevin Dunn examines this long tradition in his *Pretexts of Authority: The Rhetoric of Authorship in the Renaissance Preface* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), as does Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek in *The Social Dimensions of Fiction: On the Rhetoric and Function of Prefacing Novels in the Nineteenth-Century Canadas* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher, 1993).

himself in the first place—*Jack Engle* appeared unsigned, after all. As the narrator implies, this anonymity may be a protective measure against charges of libel. “There will be a sprinkling of our readers,” he concludes, “who will wonder how the deuce such facts, (as they happen to know them) ever got into print.”⁸³ Who those readers of the *Dispatch* were, and what of themselves they might have recognized in the narrative, are questions for future research.

Regardless of how “such facts” might color *Jack Engle*, the broad strokes of the novella are certainly untrue. Whitman was not an orphan, nor was he adopted. It is doubtful that he ever had a serious romantic relationship with a woman, despite his occasional undetailed assertions to the contrary.⁸⁴ And he did not study law, though he briefly clerked for lawyer James B. Clark and son. (Young Walter, who had just dropped out of school, was eleven at the time.) *Jack Engle* is, not to put too fine a point on it, fiction. Even so, it must be admitted that the story incorporates a few recognizable elements of the life of its author, elements that are key to understanding who Whitman was.

⁸³ “Jack Engle,” *Sunday Dispatch* 7.16 (March 14, 1852), [1].

⁸⁴ His most famous assertion was made to scholar John Addington Symonds in 1890. Having hounded Whitman for the better part of two decades about the meaning of the “Calamus” cluster—whether or not, that is, it authorizes sex between men—Whitman finally told him: “Tho’ always unmarried I have had six children—two are dead—One living southern grandchild, fine boy, who writes to me occasionally. Circumstances connected with their benefit and fortune have separated me from intimate relations.” For this quote, see Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price’s “Walt Whitman,” a comprehensive biography of the poet available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. For their part, Folsom and Price call this quote “a lie of grand proportions.” Even Whitman himself, after Symonds’s years of probing, seems to have begun to doubt his own official line on the “meaning” of the “Calamus” cluster: “You know how I hate to be catechised,” he told Horace Traubel, but “Symonds is right no doubt, to ask the questions: I am just as much right if I do not answer them: just as much right if I do answer them. I often say to myself about Calamus—perhaps it means more or less than what I thought myself—means different: perhaps I don’t know what it all means—perhaps never did know. My first instinct about all that Symonds writes is violently reactionary—is strong and brutal for no, no, no. Then the thought intervenes that I maybe do not know all my own meanings: I say to myself: ‘You, too, go away, come back, study your own book—an alien or stranger, study your own book, see what it amounts to’; Sometime or other I will have to write him definitively about Calamus—give him my word for it what I meant or mean it to mean.” (*WWWC* 1:76-77)

Perhaps more than anything, he was a writer defined by place. “I was happy that I lived in this glorious New York,” says Jack Engle, “where, if one goes without activity and enjoyment, it must be his own fault in the main.”⁸⁵ Like Jack, Whitman was first and last a New Yorker—born and raised in Long Island, matured in Brooklyn, and by the 1850s a regular visitor to Manhattan, via the Brooklyn Ferry he would later immortalize in verse. In Whitman’s sole surviving letter from 1852, written to Senator John P. Hale, he says of himself and New York City, that

I know the people. I know well, (for I am practically in New York,) the real heart of this mighty city—the tens of thousands of young men, the mechanics, the writers, &c &c. In all these, under and behind the bosh of the regular politicians, there burns, almost with fierceness, the divine fire which more or less, during all ages, has only waited a chance to leap forth and confound the calculations of tyrants, hunkers, and all their tribe. At this moment, New York is the most radical city in America.⁸⁶

Though Whitman writes to encourage Hale to run for president, he might as well be speaking of himself when he adds that “the souls of the people ever leap and swell to any thing like a great liberal thought or principle, uttered by any well-known personage—and how deeply they love the man that promulges such principles with candor and power.” To Whitman, New York embodied the spirit, beauty, diversity, and flux of America. His identity as a New Yorker, and his attachment to the city as a sort of worldwide democracy in microcosm, inform *Jack Engle* every bit as much as they do *Leaves of Grass*. By 1852, Whitman had already traveled across the Midwest and down the

⁸⁵ “Jack Engle,” *Sunday Dispatch* 7.20 (April 11, 1852), [1].

⁸⁶ Whitman, *Correspondence, 1842-1867*, 40.

Mississippi as far as New Orleans. Yet, while he was captivated by the size and sweep of the Great Plains, he would always be defined by New York: “the beautiful city, the city of hurried and sparkling waters! the city of spires and masts! / The city nested in bays! my city!” (LG1867 258). Among other things, then, *Jack Engle* is a tale of “seeing life as it is to be seen in a great city like New York,” where Whitman would spend more than half his life.⁸⁷

Indeed, other than long stays in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., until he was in his fifties Whitman rarely left New York City and Long Island for more than a few weeks at a time. When he finally moved away for good, in 1873, it was to Camden, New Jersey, where he would live until the end of his life. Camden had been founded as a Quaker town, a ferry point for travelers looking to cross the Delaware River to Philadelphia, and Quakers had always meant a great deal to Whitman. Though not one himself, his maternal grandmother had been a Quaker, so he considered himself “of Quaker stock.”⁸⁸ From childhood, Whitman maintained a lasting interest in the Society of Friends, their happy egalitarianism and lack of dogma. He attended a few Quaker meetings, and at least once heard a speech by the great Quaker orator Elias Hicks—though readers may notice Whitman still has some trouble with the thee’s and thou’s of the Quakers’ characteristic “plain speech.”⁸⁹ That the central antagonist of *Jack Engle*, Mr. Covert, is himself a Quaker is no doubt meant to be ironic. Like Ahab, Herman Melville’s bloodthirsty pacifist, Covert is a walking contradiction—a chaste swindler,

⁸⁷ “Jack Engle,” *Sunday Dispatch* 7.18 (March 28, 1852), [1].

⁸⁸ See “Whitman’s Natal Day,” an interview published in *The North American* (June 1, 1889), 1. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

⁸⁹ For more on Whitman’s complicated relationship to Quakerism, see Mitchell Santine Gould’s “Walt Whitman’s Quaker Paradox,” in *Quaker History* 96.1 (2007), 1-23; and Lawrence Templin’s “The Quaker Influence on Walt Whitman,” in *American Literature* 42.2 (1970), 165-80.

hard-working and respected yet thoroughly underhanded.⁹⁰ He is, in short, a stereotypically evil lawyer.

Beyond the usual reasons, Whitman seems to have had special cause to despise lawyers. When listing as many childhood addresses as he could recall, beside the entry “Johnson st. May 1st 1825”—the place where Whitman had celebrated his fifth birthday—he noted: “Covert the villain” (*NUPM* 1:10). Among his plottings for *Jack Engle*, it will be remembered that Whitman reminds himself to include “some remarks about the villainy of lawyers—tell the story of Covert’s father’s swindling, about the house in Johnson st—damn him.” What happened to Whitman and his family on Johnson Street is still a mystery, but it may be partially explained in *Jack Engle*, Chapter 7. It is here that Jack’s mentor and fellow clerk, Wigglesworth, reveals the unscrupulous ways of their employer. Long ago, he says, Covert and his father had contracted a “poor carpenter” to build a house, all the while reassuring the man that it need not be built on schedule. “Our carpenter was unsuspecting,” the narrator explains, “and he took the matter very easily, until the arrival of the period mentioned in the contract.” When the deadline passes, the Coverts refuse to pay. Inevitably, “the lumber and hardware merchants lev[y] for their bills, on the carpenter’s own little property.”⁹¹ The unnamed carpenter—a housebuilder and head of a sizeable family, like Whitman’s own father—loses everything, his home and savings. Thus, while *Jack Engle* is a work of fiction, this episode may go some way toward explaining what happened to the Whitman family in 1825, and why Walt rarely trusted attorneys thereafter.⁹²

⁹⁰ For what it is worth, Melville’s *Moby-Dick* debuted in the US just four months before *Jack Engle*.

⁹¹ “Jack Engle,” *Sunday Dispatch* 7.17 (March 21, 1852), [1].

⁹² As he would later tell Traubel, “[t]he doctor is certainly better than the lawyer—oh! far better: the lawyer is buried deep in red-taperies, dead phraseologies, antique precedents” (*WWWC* 4:84). Whitman would also

Jack Engle isn't Whitman's first anti-lawyer revenge fantasy. Seven years earlier, in 1845, he had published "Revenge and Requitel," a tale he later collected, with its ending modified, under the title "One Wicked Impulse!" This short parable, which first appeared in the *Democratic Review*, tells of a wicked lawyer named Adam Covert, who—much as detailed in the red notebook—has wards in his care, one of whom he attempts to force into marriage. But here ends any resemblance to the Covert of *Jack Engle*. Adam Covert is no Quaker, nor does he survive particularly long; in "Revenge and Requitel," he is murdered for his villainy within two pages. Even so, due to the similarity between this story and *Jack Engle*, the red notebook has long been associated (incorrectly) with "Revenge and Requitel." However, I doubt the connection is entirely specious; given the parallels between the two antagonists, it is likely that the Covert of "Revenge and Requitel" is an earlier iteration of the one in *Jack Engle*.⁹³

Because *Franklin Evans* features yet another dishonest bank lawyer, who yet again hires the protagonist as a clerk, it is tempting to trace all of Whitman's villainous attorneys back to James B. Clark, the lawyer for whom Whitman clerked at age eleven. Overall, there is very little evidence to support this connection. Hardly anything is known of Clark or his disposition, positive or negative. If anything, Whitman's employment under him seems to have been pleasant; among other things, Clark's son, Edward, introduced young Walter to his first library. In his memoir, *Specimen Days* (1882), the poet attributes to this gesture his lifelong love of books and reading:

marvel: "What case under heaven but in the hands of a cute lawyer may not evidence white black and black white" (*WWWC* 6:127).

⁹³ For this reason, Natalie O'Neal, Nicole Gray, and Kenneth M. Price previously suspected that "this notebook contains notes towards a different, as-yet-undiscovered piece of early fiction." Clearly, their suspicions were well founded. See their editorial note for "a schoolmaster," available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

At about the same time [1829-1830] employ'd as a boy in an office, lawyers', father and two sons, Clarke's, Fulton street, near Orange. I had a nice desk and window-nook to myself; Edward C. kindly help'd me at my handwriting and composition, and, (the signal event of my life up to that time,) subscribed for me to a big circulating library. For a time I now revel'd in romance-reading of all kinds; first, the "Arabian Nights," all the volumes, an amazing treat. Then, with sorties in very many other directions, took in Walter Scott's novels, one after another, and his poetry, (and continue to enjoy novels and poetry to this day.)⁹⁴

These hardly sound like memories of a "villain" and son. While it is possible that Clark's legal profession informs Covert's, for sheer sadism the Covert of Jack Engle might more properly be connected to B.B. Hallock, Whitman's last and strictest schoolmaster.

Hallock—a Quaker, like Covert—taught according to the Lancastrian system, a rather stern teaching method, and made extensive use of corporal punishment. It was his school Whitman left to go to work for Clark. In Whitman's entire life, Hallock is one of the few Quakers he managed to dislike.⁹⁵ Yet, it should be noted that *Jack Engle* features Quakers both good and bad, whereas its lawyers are uniformly detestable.

Beyond whatever they may have done to his family, lawyers represent for Whitman nearly everything that is unhealthful about urban professional life. As he would

⁹⁴ *Prose Works 1892*, 1:13.

⁹⁵ For an overview of Whitman's schooling under Hallock, see Natalie A. Naylor's "Walter Whitman at School: Education and Teaching in the Nineteenth Century," *New York History* 86.1 (2005), 6-27; as well as David S. Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 34-35. For his part, Hallock would later claim to remember Whitman as "a big, good-natured lad, clumsy and slovenly in appearance, but not otherwise remarkable." Of Whitman's eventual fame as a poet and writer, Hallock added, perhaps a little underhandedly, that "[w]e need never be discouraged over anyone." See *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, 2 vols., ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1921), 1:xxvi n9; also quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 34.

later write in his wellness treatise, “Manly Health and Training” (1858), the city’s “shambling professional and genteel persons”—a category into which Whitman lumps lawyers and clerks—are more often than not “pale, feeble, timid, quiet, dyspeptic, and uninteresting generally.”⁹⁶ They are also, as he portrays them, avaricious by nature. By contrast, Whitman depicts men of more physical (and less remunerative) trades as being healthier, happier, kinder. In *Jack Engle*, one of his representative tradesmen is the carpenter: hardworking, undissembling, generous, and not a little Christ-like.

In 1852, Whitman and his father both worked together as carpenters and real-estate developers, turning over a number of properties in Brooklyn. Life in such circumstances was not terribly steady. The two men, along with the rest of the Whitman family, moved often, usually only occupying a house long enough to build the next. Whitman lived in attics for years, rarely with more furniture than a bed, a chair, and a nightstand, the only decoration being prints of Bacchus and Hercules tacked to the wall.⁹⁷ Within the confines of Brooklyn, he was used to this nomadic life, in which he said one “possessed a home only in the sense that a ship possesses one.”⁹⁸ It would be another twenty years before Whitman would own a home he considered his own. Though he had nights to himself, it has generally been assumed that Whitman had little time for prose writing, in part because of his newfound devotion to poetry. He would soon remind himself in a note that “[i]t seems to be quite clear and determined that I should concentrate my powers [on] *Leaves of Grass*—not diverting any of my means, strength,

⁹⁶ “Manly Health and Training,” *WWQR* 33.3/4 (2016), 264.

⁹⁷ This description is based on the recollections of Bronson Alcott, who, with Henry David Thoreau in tow, visited Whitman in his attic in 1856. See Robert D. Richardson, Jr.’s *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 347-348.

⁹⁸ For the quote, see “Walt Whitman in Camden,” in *The Critic* (February 28, 1885), 97. Part of the *Critic*’s “Authors at Home” series, this profile was in fact written by Whitman himself, under the pseudonym “George Selwyn.”

interest to the construction of anything else—of any other book” (*NUPM* 1:329). Other than that, construction of the most literal sort probably occupied the majority of Whitman’s time, plus the strain of operating a bookstore and printing office out of an extension added to his Myrtle Street house.⁹⁹ In his own chronology of the period, Whitman’s succinct recap of the years between “’51 [and] ’53” was that he’d been “occupied in housebuilding in Brooklyn.”¹⁰⁰ That he found the time to generate a novella is a testament to his dedication to writing, and to the speed of his pen.

It may also indicate that he and his family needed whatever extra income they could get. Whitman’s paperwork confirms as much. Among his notes and receipts from this period, collected by Charles E. Feinberg, nearly all of those for 1852 are bills for house-building materials and sundry daily items.¹⁰¹ From them, we can infer a day-to-day existence that was comfortable, if a bit precarious. To develop his properties on Cumberland Street (five of them, as he would later recall),¹⁰² Whitman employed a good deal of outside help, including contractors, woodworkers, framers, masons, and tinsmiths. Not everyone was worth the cost. To one hired carpenter who owed money elsewhere, Whitman paid \$31.65—three weeks’ earnings, plus a small loan. On the back of the promissory note, Whitman records his certainty that “This sucker & Liar won’t pay this bill.”¹⁰³ It is unknown whether the sucker ever did.

⁹⁹ Whitman mentions the extension in an interview titled “A Visit to Walt Whitman,” 10.

¹⁰⁰ Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days & Collect* (Philadelphia: Rees Welsh & Co., 1882-3), 20. Richard Maurice Bucke, a friend and devoted reader, writes similarly of Whitman that in “1851, ’52, ’53, ’54” the poet occupied himself “[c]arpentering—building houses in Brooklyn, and selling them.” See *Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1883), 9. Whitman often looked over Bucke’s writings and may have reviewed this chronology; if so, he apparently kept silent about his novel-writing.

¹⁰¹ For a transcript of one of his jotted memoranda pages, now housed in Duke’s Trent Collection, see *NUPM* 1:100.

¹⁰² “A Visit to Walt Whitman,” 10.

¹⁰³ Charles E. Feinberg, “A Whitman Collector Destroys a Whitman Myth,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 52 (January 1, 1958), 88.

Thus, while solvent, the Whitman family probably did not have much money to spare. Newspaper notices show that Whitman owed bills for advertising in 1852, and several assessment notices seem to have followed him throughout the year.¹⁰⁴ While he later recollected earning “quite a sum” this year, his younger brother George remembered otherwise, recalling how his older brother

got offers of literary work—good offers: and we thought he had chances to make money. Yet he would refuse to do anything except at his own notion—most likely when advised would say: “We won’t talk about that!” or anything else to pass the matter off. [. . .] He never would make concessions for money—always was so. He always had his own way, or took it. There was a great boom in Brooklyn in the early fifties, and he had his chance then, but you know he made nothing of that chance.¹⁰⁵

Certainly Whitman might have done better on the housing market; he later half-joked that “I ought to have stuck to the building of houses and buying real estate. If I had I should be a man of means now. As it is I am only the author of ‘Leaves of Grass.’”¹⁰⁶ But for someone so insistent on his own loaferism, Whitman worked exceedingly hard in 1852. Though first and foremost a “Carpenter & Builder,” as announced by a sign hung from his Cumberland Street house, he was also by turns a real-estate developer, printer, bookseller, freelance journalist, art critic, budding poet (writing the beginnings of a new

¹⁰⁴ For Whitman’s advertising bill, see the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (December 10, 1851), [2]. Throughout 1852, his assessment notices appeared repeatedly in this same paper—for sewage notices, see page 4 for January 23, January 30, and February 6; for a gas and lamp notice, much later, see page 1 for December 24.

¹⁰⁵ *In Re Walt Whitman*, ed. Horace L. Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1893), 33-34. “Quite a sum” comes from the interview “A Visit to Walt Whitman,” 10.

¹⁰⁶ “A Visit to Walt Whitman,” 10.

national epic), and—it is now clear—novelist.¹⁰⁷ “I am large,” Whitman would soon say of himself: “I contain multitudes” (*LG*1855 55).

Jack Engle is as multitudinous as its author. As the latest work of fiction Whitman is known to have published, the novella incorporates elements of nearly every genre of prose Whitman had ever made use of: sentimentalism, sensationalism, adventure fiction, city mystery, reform literature, parables, the picaresque, autobiography (supposedly), suspense fiction, place painting, revenge narrative, didactic moralism, detective fiction, early realist fiction, the essay, journalistic reportage—and I do not doubt that I am leaving something out.¹⁰⁸ Even for Whitman, such playfulness in his fiction is unusual. His shifts in tone and pacing, the revealed conspiracies and the sudden disappearances of secondary characters, sometimes remind me of a pre-modern Thomas Pynchon. Yet, for every chapter of hot pursuit and devilish coincidence, there is another of natural beauty or urban serenity, one that could only have come from the man who was writing *Leaves of Grass* by candlelight. Chapter 19, which momentarily abandons any narrative, is a fine example: Jack, mourning the loss of a friend, spends a tranquil hour among the gravestones of Manhattan’s Trinity Church. As he reads the epitaphs around him (which are real, and survive today), he is reminded of how young his country is—less than a century old—and yet how greatly it has changed in so little time.¹⁰⁹ He wonders whether

¹⁰⁷ Of what he calls “Walter Whitman Jr.’s involvement in Brooklyn real estate development and the influence this had on the production method, themes and style of his subsequent book of poems” (170), Peter J. Riley has written extensively and perceptively. See his “Leaves of Grass and Real Estate,” in *WWQR* 28.4 (2011), 163-187.

¹⁰⁸ For an informative examination of Whitman’s engagements with the many categories of popular fiction, see David S. Reynolds’ “From Periodical Writer to Poet: Whitman’s Journey through Popular Culture,” in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 35-50.

¹⁰⁹ Stephanie Blalock has recently discovered that Whitman directly quotes not only the churchyard epitaphs but also himself. The life of Captain James Lawrence— as inscribed on a monument protected by “a rough pine shed”—first appeared, transcribed in full, in Whitman’s 1846 article “One of the Bold and True” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 18). For *Jack Engle* Whitman borrows directly from his *BDE*

those generations who preceded him might not have been very much the same: “Could it be that coffins, six feet below where I stood, enclosed the ashes of like young men, whose vestments, during life, had engrossed the same anxious care—and schoolboys and beautiful women; for they too were buried here, as well as the aged and infirm.”¹¹⁰ These are what Whitman would later call “the similitudes of the past and those of the future” (LG1856 211). It is a theme common to much of the poetry Whitman was then composing: “What is it, then, between us? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?/ Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not./ I too lived” (LG1856 216-217). Invariably, thoughts of death renew his zest for life, as in “Song of Myself,” where the grass seems to be “the beautiful uncut hair of graves,” a thought that holds no darkness for Whitman: “It seems to me that everything in the light and air ought to be happy; / Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him know he has enough” (LG1855 73). In its moments in the Trinity Churchyard, *Jack Engle* strikes similar notes, and perhaps hints at the geographic origins of some of *Leaves of Grass*’s meditations on mortality.

Jack Engle also displays the breadth of Whitman’s skill as a writer of fiction—abilities that, until recently, few critics have granted the poet. Until the last twenty-five years or so, the common critical view of Whitman’s tales was uniformly negative, with especially uncharitable estimations of his fiction being that it was “pretty terrible” (Henry Seidel Canby), “magazine filler” (Paul Zweig), and “sentimental didacticism . . . in the

transcription, including his own detail about the shed and a parenthetical interjection directing the reader to further inscription “[o]n the opposite side.” Compare Chapter 19 of *Jack Engle* with “One of the Bold and True,” reprinted in *The Journalism, Volume 2*, ed. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 122. Scholars like Blalock have increasingly noted Whitman’s tendency to recycle his own material (or plagiarize others), a dynamic that further underscores the remarkable interplay between his journalism and his fiction.

¹¹⁰ “Jack Engle,” *Sunday Dispatch* 7.20 (April 11, 1852), [1].

worst tradition of American popular literature” (Floyd Stovall). Even Thomas L. Brasher, editor of the authoritative collection of Whitman’s early work, *The Early Poems and the Fiction* (1963), felt that “the plain fact is that Whitman had no talent for fiction.”¹¹¹ For all its faults, *Jack Engle* belies the plainness of such a “fact.” It also suggests the importance of reading more sensitively the interplay between Whitman’s fiction and poetry.

Fortunately, recent reappraisals of Whitman’s tales have begun acknowledging this complex relationship, as well as exploring his fiction’s embodiment of and engagements with social mores.¹¹² Taken together, Whitman’s stories reflect a broader trend of the period, in which critics tasked American literature with establishing a unique and coherent national identity, even as that literature also sought to embody a new era of change and cultural upheaval. Hence, Whitman’s stories contain “his most explicit and

¹¹¹ A kinder estimation comes from Emory Holloway, who writes that “in fiction and other narrative Whitman was rather less successful than he was in the essay or sketch form,” citing Whitman’s tendency toward preaching and propagandizing. For Zweig’s comment, see *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 115; for Brasher’s, *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, xviii. The remainder may be found quoted in William White’s “Walt Whitman’s Short Stories: Some Comments and a Bibliography,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 52 (January 1, 1958), 300-306.

¹¹² By far the most in-depth reappraisal of Whitman’s fiction is Stephanie M. Blalock and Nicole Gray’s “Introduction to Walt Whitman’s Short Fiction,” which is now available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. It is the culmination, however, of twenty years’ worth of sensitive critical readings of Whitman’s fictions, the majority of which focus on Whitman’s temperance novella, *Franklin Evans*. These include Michael Moon’s “Rendering the Text and the Body Fluid: The Cases of ‘The Child’s Champion’ and the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*” (see endnote 29); Michael Warner’s “Whitman Drunk,” an explication of *Franklin Evans*’s rhetoric of addiction, first published in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30-43; Vivian Pollak’s “Why Whitman Gave Up Fiction,” in her book-length study of *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 37-55; Jay Grossman’s “Representing Men,” in his *Reconstituting the American Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 161-206; Thomas C. Gannon’s “Reading Boddo’s Body: Crossing the Borders of Race and Sexuality in Whitman’s ‘Half Breed,’” in *WWQR* 22 (2004), 87-107; Christopher Castiglia and Glenn Hendler’s extensive introduction to their recent critical edition of *Franklin Evans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Blalock’s “Walt Whitman’s Early Fiction in Periodicals” in *WWQR* (2013); Amina Gautier’s “The ‘Creole Episode’: Slavery and Temperance in *Franklin Evans*,” in *Whitman Noir: Black America and the Good Gray Poet*, ed. Ivy Wilson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 32-53; and Blalock and Gray’s illuminating “Introduction to *Franklin Evans* and ‘Fortunes of a Country-Boy’” (2015), available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*. Among Whitman biographies and historical studies, his fiction has received substantial attention in several recent volumes, including in Reynolds’s *Walt Whitman’s America* (1995) and Jerome Loving’s *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

extended treatment of race, [as well as] an engagement with the reform movements that roiled the country,” write Stephanie M. Blalock and Nicole Gray, who add that the stories “express his conflicted engagement with the world around him within a range of existing models.”¹¹³ As these two scholars go on to suggest, the full interplay between Whitman’s mature fiction and embryonic poetics, and the extent to which the fiction anticipates—and, at times, contradicts—the politics and aesthetics of *Leaves of Grass*, have only just begun to be explored.

Those politics are not always as progressive as one might expect. In line with its quick pace and occasional clichés, *Jack Engle* is at times reliant on racist or sexist stereotypes for characterization. In the place of finer-grained development, this prejudiced shorthand risks making caricatures of characters like Inez, the “Spanish dancing girl”; Rebecca Seligny, a wealthy “young Jewess”; or Barney Fox, a semiliterate Irish tradesman and father of seven. While such stereotypes may have been common in certain American discourses of the time, they are far less prevalent in Whitman’s published work. Or anyway, his *signed* work, a distinction that again underscores the license granted Whitman by anonymity. Notably, of his many engagements with race in America, there is a strong distinction between those intended for public readership and those meant for private audiences. This is why, regardless of Whitman’s use of stereotype-as-characterization, readers must question the extent to which Whitman is inhabiting his own sociopolitical views, versus meeting the expectations of his audience. In turn, one might also examine the functions of the novella’s sharp racial and gender divisions, particularly in a narrative that so strongly indicts class divisions and religious

¹¹³ From Blalock and Gray’s “Tales of a ‘Half-grown (angry?) boy’: The Travels and Tribulations of Walt Whitman’s Early Fiction.”

intolerance. And what of the novella's engagement with sexual mores? How can readers square Whitman's exceedingly traditional depictions of chaste, heteronormative man-woman relations in *Jack Engle* with the novella's lengthier, more lingering descriptions of men's beauty and manly magnetism?¹¹⁴ Even if there were space here to explore these issues, I am unsure that I would have many answers.

Such questions are all the more vital given the novella's proximity to the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the poetics of which hinge on themes of universal democracy and equality. In *Leaves*, the poet unbinds not only the binaries of society (of gender, race, class, geography, and sexuality), but of existence (of size, purpose, time, and being). "Births have brought us richness and variety," Whitman would soon write, "And other births will bring us richness and variety. / I do not call one greater and one smaller, / That which fills its period and place is equal to any" (LG1855 49). The leaf of grass, his guiding poetic conceit in "Song of Myself," is not the dross of the earth but "the journeywork of the stars," just as "the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren," and so on (LG1855 34). Aesthetically as well as politically, Whitman's ideal democracy is universal. As he sheds the barriers between himself and others, the poet blurs the distinctions between person and person, even down to the microscopic level, such that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (LG1855 13). Yet, in *Jack Engle*, such distinctions seemingly stand firm. Compared to Whitman's poetry of the period, why is this novella so much more conventional? Does it merely reflect the "familiar characters" of a particular place and time, as its subtitle

¹¹⁴ To this question, Vivian Pollak has already hypothesized that the heteronormative mold is precisely what drove Whitman to quit fiction. Keeping in mind that her work pre-dates the rediscovery of *Jack Engle*, Pollak argues that Whitman "stopped writing fiction when the conflict between his desire to uphold the heterosexual values of middle-class family life and his desire to undermine those values in print could no longer be ignored." See *The Erotic Whitman*, 55.

suggests? Or are its (mostly) normative depictions of society and culture some function of its being fiction, as opposed to a more subjectivized lyric poetry? In short: for Whitman, is there something inherently more conventional about fiction?

It might seem so, at least if we take him at his word that by trading fiction for poetry, and embarking upon *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman “abandon’d the conventional,” leaving out “the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages of Old-World song.”¹¹⁵ However, I doubt that. Contrary to his word, Whitman rarely abandoned anything suddenly—not fiction, and certainly not conventionality. His bonds to literary convention were much stronger than Whitman tended to portray them.¹¹⁶ Probably, the more conventional a work by an otherwise unconventional author, the more seriously we should interrogate his or her relationship to convention—particularly canonical authors who are in large part responsible for shaping their public image and literary legacy. Besides Benjamin Franklin, Whitman is perhaps the *Ur*-example of such a writer in America. Thus, *Jack Engle* is vital not only as a unique literary work, but as an example of the limits of the extent to which an author, however powerful, may influence his or her own legacy. To read *Jack Engle* alongside Whitman’s more self-promoted and -celebrated poetry, and to attend to the resulting tensions between them, is to give visibility to submerged contradictions. One of the deepest conflicts, which I will explore in the next chapter, is Whitman’s dilemma

¹¹⁵ “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” from *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-92), 427.

¹¹⁶ For discussions of the interplay between Whitman’s poetry and the nineteenth century’s more conventional literary forms, see Kenneth Price’s *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Gary Schmidgall’s *Containing Multitudes: Walt Whitman and the British Literary Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Ed Folsom’s “‘Affording the Rising Generation an Adequate Notion’: Walt Whitman in Nineteenth-Century Textbooks, Handbooks, and Anthologies,” in *Studies in the American Renaissance*, ed. Joel Myerson (1991), 345-374. The “long foreground” quote is from Emerson’s letter of greeting to Whitman, printed without consent in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn: Fowler & Wells), 345.

between ethical prudence, on the one hand, and all-embracing democratic ideals, on the other.

Chapter 3

“The Poet of Sin”: Tracing the Arc of Whitman’s Sentimentalist Ethics in *Jack Engle* and
Leaves of Grass

As more and more of Whitman’s previously unknown sentimental fictions come to light, their existence suggests the need for a recalibration of the ways in which we trace the arc of his sentimentalism into and through Whitman’s other major mode of artistic expression, lyric poetry. Given the prominent role played in his fictions by sympathy and sentiment, concepts which had major ethical consequences in nineteenth-century thought, in this chapter I analyze Whitman’s sentimental ethics—in particular, how his fictive engagements with sentimentalist ethics anticipate the ways in which his poetry advances a more radical sentimentalism, in which the reader is encouraged to not only empathize with, but see herself as being literally commingled with, the Other, either sufferer or sinner. In using the term “sin,” I mimic Whitman, whose own usage divests it of some of its theological meaning and ethical normativity, in exchange for connotations rooted in his ethical concept of “prudence”—the sense that all individuals are one, and that any action has unending ramifications in a closed universe. However, while Whitman largely evacuates sin as a social or metaphysical concept by embracing many so-called “immoralities,” he does not manage an outright disbelief in wrongdoing. On the contrary, radical sentimentalist though he is, Whitman largely remains silent on the subject of empathizing with oppressors—slaveholders, murderers, torturers, heckling crowds—since to do so would either belie his apparent disbelief in traditional sin, or encourage readers to empathize with subjugators. To illustrate the tensions at work here, I juxtapose

two adjacent works in Whitman's corpus: what is now his last known major work of fiction, *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*, and his first major lyric effort, the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

As a thematic concern, sin, like the concepts "good and evil," may seem at first a bit too binaristic for Whitman's prolonged attention, but it is in fact one of his most sustained poetic subjects. The difficulty arises, I think, because his moral philosophy in *Leaves of Grass*, such as it is, hinges—like his aesthetic, poetic, and political principles—on holism and interdependence.¹¹⁷ Whitman's general poetic principle is one of union, even at the cost, sometimes, of non-systematicity, or contradiction. For Whitman, the push and pull of existence stems from its unity—the unity of all people with one another, with the nation, and with the universe at large. In his cosmos, every thing is related in some way to every other thing. As the poet would later remark to friend and scribe Horace Traubel, that unity is not only literal, but philosophical as well, since

Leaves of Grass is not intellectual alone (I do not despise the intellectual—far from it: it is not to be despised—has its uses) nor sympathetic alone (though sympathetic enough, too) nor yet vaguely emotional—least of all this. I have always stood in Leaves of Grass for something higher than qualities, particulars. It is atmosphere, unity: it is never to be set down in traits but as a symphony. (*WWWC* 2:373)

In other words, what seems to serve to develop only a poetics or a politics, also feeds back into obscurer developments of science, sexuality, and—perhaps obscurest of all—ethics. The difficulty in recognizing a coherent ethics in *Leaves of Grass* stems not only

¹¹⁷ Probably the best summary of the moral philosophy of Whitman's poetry may be found in the "Ethics" chapter of Roger Asselineau's *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Book* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 78-90.

from Whitman's decades of revisions and reorderings, but also from his holistic approach to concepts (like ethics) often thought of in binaristic terms.

Readers will notice that dualisms seem to make little or no sense to the speaker of *Leaves*: there is no embracing “the half” of something without embracing its complement, without in turn recognizing the two elements as in some way identical. Whitman's speaker does not seem to trade in halves and wholes, goods and bads, Democrats and Whigs, manhood and womanhood, and so on. There is instead a defiant or ecstatic oneness to Whitman's poetic universe, dissolving distinctions and de-normalizing to give everything depicted a lyrical freshness or novelty. As one reviewer noted in 1874, it is “as if the grasp of his finite intellect were the underlying principle that welds things together, harmonizes all discords, annihilates all distinctions of good and evil, of pain and pleasure, of past and future, time and eternity.”¹¹⁸ Such a radical departure from Western literary and moral traditions imbues Whitman's mature poetics with a shocking modernity, even as it harkens back to ancient nondualist worldviews like those of Parmenides or Laozi.

Such worldviews are as common today as they were thousands of years ago, be it in theories of consciousness, existence, language, culture, or truth. That said, nondualist *ethics* are historically far less common; current examples that come to mind are primarily philosophies and literary theories that analyze and deconstruct longstanding, historically contingent power structures. Anyway, I suspect that the relative rarity of nondualist ethics might be explained by ethical philosophy's tendency to normativize. An ethical thinker may or may not seek moral absolutes, nor some “practicable” or “workable” ethic, but—

¹¹⁸ John Charles Earle [unsigned in original], “American Poets [Part 2],” *Dublin Review* (July 1874), 83. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

praxis aside—many of the central questions of moral inquiry encourage binarization, systematization, normativity: *What is a right action, and how can one know it is right? How can one live morally, and what is morality? Are there acceptable levels of immorality? When do ends justify means, and when don't they? How should one tend to treat others?* And so on. Thus, nondualist, or monistic, ethical philosophies are relatively rare.

This rarity may account for why so little has been written explicitly concerning Whitman's ethics, as a primary subject of criticism rather than a consideration arising secondarily from other critical questions, be they new historicist, Marxist, feminist, post-human, and so on. (Such readings of Whitman interrogate the extent to which the poet's life or works contribute to, complicate, or subvert American sociopolitical norms—inherently ethical inquiries—but rarely ask whether Whitman puts forward a literal ethics of his own.) The last major moment for discussions of Whitman's direct engagement with moral philosophy seems to have been the end of the nineteenth century. In the late 1890s, no fewer than four tracts on the poet's ethics appeared in rapid succession, probably prompted by renewed discussion of Whitman's cultural value following his death. The first, by American surgeon and Baconian-Shakespeare theorist Isaac Hull Platt, appeared in 1894 in *The Conservator*, a literary magazine co-founded by Traubel. In it, Platt conceives of Whitman's ethics as primarily aesthetic in character, reducing "to a proposition,... that of universal beauty and good." Acknowledging that *Leaves of Grass* puts forth no unambiguous ethical principle—that is, that Whitman's is an ethics "not of the letter but of the spirit"—Platt concludes that "the true test of the book is this: Has it

helped human souls?”¹¹⁹ A year later, American psychologist and philosopher William James would suggest that it had. In an essay titled (non-rhetorically) “Is Life Worth Living?” James contends that Whitman’s ethics, such as they are, consist merely of the promulgation of optimism—of the disbelief, specifically, “that anything seriously evil can exist.” The philosopher, known for his admiration of the Good Gray Poet, calls “our dear old Walt Whitman’s works...the standing text-book of this kind of optimism: the mere joy of living is so immense in Walt Whitman’s veins that it abolishes the possibility of any other kind of feeling.”¹²⁰ Thus, James contends that while Whitman makes no moral prescriptions about living (a contention with which I disagree), the poet at least discourages existential despair and suicide.

These emphases on what one might call a passive ethics, in which Whitman is said to make no specific ethical claims or promote no system for living, are reflected in other writings of the period. The very next year, for example, Willa Cather would suggest that the Good Gray Poet is in fact “neither good nor bad, any more than are the animals he continually admired and envied.”¹²¹ Here, she refers to Whitman’s suggestion in “Song of Myself” that animals “do not sweat and whine about their condition,/ They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,/ They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,/ Not one is dissatisfied,” and so on (LG1855 34). Cather contends that Whitman’s ethics is a non-judgmental, even hedonistic, one, in which “he accepted the world just as it is and glorified it, the seemly and the unseemly, the good and the bad.” Within that acceptance, she writes, “[t]o be comfortable was to be happy. To be happy

¹¹⁹ Isaac Hull Platt, “Walt Whitman’s Ethics,” *Conservator* 5 (April 1894), 24.

¹²⁰ Both quotes from William James, “Is Life Worth Living?” *International Journal of Ethics* 6 (October 1895), 2-3.

¹²¹ Willa Cather, “The Passing Show,” *Sunday State Journal* (January 19, 1896), sec. 2, 1:3.

was the highest ultimatum.” “He did not,” she adds inaccurately, “realize the existence of a conscience or a responsibility.”¹²²

In twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship, the ethical components of Whitman’s writings are rarely a primary concern. When they are, it has generally been in discussions of Whitman as a mystical theologian. David Kuebrich, for example, in his *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman’s New American Religion*, has argued that in composing the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman had a “unified religious vision” (based on some sort of mystical experience) that he “continued to elaborate...throughout the rest of his life,” making his poems, and his efforts to enlarge and restructure the book, attempts to create a “coherent religious myth.”¹²³ According to Kuebrich, that myth, such as it is, hybridizes theological millennialism with the Lamarckist evolutionary theory of teleological perfectibility. More recently, Juan A. Hererro Brasas has understood *Leaves of Grass* as a similarly religious or “messianic project” (something the poet himself suggests several times in his prefatory remarks). Taking his cue from Kuebrich, Brasas argues that Whitman proposes “a new ethical system” in his poetry, though one “grounded on unsystematic, and somewhat vague, theological notions,” one whose origins he finds in what he calls Whitman’s “weak” mysticism, and one that seems to consist mainly of the poet’s late-life cult of personality.¹²⁴ Though they put forward strong readings of Whitman’s poetry, both Brasas and Kuebrich assign moral “systems” to Whitman that require seemingly endless qualification, making them hard to accept as

¹²² Cather, “The Passing Show,” sec. 2, 1:3. In this regard, Cather’s Whitman sounds a bit like the anti-Nietzsche, given the latter’s disgust at “the moral cow and the plump comfortableness of a good conscience. One has renounced *grand* life when one has renounced war.” That said, Whitman is well aware of the necessity of conscience, as I demonstrate in this chapter.

¹²³ See Kuebrich’s *Minor Prophecy* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), 4.

¹²⁴ See Brasas’ *Walt Whitman’s Mystical Ethics of Comradeship: Homosexuality and the Marginality of Friendship at the Crossroads of Modernity* (Albany: SUNY P, 2010), 3-4.

systems at all. Furthermore, they tend to ignore possible sources of Whitman's rather fluid ethics, such as his interest in Epicurus and the ancient Stoic Epictetus.

All these readings also elide two important points concerning Whitman's ethical stance(s). The first is that the poet only made clear the extent of his ethical commitments later in his career, in the pages of those editions or imprints of *Leaves of Grass* that did not sell especially well; then, in his final versions of *Leaves*, he removed these explanations again. The second and probably more important point is that Whitman, as has been noted, was no systematic philosopher—indeed, he was quite content to entertain paradoxes and irresolvable tensions. They are the stuff of an all-inclusive poetics for an open-armed nation, a nation that is “essentially the greatest poem,” peopled with those who “of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature” (LG1855 iii). Because Whitman so thoroughly embraces contradiction, and invites the multiplicity of a “teeming nation of nations” into his poetry, it can be difficult to pin him to any realizable moral system (LG1855 iii). Just the same, in this chapter I do my best to relate Whitman's moral commitments, in his poetry, to those first established in his fiction.¹²⁵ These commitments are founded on an eighteenth-century ethical tradition known as “moral sentimentalism,” one in which immoral or evil actions are understood as such via emotional response, and via the imaginative attempt at empathy with the suffering of another. This imaginative attempt may in turn be related to ethics established by Epictetus and Epicurus. As a philosophical foundation for *Leaves*, the sentimental tradition—with which Whitman first engages in his fiction—runs counter to his overt

¹²⁵ On the use of *ethical* and *moral* in this chapter: The terms “ethical philosophy” and “moral philosophy” are more or less synonymous, but because the majority of this chapter is concerned with Whitman's notions of inherent right or wrong, as opposed to *codified* right and wrong, I give preference to *moral*, *morals*, and *morality*, if only to minimize confusion.

commitment to cosmic non-judgment, even as it underwrites the ethical notion of “prudence” he developed over his poetic career.

This notion has precedents. By the time Whitman, in the early 1850s, had begun sketching out “prudence” as an ethical position—first in prose, within his famous preface to the first edition of *Leaves* (1855), and later as its own (protean, expanding and contracting) stand-alone poem in subsequent editions: “Poem of the Last Explanation of Prudence,” “Song of Prudence,” etc—the term was already in general philosophical circulation thanks to Emerson’s essay, “Prudence” (1841). In the context of the well-lived life, Emerson defines the concept—“uncontroversially” for the period, according scholar Albert J. Von Frank—as “the art of securing a present well-being.”¹²⁶ While this definition may diverge from more contemporary notions of prudence (as caution or wisdom), it still shares the connotation of everyday worldliness that Emerson meant it to have. For him, prudence was one of the lesser virtues, what he calls a “virtue of the senses,” but one that nevertheless supports all others and without which the remaining virtues may not readily operate.¹²⁷ For Emerson, the prudent person “takes the laws of the world, whereby man’s being is conditioned, as they are, and keeps these laws, that [he] may enjoy their proper good”; thus, the prudent person “respects space and time, climate, want, sleep, the law of polarity, growth, and death.”¹²⁸ As Von Frank notes, prudence may be best understood as Emerson’s “revision of the popular notion of genius” away from the stereotypical “improvidence and eccentricity” of Romanticism’s self-destructive

¹²⁶ For Von Frank’s quote, see his entry on “*Essays: First Series* (1841)” in the *Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999), 112. For Emerson’s definition, see “Prudence,” taken from his *Essays: First Series*, at Emerson Texts online, 2009 <<http://www.emersoncentral.com/prudence.htm>>.

¹²⁷ “Prudence,” Emerson Texts online.

¹²⁸ “Prudence,” Emerson Texts online.

genius.¹²⁹ In the place of such a genius, Emerson envisions the self-reliant man who exercises “diligence and self-command,” who attends to the laws of being, “[b]ecause,” as Von Frank says of Emerson’s ontology, “there is nowhere that law does not penetrate, [meaning] human actions all have value, all have significance.”¹³⁰ It is this last dynamic that prefigures Whitman’s own “prudence,” since his, too, relates the individual action to all actions and all existence, even all futurity.

It is exceedingly likely that Whitman had read “Prudence,” and that Emerson’s own formulation of the term plays into Whitman’s. But Emerson was not the only thinker to use “prudence” to signify attentiveness to what Thoreau calls ethical “discretion.” Indeed, the word itself must have, as Von Frank suggests, already carried some similar connotation, since Thoreau, in his 1840 essay “The Service,” delineates his own definition of “prudence” in a way very similar to Emerson’s, though more explicitly ethical. Referring to what he calls “the brave man,” Thoreau writes that “his discretion give[s] prevalence to his valor. ‘Discretion is the wise man’s soul’ says the poet. His *prudence* may safely go many strides beyond the utmost rashness of the coward; for, while he observes strictly the golden mean, he seems to run through all extremes with impunity.”¹³¹ This is to say that while “the brave person,” Emerson’s genius, should live a healthy and moral life, he or she should not be constrained to actions considered traditionally moral, since such may not reveal the true good. Instead, one must explore many moral ways of living, in order to discover what Thoreau calls the ethical “golden mean”:

¹²⁹ Von Frank, “*Essays: First Series*,” 112.

¹³⁰ The first quote is from “Prudence,” the second from Von Frank’s “*Essays: First Series*,” 112.

¹³¹ Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2001), 9, emphasis mine.

The golden mean, in ethics, as in physics, is the centre of the system, and that about which all revolve; and, though to a distant and plodding planet it be the uttermost extreme, yet one day, when that planet's year is complete, it will be found to be central. They who are alarmed lest Virtue should so far demean herself as to be extremely good, have not yet wholly embraced her, but described only a slight arc of a few seconds about her; and from so small and ill-defined a curvature, you can calculate no centre whatever; but their mean is no better than meanness, nor their medium than mediocrity.¹³²

It may sound contradictory to suggest that “Virtue” might consist of more than merely being “extremely good,” even of being something *other* than traditionally good, but this is what Thoreau suggests. In part, he makes these remarks in favor of “resistance” (violence), a thought he would later revisit in “Slavery in Massachusetts” and “The Last Days of John Brown.” But more generally, Thoreau’s ethical concern here anticipates what will be Whitman’s: the idea that ethical living may not always hew to traditional notions of good and bad. This tension, combined with Emerson’s suggestion that every act has cosmic consequences, goes a good way toward delineating Whitman’s conception of prudence.

This prudence—or “extreme caution,” as he sometimes calls it—is a principle important enough to the philosophy of his poetics that he lingers on it in his 1855 Preface for several pages on end (*LG*1855 ix). After some attempts to define it by opposition—as

¹³² Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, 9. Though he wrote this essay in 1840 and submitted it to *The Dial*, Thoreau would not see it published in his lifetime. Margaret Fuller, editor of *The Dial*, rejected it, possibly for passages like this one, that reject blanket “non-resistance” (what is now called passive resistance, or non-violence) in favor of occasional military action.

not being personal gain, or hospitality—Whitman admits that “[s]till the right explanation remains to be made about prudence” (*LG1855 ix-x*). Here is how he defines it:

All that a person does or thinks is of consequence. Not a move can a man or woman make that affects him or her in a day or a month or any part of the direct lifetime or the hour of death but the same affects him or her onward afterward through the indirect lifetime. The indirect is always as great and real as the direct. The spirit receives from the body just as much as it gives to the body. Not one name of word or deed . . . not of venereal sores or discolorations . . . not the privacy of the onanist . . . not of the putrid veins of gluttons or rumdrinkers . . . not peculation or cunning or betrayal or murder . . . no serpentine poison of those that seduce women . . . not the foolish yielding of women . . . not prostitution . . . not of any depravity of young men . . . not of the attainment of gain by discreditable means . . . not any nastiness of appetite . . . not any harshness of officers to men or judges to prisoners or fathers to sons or sons to fathers or of husbands to wives or bosses to their boys . . . not of greedy looks or malignant wishes . . . nor any of the wiles practised by people upon themselves . . . ever is or ever can be stamped on the programme but it is duly realized and returned, and that returned in further performances . . . and they returned again. Nor can the push of charity or personal force ever be any thing else than the profoundest reason, whether it bring arguments to hand or no. No specification is necessary . . . to add or subtract or divide is in vain. Little or big, learned or unlearned, white or

black, legal or illegal, sick or well, from the first inspiration down the windpipe to the last expiration out of it, all that a male or female does that is vigorous and benevolent and clean is so much sure profit to him or her in the unshakable order of the universe and through the whole scope of it forever. If the savage or felon is wise it is well . . . if the greatest poet or saven is wise it is simply the same . . if the President or chief justice is wise it is the same . . if the young mechanic or farmer is wise it is no more or less . . if the prostitute is wise it is no more nor less. The interest will come round . . all will come round. (*LG1855 x*)

I hesitate to abbreviate this passage because Whitman, over the course of his definition, uses a number of specific cases to illustrate his purpose, in spite of his insistence that “[n]o specification is necessary.” To be prudent, he writes, one must understand that everything one does has effects that have in turn other effects, and so on, outward in ripples, “onward afterward through the indirect lifetime.” As an illustration, he insists that a great number of specific actions—murder, prostitution, drunkenness, self-deceit—have such consequences. There is no exception; “Not one name of word or deed [...] ever is or ever can be stamped on the programme but it is duly realized and returned, and that returned in further performances.” Thus, “prudence” seems, at this early juncture in Whitman’s formulation, rooted in something a bit like the concept of karma, in that all actions are returned upon the actor in some way: “whatever is done or said returns at last to me,” writes Whitman, “[a]nd whatever I do or say I also return” (*LG1855 29*). However, as Roger Asselineau notes, “prudence” on such a cosmic, deep-time-like scale becomes something different than simply looking toward right action, whatever that

might be, and instead more like “disinterested self-sacrifice and love.”¹³³ The trouble with this ethical formulation, however, is that it does not posit a calculus by which one might understand the cosmic import of any given action. That is, if all one’s actions have indefinite ramifications, positive or negative, how is one to decide how to do anything—how to stir one’s coffee, much less treat another person?

The answer, as it turns out, hinges on sentimental identification with the Other, coupled with a radical evacuation of the theological-ethical notion of “sin.” Whitman’s poetic clusters in the 1855 *Leaves*—many of which convey sympathy for prostitutes, masturbators, suicides, and so on—seem at first to contradict his prefatory attempt at a “prudent” ethical stance, an attempt that Whitman would not elaborate on significantly for another two decades. However, they do not undo it so much as they begin to evacuate the concept of “sin,” to unhook it from ethical discussions of right action and wrong action (as Thoreau does in “The Service”), and instead define it as the infliction of degradation—for, as Whitman says, “[w]hoever degrades another degrades me” (LG1855 29). In this way, Whitman can re-approach many so-called “sins”—sex, laziness, atheism, epicureanism, and so on—as perfectly ethical actions, and “sins” themselves as salutary, leaving only the most oppressive or violent acts (like murder and slavery) immoral. This is why, from the very beginning, Whitman describes himself as the “poet of sin.”¹³⁴

¹³³ *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Book* (Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 1999), 82.

¹³⁴ It is little wonder critics have periodically compared Whitman to Nietzsche, given this idea of sin’s being somehow healthy, either for individuals (by gaining them moral perspective) or for the cosmos (by providing an antithesis to good). (Another reason might be the debt both owed to the writings of Emerson, and another their mutual departure from ethics grounded in traditional religion.) Writers like Charles M. Bakewell, Armando Donoso, and Giovanni Papini have all suggested indirect ties between the two thinkers’ lines of ethical or philosophical reasoning. Bakewell, for example, argues that Whitman was “a curious pendant and counterpart to Nietzsche,” and not merely for the symmetry in what he calls their “megalomaniacal conceit” (314). He cites the same passage that Cather had: Nietzsche’s thoughts on the

Scholars used to wonder if Whitman's open-armed poetics negated the possibility of his having any ethical commitments at all. Asselineau, for example: "Can one, indeed, speak of an ethical philosophy in the case of a pantheist who deifies life in its totality, evil included, who attributes to evil the same value as to good and believes it necessary to the becoming of the world?"¹³⁵ The sticking point, as I see it, is not Whitman's commitment to sin, since he expands the word's meaning rather than committing himself to immorality. Instead, I imagine scholars like Asselineau have difficulty seeing an ethics emanating from someone who "deifies life in its totality." The solution, here, is to acknowledge Whitman's comfort with contradiction—and, later, to emphasize that Whitman does *not*, in fact, deify all of life, or all Americans. There are a few, indeed, whose actions fall outside even his rather capacious idea of sin, making them truly immoral, or "imprudent." But first: Whitman's comfort with ethical contradiction.

The heartfelt affirmation of contradiction is a time-honored, if unpopular, point of view. And it makes anything beyond a passive ethics quite difficult to put one's finger on. If, like Whitman's "noiseless patient spider," one senses a connection to the furthest reaches of existence—if one is to experience what Romain Rolland called the "oceanic

"moral cow and the plump comfortableness of a good conscience," as well as his certainty that "[o]ne has renounced *grand* life when one has renounced war" (322). Bakewell's implication is that Whitman anticipates Nietzsche's ethical thesis of humanity's being "beyond good and evil." However, Whitman does not suggest anything of the kind, not least because his definition of "evil" is something different than Nietzsche's. (For Whitman, evil seems to be an Epicurean concept: the existence of suffering.) But further, Whitman does not suggest America is beyond good and evil because it is, and he is, is forever embracing both and neither, accentuating all aspects of reality, however grubby. For more on Donoso, Papini, and other Spanish and Italian responses to Whitman's work, see Carol M. Zapata-Whelan's "Whitman in Spain and Spanish America," and Thomas Sanfilip's "Whitman in Italy," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Walt Whitman*, eds. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹³⁵ Asselineau, *The Creation of a Book*, 78.

feeling”—one must admit to being a creature in whom contradictory impulses roil.¹³⁶ In his poetry, Whitman offers himself as that person:

I am the poet of commonsense and of the demonstrable and of
immortality;
And am not the poet of goodness only I do not decline to be the poet
of
wickedness also. [...]
What blurt is it about virtue and about vice?
Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me I stand indifferent
(LG1855 27-28)

Rather than apathy or anarchy, Whitman’s indifference is something more akin to an acceptance of contradiction, a glorification of it—an acknowledgment, as Asselineau puts it, that “the mere fact of existence implies perfection.”¹³⁷ Indeed, Whitman’s lyric poetry announces his recognition of this seeming perfection: “How beautiful and perfect are the animals! How perfect is my soul!/ How perfect the earth, and the minutest thing upon it!/ What is called good is perfect, and what is called sin is just as perfect” (LG1855 69). Yet statements like this one are misleading: while all these things may be “perfect” in a Zen-like or existential sense, Whitman is making an ethical claim here that he will later come to contradict, when he butts up against the oppression and degradation of war and slavery.

¹³⁶ See Rolland’s letter to Sigmund Freud, dated December 5, 1927, later published in *Un Beau Visage à Tous Sens: Choix de Lettres de Romain Rolland, 1866-1944* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1967), 264-266. For Freud’s interpretation of the idea, see the introduction to his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 11-21.

¹³⁷ *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Book*, 79.

In this regard, the American Civil War would test his optimism. For his part, Whitman seems to maintain his equanimity about evil; even after nursing dying soldiers, he still writes in the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*,

. . . let others ignore what they may,
 I make the poem of evil also, I commemorate that part also,
 I am myself just as much evil as good, and my nation is—and I say there
 is in
 fact no evil,
 (Or if there is I say it is just as important to you, to the land or to me, as
 any thing else.) (LG1867 22)

It is for lines like these that Whitman's poetry was more than once branded immoral. Yet, unfortunately for the reader looking to understand the poet's ethical commitments, Whitman's defense was to instead identify his work as amoral: "The greatest poet," indeed, "does not moralize or make applications of morals," as he writes in the 1855 Preface (LG1855 vi). Of course, there are signposts in his private papers from the 1850s that Whitman is engaging in moral redefinition, rather than amorality: "I am the poet of sin," he writes in a notebook, "For I do not believe in sin."¹³⁸ But generally, in *Leaves*, Whitman promulgates an all-embracing vision of democracy, which requires that the poet must proscribe nothing: "He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing" (LG1855 v). Here, I think, is where readers have been turned away from investigating Whitman's ethics further. But as his fiction reveals, Whitman's ethics in *Leaves* has its own "long foreground" in his engagement with the sentimental genre,

¹³⁸ See the "Talbot Wilson" notebook, leaf 46 verso, available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

wherein he seems to have gradually developed his notion of “prudence” from the moral-sentimental concept of sympathy.

In his tales, Whitman confronts morality more directly and traditionally, often drawing a sharp boundary between moral and immoral characters. There is plenty of crossover between righteousness and wickedness, of course—as Whitman notes in Chapter 12 of *Jack Engle*, many a repulsive character “is like all human specimens, a compound of both good and evil”—but for the most part his narrators judge “as the judge judges.”¹³⁹ Whitman’s fiction is almost invariably moralistic. His most dynamic characters tend to move from evil to good, rather than the other way around. Sinners see the error of their ways, as in his earliest tale, “Death in the School-Room. A Fact” (1841), or they make up for their wrongs, as does the narrator of “Revenge and Requital” (1845). At the very least, they realize the good they might have done, like the brother-killer in “The Angel of Tears” (1842). This Whitman, the fiction writer, is quite a long way from the poet who will say in 1855: “Great is wickedness . . . I find I often admire it just as much as I admire goodness” (*LG*1855 95), who will sympathize with “[t]he suicide [who] sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,”

The opium eater [who] reclines with rigid head and just-opened lips,

The prostitute [who] draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and
pimpled neck,

The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each
other,

(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you) (*LG*1855 17, 22)

¹³⁹ [Walt Whitman], “Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography,” ed. Zachary Turpin, *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 34 (2017), 297, hereafter cited parenthetically as *JE*.

This last parenthetical represents Whitman's ethical mood in his poetry, in which he embraces practically every person or action traditionally thought of as wicked (oppressors and oppression excepted). But in his fiction, there are fewer such embraces. Therein, he is much more traditional in his nearly unilateral indictment of wickedness, invested as he was in a number of social reform movements of the 1840s. The reader rarely has to dig very deep to learn the dangers of drink, venery, corporal punishment, family separation, or murder. An emphasis on virtue is one of the defining elements of Whitman's fiction—perhaps *the* defining element. "Virtue," as he writes in "Lingave's Temptation" (1842), "is ever the sinew of true genius."¹⁴⁰

Yet, for all their moralism, it is important to note that in Whitman's tales virtue is not unerringly rewarded, nor vice always punished. As early as his parable "A Legend of Life and Love" (1842), Whitman may be caught complicating the moral straightforwardness of sentimental fiction, particularly in its position on sin, and how one should approach a life in which sin plays a part. In "A Legend," two brothers reunite after fifty years. One has protected his heart by avoiding all affections, while the other has loved and lost repeatedly. The latter says of his time with his late wife, for example, that, "there came crossings and evils, but we withstood them all, and holding each other by the hand, forgot that such a thing as sorrow remained in the world." Pain, in other words, is essential to life's pleasures, as inseparable from them as evil is from good:

I will not deny but that some in whom I thought virtue was strong, proved cunning hypocrites, and worthy no man's trust. Yet are there many I have known, spotless as far as humanity may be spotless. Thus, to me, life has been alternately dark and fair. Have I lived happy? No, not completely; it

¹⁴⁰ *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, 334.

is never for mortals to be so. But I can lay my hand upon my heart, and thank the Great Master, that the sunshine has been far oftener than the darkness of the clouds. Dear brother, the world has misery—but it is a pleasant world still, and affords much joy to the dwellers!¹⁴¹

Here may be seen the root of Whitman's later poetic engagement with sin. Likewise, it is notable that Whitman suggests that some sin is unavoidable, and not necessarily something one *should* avoid, given that one would have to shut oneself away (like the first brother) in order to sin not at all. Again, one hears echoes of Emerson's prudence (in its rejection of isolation, and attention to healthful living) and Thoreau's (in its complication of the notion of "sin"). Here is where Whitman's sentimental fiction comes into play, in his engagements with sin, since the sentimental tradition similarly questions ethical binarism: What are the origins of conduct and misconduct in childhood? What are the shifting motivations and rationalizations behind the immoral act? Why is there social disagreement over what constitutes goodness? And most importantly, how can a person know what is the moral thing to do? Whitman's answer to this last question is, in fact, sentimentalism.

This term may remind the reader of the literary genre—or perhaps mode—of prose and poetry that reached the height of its popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The etymological similarity is no coincidence. Literary sentimentalism—that is, literature that hinges on “the power of sympathy and its embedding in the practice of domestic reading”—shares elements of the similarly named moral philosophy of sentimentalism, most prominently its foundations in sympathy, a layered and evolving

¹⁴¹ Both quotes are taken from *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, 118-119.

complex of feelings that include pity, concern, and/or personal identification.¹⁴²

Readerships of eighteenth-century Europe responded strongly to “sympathetic” literature, just as it did to sympathetic philosophy, since, as June Howard notes, in both cases

“reading was seen as a way to cultivate improving, morally legitimating emotions.”¹⁴³

Yet scholars since have also pointed to literary sentimentalism as legitimating only certain sociopolitical circles or readerships, as *broadening* the divide between the sympathizer and the object of sympathy. “Object” is the salient word here; Lynn Festa, for example has argued that while “sympathy” can be a radically egalitarian sensation, one that equalizes and dissolves the barriers of personhood, “sentimentalism” is a higher-order practice that affords full personhood only to white Europeans, and that “monitors and seeks to master the sympathetic movement of emotion between individuals and groups of people.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, one of the ethical dangers of sentimentality is its privileging of subject over object, and the consequent extension of the non-European Other only “qualified recognition.” While the reader of the sentimental text may thus feel better, having cathartically purged their emotions, the object of their sympathy has not been relieved in any way by the reading of a book—a dynamic Lauren Berlant has called the hegemonic recourse to “emotional prosthetics,” and one she addresses extensively in her continental trilogy.¹⁴⁵ This difficulty is one that scholars like June Howard have worked to reconcile, but it is also one that moral sentimentalists grappled with three hundred years ago.

¹⁴² June Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?” *ALH* 11.1 (1999), 73.

¹⁴³ Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?”, 71.

¹⁴⁴ See Lynn Festa’s *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 3. For the source of “qualified recognition” in my next sentence, see page 49.

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Can one's feelings be relied upon in a moral situation, and if so, how? Is there a certain primal or reflexive emotional connection between people, one that overwhelms even a position of privilege or distrust? The moral sentimentalists thought so. At its core, moral sentimentalism is a complex of closely related philosophies that ground the basis of moral action on internal feelings, such as conscience, imagination, or sympathy (a feeling now generally, if a bit inaccurately, considered synonymous with "empathy"). The rationales of the most prominent of moral sentimentalists—including Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), David Hume (1711-1776), and Adam Smith (1723-1790)—all share some notion of there being interior feelings or intuitions that correspond to moral or immoral acts or situations. These feelings, it should be noted, are often situated as being natural or inborn, an assumption that ultimately led to rebuttals from other philosophical schools (utilitarianism, for example), as well as popular pejorative estimations of sentimental modes of thought, including literary sentimentalism.

Moral sentimentalism, as Jane Austen formulates it (ironically) in *Sense and Sensibility*, begins with the idea of conscience, the belief that one cannot commit an immoral act without either feeling guilty about it or experiencing it as somehow aesthetically displeasing. When, for example, Austen's character Elinor notes rather sharply that "the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety," Marianne responds that

[o]n the contrary, nothing can be a stronger proof of it, Elinor; for if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible

of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure.¹⁴⁶

While biased (Austen favors “sense,” after all), this characterization of moral sentimentalism—or “sensibility”—does contain its kernel of truth. Moral sentimentalists argue that, in one way or another, the evidence of right action comes not from external sources (like social norms or ethical codes), but from internal feelings—pity, sympathy, doubt, guilt. It is for this reason that the earliest moral sentimentalists are now called “moral sense theorists.” While the emotions are inconstant and subject to temptation, the moral sense was (in eighteenth-century moral thought) typically framed as either somehow objective, or else as helplessly susceptible to kindness. Thus, the moral sentimentalists tend to position the feelings of pity and sympathy as overwhelming their opposites (apathy or hatred), often permanently. This theory of moral sense is reflected in Whitman’s description of the childhood of *Jack Engle*’s eponymous narrator, for example, who recounts of his upbringing that

Whatever seeds of evil and degradation my life in the streets had infused in my character, before I took up my abode with Ephraim Foster, had no chance to grow afterward. Both his wife and himself treated me like a son; and better than many people treat their sons. Kindness choked out all lingering tendencies to mischief within me; and the *sentiment* which just flickered a moment in my mind, when we were in the basement of the Quaker lady’s house, here grew into form and permanence. (*JE* 271-272, emphasis mine)

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The idea here is that the purported moral sense is reflexively attuned to sympathy, whose presence is something of a signpost for morality. The first philosopher to posit such a sense was the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, in his *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699).

To him, all people are born with a moral sense, in contradistinction to Hobbes' ethical egoism. Shaftesbury argues that this sense is a meta-emotion: that is, the moral being not only has feelings—self-interested and otherwise—but also feelings *about* those feelings. These meta-feelings, including both reasoning about one's actions and sensations like guilt or shame, comprise the "moral sense." By Shaftesbury's lights, these higher-order feelings are both instinctive and generally unerring, except in rare cases of long "contrary habit and custom."¹⁴⁷ One's internal, rational approval of one's actions, he concludes, tends not only toward the moral, but also toward the good of all. Shaftesbury's successors, though less optimistic perhaps, would at least agree that morality is based on sentiments.

However, Shaftesbury's closest successor, Francis Hutcheson, disagreed that such a moral sense could be a rational process, since this position would require that morality be somehow externally evident. If the moral sense is a feeling, it is by definition irrational, he argues—or anyway, internally self-evident. What is felt, is somehow *known* to be true. Thus, Hutcheson jettisons all rationalism, concluding that any moral sense must be a reflex, some sensation that arises through no conscious process at all, a knee-jerk response. As an example, in his *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises* (1725), Hutcheson looks to children, who "upon hearing the Storys with which they are commonly entertain'd,"

¹⁴⁷ Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry Into Virtue and Merit*, in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 2 vols., ed. D. Den Uyl (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 2:25.

always passionately interest themselves on that side where Kindness and Humanity are found; and detest the Cruel, the Covetous, the Selfish, or the Treacherous. How strongly do we see their Passions of Joy, Sorrow, Love, and Indignation, mov'd by these moral Representations, even tho there has been no pains taken to give them Ideas of a Deity, of Laws, of a future State, or of the more intricate Tendency of the universal Good to that of each Individual!¹⁴⁸

I suspect the example is flawed, not least because, as a father (like Hutcheson was), I am aware that when told moralistic tales, children do not “always passionately interest themselves on that side where Kindness and Humanity are found”—at least, not without the occasional verbal cue or leading question. And more to the point, by looking to storytelling, Hutcheson risks characterizing morality as a *taught* behavior, not a reflex—a risk of which he seems to have been well aware. Thus, he confronts the begged question: If it is innate, then to what does the child’s “moral sense” respond? In Hutcheson’s formulation of the moral sense, the reaction is to beauty.

Morality, for Hutcheson, has an aesthetic quality—that is, he supposes that moral thoughts or acts have an inherent aesthetic beauty that immoral thoughts or acts lack. From this it does not follow that a moral actor *must* follow her moral sense, but it does provide a basis for the self-evidence of morality. Hutcheson’s aesthetic theory of morality is one that is reflected in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reformist sentimental literature, in which the beauty of good works and the tragedy of suffering were thought to be what moved readers to potentially reform their actions or rethink their position of

¹⁴⁸ Francis, Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises*, ed. W. Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 146-147.

privilege. In the character of Jack Engle, for example, Whitman embodies this very position, when he has the character feel “pity and sympathy for the wrongs which were encompassing” Martha. The tragedy of these wrongs, and the beauty of Martha’s moral action in the face of them, move Jack to help her rather than her immoral adoptive father—and ultimately, to fall in love with her.

It is critical that Jack does not appear to reason through his moral actions; indeed, throughout the majority of the narrative, he is almost bafflingly torn between aiding the innocent Martha and the “sanctimonious satanic” Covert (*JE* 263). The difficulty, it seems, is that reason cannot help him make his moral decision. Rather, it is the excitation of passions, a Humean action. Like Hutcheson, David Hume conceives of morality as being something one cannot reason through. As early as his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), Hume insists that “[m]orals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.”¹⁴⁹ In *Jack Engle*, this excitation comes rather late in the narrative, when Jack has a moment of clarity at a police station, after having helped Martha escape Covert’s home, incriminating papers in tow. “Yes, it was while we were waiting there in that cheerless police room,” Jack says, “that the inspiration first came to me, of a simple way to cut the knot at once; or, at any rate to remove most of the complications, and make the battle between Covert and Martha a decided one” (*JE* 327). That inspiration, for Jack, is his reflexive realization of the beauty of her morality, in his recollection of her ministering, many years before, to an injured friend:

The good lady—ah! How gently she washed that dirty head, while I held
the large basin of half-warm water; how the jagged wound made me

¹⁴⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1978), 457.

almost feel sick, although one who helped bring Billjiggs in, pronounced it not so much after all, and laughed, and said that it was more blood than anything else. How the lady looked around, and, finding nothing else handy, took that famous handkerchief, so large, so fragrant, of such beautiful white linen, and bound up Billjiggs's phrenological developments from the public gaze. Then how the little girl Martha came and neatly tied the knot, with such tender fingers, for fear she might hurt the wound. Even then, did she not exhibit the inward force and strength of her character?—Wouldn't almost any other little girl have been frightened and held back in alarm? (*JE* 328)

Her unselfishness has a beauty so magnetizing that Jack realizes without rational thought his course of action—not only to save Martha, but (in what is surely the book's most whiplash-inducing moment) to marry her. By comparison, Jack finds Mr. Covert's actions uniformly unbeautiful—though it is a bit difficult to believe that Jack had not detected that moral ugliness earlier, given that his mentor, Wigglesworth, had rather straightforwardly described it to him. ("The character of Covert did not take me long to understand," Jack admits a full fifty pages previously. "That he was an unprincipled man, with boundless selfishness and avarice, seemed sure enough" [*JE* 280].) In any case, it is the *aesthetic* experience of morality and immorality that, in Humean fashion, affect what Whitman positions as Jack's reflexive moral sense.

What had nagged at Hume, though, is the difficulty in rigorously connecting the descriptive mode (*I act*) with the prescriptive (*I ought to act*), a dilemma since termed

Hume's "is-ought problem."¹⁵⁰ If morals are reflexive, then on what basis may anyone say what another *ought* to do? (Besides simply suggest they follow their instincts.) On what may one build an ethical system? Hume's answer is that while moral feelings are aesthetic, moral actions and codes must be based on that which exceeds the self, transcends self-pleasure or the experience of beauty. For him, this external connection is grounded in "sympathy," a feeling not just for but *of* another's suffering, one that is today generally termed *empathy*.

It is not until his "second enquiry," *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), that Hume fully fleshes out an empathy-based ethics. While his theory is an aesthetic one, the *mechanism* of morality, as he sees it, is one of sympathy. Thus, though one may reflexively sense the ugliness of suffering, it is the pleasure one gets when *empathizing* with that person that acts as the mechanism of morality. Hume posits these feelings as a sort of naturalized Golden Rule: "When any quality, or character, has a tendency to the good of mankind, we are pleased with it, and approve of it; because it presents the lively idea of pleasure; which idea affects us by sympathy, and is itself a

¹⁵⁰ As he formulates it in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40),

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.

See Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 302.

kind of pleasure.”¹⁵¹ And Hume argues that the sympathy is aggregative—that based on the aesthetics of moral and immoral acts, suffering and oppression, one gradually empathizes with victims over victimizers, associating immoral acts with displeasure, or inferring it from the displeasure of others. However, Hume does not believe in a moral sense. Instead, he operates on the assumption that good is self-evident, else our moral reason would tend toward our own advantage rather than others’. Such self-evidence would explain why, in much sentimental literature, Whitman’s included, generous and unselfish characters tend to have the good returned upon them (as opposed to in realist or naturalist literatures, whose critiques of the unfairness of sociopolitical forces are instantiated in the unavoidable crushing of morally good characters). In *Jack Engle*, examples of this dynamic abound. Jack’s adoptive father Ephraim, for example, is an uncaring but generous shop-owner, yet the evidence of his morality is in his somehow always making ends meet. “[A]lthough the usual sign of ‘No Trust’ hung up over the counter,” Jack recounts, “Ephraim did trust very much—particularly if the family asking indulgence were poor, or the father or mother was sick. Although this resulted several times in bad debts that were no trifle to a man in his sort of business, it was marvellous how in the long run he didn’t really lose” (*JE* 266). Because Ephraim’s actions have “a tendency to the good of mankind,” as Hume suggests, his customers (and Jack) in turn experience “the lively idea of pleasure,” and all in turn tend to follow his moral example.

Yet just as often as it presents positive moral examples, sentimental literature indicts the rashness of the quick, even reflexive, immoral decision. If morality is based on reflex or passion, how is one to prevent oneself, in the heat of the moment, from the irreversible immoral act? In sentimental fiction, such questions—and the indictment they

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imply—are often instantiated in a penitent figure, whose moral self-consciousness and reflection set an example, even as his crime acts as a cautionary tale. The reader is encouraged to reflect, to imagine themselves in the Other’s shoes—a dynamic related most closely to Adam Smith’s formulation of moral sentimentalism.

Another Scottish philosopher and a friend of Hume’s, Smith posits a slightly different ethical mechanism than Hume’s, one that would be highly influential in sentimental discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Rather than a sympathy based on the aesthetics of moral character or acts, or on the passions, Smith’s sentimentalism hinges on what he calls “moral sentiments”—namely, feelings like propriety, (dis)approbation, and empathy,¹⁵² all of them driven (like Whitman’s prudence) by the use of the imagination. According to Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), morality is a careful act of imagination, in which a person must project herself into another’s position, and try to reconcile how *they* apparently feel with how one *imagines* they must feel. The pleasure of these two sensations seeming to coincide is what Smith calls “approbation.” Smith argues that it is this mental effort, of putting oneself in someone else’s shoes, in which moral determinations consist.

In *Jack Engle*, Whitman encourages such Smithian imagination by introducing—late in the novella—the “Narrative of Martha’s Father,” a written confession in which a condemned murderer begs the reader to imagine being in his place, in prison: “Look around you on the beautiful earth, the free air, sky, fields and streets—the people

¹⁵² See Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), III.i.2 & III.ii.3, 100 and 103, hereafter cited parenthetically as *TMS*. In most continental philosophy on this subject, ethicists tend to use the term *sympathy* more or less as we use *empathy* today. Taking a cue from a number of recent writers on this subject, I will stick to using the word *empathy* throughout my discussion, except in quoting historical documents—since today *empathy* denotes a feeling that is more than pity, one that implies some identification with another person, often via shared culture or experience. The shift in terminology dates to the beginning of the era of psychology (circa the late 1890s).

swarming in all directions.—All this is common you say; it is not worth a thought I once supposed thus, like you. But I suppose so no longer” (*JE* 338). Rather than merely pity his plight, Whitman encourages the reader to empathize with the murderer, specifically the ease with which a momentary hotness can lead to rash action. First, Whitman creates a situation that acts as a critique of the Hutchesonian and Humean views by making his character naturally hot-headed, such that his “passions” tend toward immorality, and with no good example from which to follow: “A fiery temper grew up in me from my birth. [...] Although parents cared enough for me to spend money liberally, and give me an almost unlimited indulgence that way, yet they did not furnish me what is most wanted from parents—good example, good counsel and a true home-roof” (*JE* 340). How, from a sentimental perspective, is such a moral actor supposed to avoid immorality, if his natural inclinations are “fiery” enough and his moral examples few enough that he does not seem to experience the Humean pleasure of sympathy with good acts? And indeed, Martha’s father grows up to sympathize with no one, and to act with a “stormy temper,” which tends away from sympathy or the good of all (*JE* 340).

This trajectory culminates in Martha’s father reaching a moral impasse: he employs a workingman whose sarcasm impugns him, relentlessly ratcheting up and up and up. He cannot stop the insults, nor endure them. Rather than try to see the workingman’s side of things, Martha’s father acts on his Hutchesonian passions:

My blood was already afire in my veins; and this maddened me. I hardly remember now with sufficient distinctness what passed. I think I had gone a couple of steps beyond where the man stood; but the fury was too much, then. I turned, made one spring upon him, and, in the rage of my anger

wrenched from his hand the mallet he had been working with, and dealt him a blow directly on top of the head! My arm was unnaturally nerved by an insane ferocity. It was the stroke of death. He fell like a log, and I stood there a murderer. (*JE* 343)

Such moments are not uncommon in sentimental literature, reflecting, I argue, an Smithian emphasis on a moral-sentimental ethics of empathy. In his lack of empathy for the workingman, Martha's father dooms himself—just as, by empathizing *with* Martha's father, the reader is encouraged to see the dangers of the momentary passions, as well as the value of imagining oneself in another's situation. Indeed, it is clear that Martha's father has learned the latter value, since he begins his confession by noting the general tenor of life of people like the workingman:

Then among the busier and more laboring kinds of people, the...general absence of happiness prevails. It seems reasonable that he whose existence is one uninterrupted struggle to keep off starvation by slavery and hard work at that—should see but few bright days. But the man whose labors are effectual, fares little better. The mechanic, the ploughman, the literary drudge, are alike debarred from any delicious experience of that sweet morsel we so much prize, but never obtain. (*JE*339)

Of course, empathizing may not always be so easy. Bridging the gap between one's own experiences and another's may rely on shared experience, of which there is not always much; thus Smith's moral imagination requires cultivation. Glenn Hendler has called this bridge the "act of identification," and indeed, he cites Smith's theory that compassion is an act that must be cultivated. Hendler explains in his *Public Sentiments: Structures of*

Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature that “[t]o feel compassion, as opposed to mere pity, one must be able to imagine oneself, at least to some extent, in another’s position.”¹⁵³ A further difficulty, too, consists in remaining objective, particularly when it comes to evaluating oneself: we must “endeavour to view” ourselves, Smith writes, “with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them” (*TMS* 128 and 133). Overall, Smith insists that morality requires no inborn conscience or moral sense, but rather that the human need for the validation of others leads a person to the habit of making careful moral judgments, based on empathy and the power of imagination. “We soon learn to set up in our own minds a judge between ourselves and those we live with” (*TMS* 152). In sentimental fiction, often that judge appears too late for the doomed penitent.

In the end, Whitman’s conception of this judge, in the form of his “prudence,” is Smithian in its characteristics, though it must be noted that Whitman—insatiable reader though he was—likely did not read all of Smith’s works on ethics. How, then, might such systems have filtered through to Whitman and other writers of nineteenth-century America? Besides their instantiations in literary sentimentalism (a mode at which Whitman became quite practiced), and setting aside the general drift of Western worldviews, it is likely Whitman was influenced by the sentimental views on sympathy held by the Romantic poets, especially John Keats and William Wordsworth. Keats, for one, felt—and this goes back to the problem of evil—that the world, rather than nursing a constant immorality, is forever imbued with suffering. His sympathy for others, as instantiated in his poetry (*Endymion*, for example), presupposes suffering as a condition

¹⁵³ Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001), 3.

of human existence, though he would often frame the omnipresence of this difficulty as something existentially worthwhile, as that which creates the soul of man: “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?” he writes to his brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana in 1819. “A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!”¹⁵⁴ To Keats, the suffering of all is what makes the world, perhaps ironically, an exquisite “vale of soul-making.”¹⁵⁵

Wordsworth, on the other hand, seems to have been a bit warier of prioritizing suffering to the point of reveling in it. Like Smith (who he read, and of whose judgments he did not always approve), Wordsworth’s ethical philosophy certainly hinges on moral sentiments. Indeed, in an 1807 letter to Lady Beaumont, Wordsworth makes it clear that “[t]here is scarcely one of my poems which does not aim to direct the attention to some moral sentiment, or to some general principle, or law of thought, or of our intellectual constitution.”¹⁵⁶ But Wordsworth’s notions of sympathy rested less on the shared trials of the human lot (like Keats’) and more on the shared joy of it all. As Whitman would a generation later, Wordsworth began by hewing closely to the literary sentimental and Gothic modes, but he gradually moved toward a more expansive poetics that embraces the suffering of others as a common bond through which all might be recovered from their suffering. In his work on *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, Adam Potkay has argued that this expansive view of sympathy and suffering hinges on Wordsworth’s movements from the first-person to third-person voice in his mature poetry, from “I” to “we”—as when, in

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in *The Poems of John Keats: A Sourcebook*, ed. John Strachan (New York: Routledge, 2003), 20.

¹⁵⁵ *The Poems of John Keats*, 19.

¹⁵⁶ *Wordsworth’s Literary Criticism*, ed. W.J.B. Owen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 113.

“Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” the poet moves from his own debt to the beauty of nature, to which,

I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened,

to humanity’s collective debt to that beauty as experienced in dreams, when

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

These lines, whose exploration of a sort of collective unconscious I see reflected in Whitman’s “The Sleepers” (1855), exemplify Wordsworth’s ethics of sympathy for all. These are the poetic ethics which, as Potkay argues, “examine our obligations to others and invite us to participate imaginatively in the joys proper to all modes of being,” via the appeal to sympathy.¹⁵⁷ Yet, while I see Whitman as Wordsworth’s successor in this regard, Whitman doesn’t seem to have thought so, based on his sense that Wordsworth’s sympathetic imagination didn’t go far *enough*. His manuscript writings make this quite clear; as in his annotation to a discussion of poets published in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, in which he reminds himself that “Wordsworth lacks sympathy with men and women—

¹⁵⁷ Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013), 2.

that does not pervade him enough by a long shot.”¹⁵⁸ Could Whitman, then, stretch the limits of imaginative sympathy further than even Wordsworth?

This question may explain why there has historically been a great deal of critical worrying over the extent to which Whitman’s moral sentimentalism is un-self-interested. The general question seems to be: *How sympathetic to others could such a self-promoter really be?* And the critical consensus for many years was, not very. This position hinges not only on the brand of sympathy Whitman is thought to promote (the common conclusion being the Smithian or Wordsworthian variety), but also on his sincerity and un-self-interestedness.

For example, in *Whitman’s Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process*, Stephen Black worries that Whitman appropriates pain rather than truly feeling it or transmitting it to the reader. Regarding in particular the poet’s famous declaration “I am the hounded slave,” Black suggests that Whitman “is more preoccupied with his own sympathies than with the slave,” a figure who “exists only as an idea by which the poet measures his [own] humanity.”¹⁵⁹ Denis Donoghue concurs in his *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry*, noting that Whitman is a bit too enthusiastic about donning the suffering of others for dramatic or ecstatic purposes. “It is not that Whitman was insensitive to the pain of others,” he writes, but “that he was a little too ready to assimilate this pain to the genial law of his own equation.”¹⁶⁰ Thinking specifically of the moment in “Song of Myself” when Whitman

¹⁵⁸ See Whitman’s annotations to “Christopher under Canvass” in the *Edinburgh Magazine* 65 (June 1849), 765. Available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*. <
<http://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/marginalia/transcriptions/duk.00015.html>>

¹⁵⁹ Stephen Black, *Whitman’s Journeys into Chaos: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Poetic Process* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975), 93.

¹⁶⁰ Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 29.

claims “I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there,” Donoghue complains that “[e]ven if we read this as a hymn to sympathetic imagination,...still we jib at its fluency. It is one thing to suffer, and it is another thing to sympathize with the suffering of others, and these experiences are not identical, no matter what Whitman’s equation says.”¹⁶¹ This criticism is a common thread among many subsequent readings of Whitman’s ethical engagements with sympathy/empathy, as are attacks on his self-interest in sympathizing with those who suffer. Kristin Boudreau, for example, notes that while Whitman’s poetic sentiments “replace difference with similarity,” they also privilege the speaker over the sufferer spoken of. The runaway slave is her major case in point.¹⁶² Calling Whitman’s sympathy “voracious,” Boudreau invites readers to ask “what might become of the slave subjected to an unchecked sympathetic embrace.” Her own answer is that, in Whitman’s morally sentimental moments, “to ‘enter into’ another is not to understand that other’s feelings but to ensure that one’s own be projected there”—that is, that Whitman invades rather than identifies.¹⁶³ In response, Paul Christian Jones has noted that “Whitman’s poetic depiction of sympathy does not deny the challenges involved in sympathetic identification nor present it as an uncomplicated process. In fact,” he adds, Whitman “depicts it as a quite difficult struggle, perhaps mostly in a psychological sense, that demands strength and determination from the sympathizer.”¹⁶⁴ Jones certainly does not deny a self-interest inherent in Whitman’s moral sentimentalism. Indeed, he “seems to see sympathy as a valuable end in itself,” particularly when and if it does not result in

¹⁶¹ Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos*, 29.

¹⁶² Kristin Boudreau, *Sympathy in American Literature: American Sentiments from Jefferson to the Jameses* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002), 12.

¹⁶³ Boudreau, *Sympathy in American Literature*, 84-85.

¹⁶⁴ Paul Christian Jones, “‘That I could look ... on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning’: Walt Whitman’s Anti-Gallows Writing and the Appeal to Christian Sympathy,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 27 (2009), 18.

detectable changes in the reader's or society's ethical norms. That said, Jones adds in Whitman's defense that "he certainly seems to be modeling the process of sympathy for his readers to follow," noting the poet's early dictum: "Produce great persons, the rest follows."¹⁶⁵

The trouble, as I see it, in each of these views (minus Jones', perhaps), is that they assume that Whitman puts forward no real moral program in *Leaves*. Even Roger Asselineau has claimed that "beyond... recommendations of an essentially negative character, Whitman's morality does not contain any precise precept."¹⁶⁶ Asselineau repeats what was the common view even in Whitman's day—a testament, perhaps, to the ambiguity of the poet's ethics. This public misunderstanding, as Whitman saw it, grew so pronounced that, shortly after his first major stroke, he expressed his concerns in a preface to the 1876 Centennial "Edition" of *Leaves*:

Since I have been ill, (1873–74–75,) ... I have felt temporary depression more than once, for fear that in "Leaves of Grass" the *moral* parts were not sufficiently pronounc'd. But in my clearest and calmest moods I have realized that as those "Leaves," all and several, surely prepare the way for, and necessitate morals, and are adjusted to them, just the same as Nature does and is, they are what, consistently with my plan, they must and probably should be. (In a certain sense, while the Moral is the purport and last intelligence of all Nature, there is absolutely nothing of the moral

¹⁶⁵ Jones, "Whitman's Anti-Gallows Writing," 23. Whitman's quote comes from "A Poem of Many in One" (1856), later expanded and retitled "By Blue Ontario's Shore (1881-2).

¹⁶⁶ Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Book*, 84. To be fair to Asselineau, he wrote the majority of this work while serving a death sentence in a Nazi prison. His dim view of Whitman's ethical commitments may be forgiven.

in the works, or laws, or shows of Nature. Those only lead inevitably to it—begin and necessitate it.)¹⁶⁷

In other words (if paraphrase here is even possible), Whitman seems to have felt he was creating a moral document all along—and anyway, he is sure that it at least lays the *groundwork* for a practical ethics. That foundation lies not merely in his emphasis on empathy for another, though that is part of it. It also, I believe, consists in Whitman's unflinching poetic gaze, his determination not to look away from anyone or anything. It is precisely what captivated Bayard Taylor, who wrote to Whitman that "[t]he age is over-squeamish, and, for my part, I prefer the honest nude to the suggestive half-draped. I think the proper question to be asked is: does a certain thing need to be said? If so, let it be said! The worst form of immorality, I have found, veils itself in decent words."¹⁶⁸

Whitman's morality may be said to spring from "indecenty"—from his commitment, that is, to empathizing with the so-called indecent, those Americans whom cultural norms had deemed immoral or unsympathetic: prostitutes, slaves, suicides, executed criminals, and so on. They too constitute Whitman's America, and he accepts them just as he does any other part. Empathy for them is evidence of the great "levelling up," as he would one day call the egalitarian drift in American culture, that

grand intestinal agitation, moving the American masses, bringing a new promise day by day—hastening us on, unconsciously even to the masses which it agitates. And with this the unmistakable levelling of things *up*—the disinclination of our people to accept giants, to crown individuality, however imposing. Undoubtedly a powerful tendency, whatever of the

¹⁶⁷ *Prose Works 1892*, 2 vols., ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York UP, 1964), 470.

¹⁶⁸ Bayard Taylor to Walt Whitman, November 12, 1866. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org, ID: loc.00871).

old adoration of heroes remains. And it is *moral*: no school of Ethics so real as this, once it is comprehended.¹⁶⁹

For citizens of a diverse nation, what the moral sentimentalism of narratives like *Jack Engle* and poetry like *Leaves of Grass* prioritize, each in their distinct way, is this “powerful tendency,” the tendency toward an in-your-bones empathy for the Other. It is a deeply affective response, for both crowds and, perhaps even more so, for the single figure. (Ecocritics Scott and Paul Slovic call this “the arithmetic of compassion,” taking a cue from poet Zbigniew Herbert.¹⁷⁰) Whitman pushes this connection beyond even psychology to the physiological, a relationship reflected in *Leaves* when Whitman writes that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

It is easy to see why, on the subjects of empathy and sentiment, affect theorists tend to emphasize the body: it is a site of common sensation. Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, for example, ground affect in the “intensities that pass body to body, in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies.” In other words, the body is empathy’s universal outlet; everyone can relate to pain and pleasure. *Pain*, in particular, has been the focal point of several recent studies of sentimental fiction, by the likes of Julia A. Stern, Mary Louise Kete, and Melissa Sodeman. All of these scholars read suffering, loss, and mourning as vital to the transmission of sentimental affect (much as Max Cavitch does in writing of 18th- and 19th-century elegy).¹⁷¹ In its emphasis on feeling the pain of those who are unlike oneself, Whitman’s moral sentimentalism relies

¹⁶⁹ Spoken to friend and scribe Horace Traubel, December 8, 1890. See Traubel’s *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols., 7:339. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org).

¹⁷⁰ Scott Slovic and Paul Slovic, “The Arithmetic of Compassion,” *New York Times* (Dec 6, 2015), SR10.

¹⁷¹ See Stern’s *The Plight of Feeling: Sympathy and Dissent in the Early American Novel* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997); Kete’s *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000); Sodeman’s *Sentimental Memorials: Women and the Novel in Literary History* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015); and Cavitch’s *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007).

heavily on this appeal to empathize with physical suffering. The difficulty—and what separates the ethics of *Leaves* from that of his fiction—is that Whitman must grapple, finally, with how to empathize with *everyone*. While many so-called sinners do not, in Whitman’s estimation, commit true immoralities, and while many more act in momentary rashness (like Martha’s father), some few still commit to the considered degradation of others—to slavery, head-hunting, and calculated murder. How to empathize with them?

Here is where Whitman’s ethical prudence runs the risk of contradiction, because Whitman does *not* empathize with them. Indeed, in *Leaves*, his moments of embodiment generally prioritize sufferers, while degraders and oppressors rarely see moments of significant embodiment. This inequality constitutes Whitman’s major ethical commitment as a sentimentalist—that is, it is Whitman’s definition, beyond a healthy “sin,” of a true immorality: slavery, degradation, domestic violence, calculated murder. Yet this boundary of his moral imagination, this limit to empathy, contradicts—or anyway, exerts tension on—the nondualist ethics of *Leaves of Grass*.

What is at issue is diversity. The conundrum: As the self-styled poet of democracy, Whitman celebrates the multifariousness of 19th-century America, or what he calls a “teeming nation of nations.” Yet, this multitude of cultures and ethnicities and genders and sexualities and bodies, also includes those who would threaten that multitude. Is the reader to empathize with the threat? There is a difference, after all, between the sentimentalism of *Jack Engle*, in which immorality is positioned as fairly obvious, even inherent in some persons—and that of *Leaves of Grass*, his ultimate celebration of diversity and amorality. In the latter, Whitman’s sentimental ethics jettison essentialism in favor of social construction, nuance, moral ambiguity. It is a difficult

balancing act to pull off, since ethics require there be some recognizable wrong—and that wrong, at root, is positioned as the infliction of suffering, and thus perpetrators of suffering as the one unembraceable element of his democratic cosmos.

To be sure, Whitman insists in *Leaves* that no one is “contained between [their] hat and boots,” not even the supremely immoral person. But in his choices of embodiment, he certainly *seems* to recognize immorality. Just as in his fiction, these choices are unevenly distributed between moral and immoral characters. A famous example, in “Song of Myself,” is the runaway slave. Whitman’s speaker says:

I am the hounded slave I wince at the bite of the dogs,
 Hell and despair are upon me crack and again crack the marksmen,
 I clutch the rails of the fence my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin,
 I fall on the weeds and stones,
 The riders spur their unwilling horses and haul close,
 They taunt my dizzy ears they beat me violently over the head with their
 whip-stocks.
 Agonies are one of my changes of garments;
 I do not ask the wounded person how he feels I myself become the wounded
 person.

(LG18

55 39)

Here, Whitman embodies the slave in first person: *I wince, I clutch, I fall, I am*. There is very little analogy or metaphor in this passage, no second-person appeal to the reader (much less to “Dear Reader”), no directive instructions on how to feel. In their place,

Whitman hews to literary devices that favor the sensory. Long strings of sharp-sounding monosyllables, for example, the longest stretching two dozen words without interruption: “I clutch the rails of the fence . . . my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin,/ I fall on the weeds and stones.” Onomatopoeias likewise appear throughout—*crack*, *ooze*, *whip*—as does alliteration—*dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin*. These devices embody the physical experience of the slave: the sounds in his ears, the feelings of his skin, the drip of his blood. “I am the man,” Whitman adds, “I suffered . . . I was there” (LG1855 39).

There are similar passages throughout “Song of Myself”: the “mother condemned for a witch and burnt,” the dying soldier gurgling and gasping, the youth stabbed, and so on. Interestingly, these passages essentially contradict Whitman’s official indifference to good and evil in *Leaves of Grass*. Throughout the poetic sequence, the so-called “poet of sin” laments suffering. The examples just mentioned are all bodily sufferers, people subject to immoral acts. Even when Whitman’s narrator embodies perpetrators (usually avoiding the violent entirely), he tends to emphasize those moments when these people suffer, often after capture. Consider these four sequential stanzas from late in “Song of Myself”:

Not a mutineer walks handcuffed to the jail, but I am handcuffed to him
and walk by his side,

I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with sweat on my
twitching lips.

Not a youngster is taken for larceny, but I go up too and am tried and
sentenced.

Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp, but I also lie at the last gasp,
 My face is ash-colored, my sinews gnarl . . . away from me people
 retreat.

Askers embody themselves in me, and I am embodied in them,
 I project my hat and sit shamefaced and beg. (LG1855 43)

There is no moment of *I am the slave owner, I am the lynch mob, I am the Confederate spy*. There is at least the murderer who awaits hanging. But rather than embody him, Whitman simply asks “how does he sleep?” Likewise, there is the “rebel,” who is depicted “gaily adjusting his throat to the rope-noose,” but again Whitman does not embody him, inhabit him and claim to be one and the same person. As in *Jack Engle*, so-called “villains” are hardly given the privilege of embodiment.

In Whitman’s poetic notebooks, this distinction becomes even clearer, as he modifies or leaves out lines that will ultimately appear in the 1855 *Leaves*—often at the expense of oppressors and their specific internal experiences. For example, in the notebook version of the “rebel...gaily adjusting his throat to the rope-noose,” Whitman first depicts the moment with a more subjective diction. In draft, he writes about “[w]hat the rebel *felt* gaily adjusting his neck to the rope noose,” later modifying it to “[w]hat the rebel *said* gaily adjusting his throat to the rope-noose” (LG1855 42).¹⁷² Furthermore, in this early draft, the rebel immediately follows the passage about the runaway slave, who in the manuscript is even *more* subjectively embodied: “My gore presently trickles, thinned with the ooze of my skin.”¹⁷³ To the peremptory modern reader, this

¹⁷² For the original draft quotation, see Whitman’s manuscript notebook now traditionally titled “Poem incarnating the mind” (after its first few words), leaf 3 verso. Emphases mine.

¹⁷³ “Poem incarnating the mind” (leaf 3 verso); for simplicity, in this quotation I leave out Whitman’s many crossings out and deletions.

juxtaposition may even give the word “rebel” the added connotation of a Confederate sympathizer (though the term would not be used as such, in print, until 1861). Even more detrimental, though, to the notion that Whitman might embody the subjective experience of even the worst of oppressors is the following line in the same manuscript draft: “What Lucifer felt, cursed when tumbling from Heaven.”¹⁷⁴ The entire line is canceled. Evidently Whitman decided against promoting empathy with Satan.

Here, I think, is further indication that, even in a holistic ethics—even in one in which the poet encourages empathy with as many other subjects and subjectivities as possible—there are some lines that Whitman seems to have been unwilling to cross. The slaveholder, the calculated murderer, Lucifer: unlike the many other individuals embodied by the poet, such personages do not merit the privilege. Indeed, upon the publication of *Leaves*, Lucifer receives quite the opposite treatment:

Now Lucifer was not dead . . . or if he was I am his sorrowful terrible
heir;

I have been wronged . . . I am oppressed . . . I hate him that oppresses
me, I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.

Damn him! how he does defile me,

How he informs against my brother and sister and takes pay for their
blood,

How he laughs when I look down the bend after the steamboat that carries
away my woman. (LG1855 74)

Not only does the interiority of Lucifer go unexamined, but he is damned—actively blamed as the progenitor of the sorrows of the speaker (and by extension, no doubt, of

¹⁷⁴ “Poem incarnating the mind” (leaf 3 verso), strike-through here omitted for simplicity.

humanity, who are his “heirs”). Furthermore, in this final version, Whitman re-accentuates his ethical opposition to oppression. It is one of the few acts his ethics of prudence cannot conscience: “I am oppressed . . . I hate him that oppresses me” (LG1855 74).

Coming from the poet of a soon-to-be-divided nation, this elision makes a good deal of sense. On the one hand, Whitman puts forward the poetic task as capturing what he calls the “ampler largeness and stir” of democracy. Depicting the multitude—and its diversity and interconnectedness which reflect that of the cosmos—means giving no moral priority to anything, good or evil, life or death. It means abjuring divisions. Yet the US of the 1850s was a nation of deep divisions, even more so than today (which is saying something), a nation on the verge of splitting in two and making war with itself. Thus, the preservation of unity, of the Union, would require a serviceable ethic, one that would encourage empathy across lines of division, and the capacity to imagine oneself in the place of nearly anyone. But not the oppressor; there, Whitman’s ethics cannot go. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Whitman’s prudential system has been less than evident to readers of *Leaves of Grass*. In order to make his ethical system in some wise normative, Whitman must exclude those actors and actions which—even in a closed cosmos—he cannot condone. But be doing so, Whitman risks paradox, since he simultaneously positions his poetic thoughts as “the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands,” adding that “[i]f they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing” (LG1855 24). Thus, one must both enclose and exclude oppression, an ethical contradiction that Whitman never seems to have found a way to fully resolve.

Of course, Whitman embraces contradiction and paradox as disparate elements of a greater unity, and that means in ethics too. “Great is goodness,” he writes as he brings the first edition of *Leaves* to a close. “I do not know what it is any more than I know what health is but I know it is great” (LG1855 95). After which, he adds that “Great is wickedness I find I often admire it just as much as I admire goodness:/ Do you call that a paradox? It certainly is a paradox” (LG1855 95). This contradiction he treats as no contradiction at all, just as he equates “[t]he eternal equilibrium of things” with “the eternal overthrow of things,” and just as he equates life and death: “Sure as life holds all parts together, death holds all parts together;/ Sure as the stars return again after they merge in the light, death is great as life” (LG1855 95). These are the final lines of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, and they point to an optimism about the hereafter that is rooted, again, in the same holism as Whitman’s ethics. This will be the subject of my next chapter.

Chapter 4

Leaves of Yew, Leaves of Grass: Whitman and the End of the Graveyard School

If Whitman's ethics presuppose the value of "prudence" in life, then what does this suggest about his views on death? Is Whitman's late fiction a proving ground for his poetic imaginings of death and renewal, or does it in some way contradict what would ultimately become his poetic philosophy of death in *Leaves of Grass*? In this chapter, I will attempt to answer these questions—or better, I will interrogate their possibilities, without the expectation of easy answers. For, as with Whitman's views on right living, his approach to dying is more intricate and multiform than one might imagine. Beginning with his earliest poems and works of fiction, Whitman engages with death via the longstanding literary traditions of elegy, nocturne, and, above all, what would eventually become known as the Graveyard School. Yet, as conventional or kitschy as his early work may seem to be, it ultimately belies the complexity of Whitman's evolving positions on mortality and eternity—positions informed by the poet's optimism, and by his elusive, highly variable engagements with religion. In light of these complexities, in this chapter I will read some of his early poems and the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*—as well as the nineteenth chapter of Whitman's *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*—as graveyard prose-poetry. Not because they *must* be considered so—for one thing, the terms "graveyard poetry" and "Graveyard School" were not even coined until six years after his death—but because the poems that critics most often read as graveyard poetry seem to me those which best prefigure Whitman's notions of death and deathlessness. Whitman, in turn, pushes against or past this tradition, if it may be so called, and rounds

it out by infusing it with a secularized optimism about death, as well as a freer formal engagement with the poetics of death. He looses words from the constrictions of longstanding literary formulae in order to demonstrate, formally, the paradoxical freedom and renewal of the grave—which, he assures the reader, is “different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (LG1855 17).

For the last century Whitman has been variously classified as, or accused of being, a graveyard poet. In a review of Emory Holloway’s landmark collection of Whitman’s *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, American literary historian Percival Boynton points disapprovingly to the poet’s early liking for the “obsession with death of the Graveyard Poets.”¹⁷⁵ Three decades later, Gay Wilson Allen would note in his biography of Whitman, *The Solitary Singer*, that “[t]he themes, images, and conceits [of Whitman’s early poetic efforts] were borrowed from the eighteenth century ‘graveyard’ poets,” of whose “mawkish sentiment” he too evinces distaste.¹⁷⁶ Critics who cite Allen on this point rarely disagree. Martin Klammer, for example, concurs not only that the “central theme” of Whitman’s early poetry is “the melancholy fact of mortality and the contemplation of life after death,” but also that such poems are unfailingly “mawkish.” Such summary dismissals of Whitman’s early work, particularly in their relation to graveyard poetry, likely stem from what Daniel Tiffany has described as the early differentiation of literary kitsch (as instantiated in the odes and elegies of Thomas Gray) from the more plainspoken “literary” poetry of the Romantics, especially Wordsworth, who preferred what he called the “language really used by men” to the “gaudiness and

¹⁷⁵ See Boynton’s “Soil Preparation and Grass Seed” in *The New Republic* (July 19, 1922), 225.

¹⁷⁶ Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 38.

inane phraseology” of poets like Gray.¹⁷⁷ The irony here is not only that the “language really used by men” includes the very clichés foundational to kitsch—indeed, is in some sense founded upon them and their social contagiousness, as Tiffany has argued.¹⁷⁸ It is also that Whitman’s literary evolution is predicated on his incorporation, rather than abandonment, of the themes and discourses of graveyard kitsch. As I will argue, the “language really used by men” is, for Whitman, not only graveyard cliché *and* Romantic common language, but even the language of the dead themselves, as spoken through the “uniform hieroglyphic” of the grass-as-graveyard-conceit.

For his own part, Klammer blames the popularity of Bryant’s “Thanatopsis” for much of Whitman’s early graveyard poems—a good assessment, since Bryant’s poetry was highly influential on Whitman’s, though I disagree with Klammer that this connection is a bad thing.¹⁷⁹ This has generally been the common line on Whitman’s relationship to the Graveyard School, as well as to the nineteenth-century poetry that drew from it: namely, that its influence on his work was puerile and limiting, one that Whitman had largely transcended by the early 1850s. As Tiffany has demonstrated, though, much of this critical disdain originates in the modernist critiques, in the 1920s, of graveyard poetry as kitsch in order to differentiate modernist writing as anti-industrial “high” art. If anything, Whitman’s connection to the graveyard school is one that further

¹⁷⁷ For quotes, see Wordsworth’s landmark preface to the second edition of his and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Fiona Stafford (New York, Oxford UP, 2013), 96-97.

¹⁷⁸ Tiffany says of “poetic diction” in particular—the Greek and Latinate floral diction of kitsch poets, that is—that it “arrests,” or separates, poetry from common discourse, paradoxically generating an ongoing public discourse and preserving a mass culture. Therefore, for Tiffany poetic diction “functions both aesthetically and socially as a viral system of resonance and feedback, allowing for the possibility of collective experience—a way of modeling social and ephemeral totalities—based on the reverberation of shared conditions.” See Tiffany’s “On Poetry & Kitsch” in *Poetry Magazine* online, November 2013, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/11/on-poetry-kitsch/>>.

¹⁷⁹ See Klammer’s *Whitman, Slavery, and the Emergence of Leaves of Grass* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1995), 25.

inscribes the generative nature of both kitsch as cultural contagion and graveyard meditation as poetic tradition. It is a long tradition, one that, as we shall, see stretches back at least to Milton's odes to melancholy. Both in his early poetry and his 1840s journalism, Whitman often appeals to the reader's sense of melancholy—as an example, Allen points to the sixth of Whitman's "Sun-Down Papers," in which Whitman argues that on the burial of a child "our painful sensations have much about them of gentleness and poetic melancholy."¹⁸⁰ But, says Allen, by the time of Whitman's initial composition of *Leaves of Grass*, he had "given up his sentimental stories and his 'graveyard' poetry."¹⁸¹ The proof, he argues—as have many critics about the poet's earlier writings—is that the Whitman of the 1850s settles on a single, recognizable style or poetics, rather than (as Cornelius Mathews had once warned) "striving at numerous kinds of composition," which "will scarcely ever be able to command the lasting honours of posterity."¹⁸² "After 1851," concludes Allen, "Whitman began to follow his advice."¹⁸³

Of course, Allen and others did not have the benefit of knowing about many of Whitman's anonymous newspaper writings of the early to mid-1850s, writings that have been turning up sporadically for decades: tales, poems, travel series, art criticism, even a novella (*Jack Engle*), the totality of which certainly "striv[es] at numerous kinds of composition," even after the rather arbitrary date of 1851.¹⁸⁴ Setting aside bibliographic

¹⁸⁰ Walt Whitman, "Sun-Down Papers—[No. 6]," *Long-Island Democrat* (August 11, 1840), [2]. Available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

<<http://whitmanarchive.org/published/periodical/journalism/tei/per.00306.html>>

¹⁸¹ Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, 134.

¹⁸² Cornelius Mathews, "The Humorous in American and British Literature," in *Views and Reviews in American Literature, History and Fiction*, ed. William Gilmore Simms (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 145; first published in *The Various Writings of Cornelius Mathews* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1843).

¹⁸³ Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, 134.

¹⁸⁴ These include Whitman's poem "To Bryant, the Poet of Nature" (published in the *New Era*, 1842); his short story "Reuben's Last Wish" (*Washingtonian*, 1842); two unfinished novels, "The Madman" (*New York Washingtonian and Organ*, 1843) and "The Fireman's Dream" (*New York Sunday Times and Noah's*

considerations, though, there is an irony in the idea that Whitman's recourse to multi-generic and multi-modal writing, in particular his engagement with the tradition of graveyard poetry, might prevent him from commanding "the lasting honours of posterity." I say this not because Whitman did, in fact, earn lasting fame, but because poetry of the Graveyard School—a tradition Whitman never quite abandoned, certainly not in 1851—is thematically founded upon the fleeting nature of fame. Whitman knew this, as a good deal of his early and more explicit graveyard poetry makes clear.

At this point, it will help to define what the Graveyard School is, and isn't. In general, there is an extremely long tradition in English-language poetry of verse that meditates on death. The elegy and related genres—including the threnody, dirge, eulogy, and pastoral elegy—are verse forms whose history dates back to the ancients. In Western poetry, a number of these forms, as established by the Greeks and Romans, were consciously imitated by English poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—as in John Milton's "Lycidas" (1638) or John Dryden's *Threnodia Augustalis* (1685, on the death of Charles II). Elegiac poems like these, which tend to be mid-length (shorter than epic poems but longer than most lyrics), typically mourn the loss of a specific person, by way of a set of standard generic conventions. They often begin by invoking either a poetic muse or the deceased themselves, then mourning their death as the loss of an exemplum of humanity, before digressing on the complexities of life that the living are left with. The latter digression usually opens the way for the poem's speaker to gain some

Weekly Messenger, 1844); a travel-writing series, "Letters from a Travelling Bachelor" (*Sunday Dispatch*, 1849-1850); art criticisms like "Encampment of the Caravan," (*Evening Post*, 1851) and "An Hour at the Academy of Design" (*Sunday Dispatch*, 1852); a serialized novella, *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle* (*Sunday Dispatch*, 1852); his "New York Dissected" local-life series (*Life Illustrated*, 1856) and "Manly Health and Training" wellness series (*New York Atlas*, 1858); and his ghostwritten contributions to William Swinton's etymological chapbook, *Rambles Among Words* (1859). It is almost certain that more such works exist, including Whitman's supposedly completed novel, *The Sleepwalker* (1850) and a planned fiction on a Quakeress prostitute, tentatively titled *Proud Antoinette* (ca. 1850s).

new understanding of the value of death, ending most often with a renewed faith in the value of life (however fleeting) or better cheer about the nature of death. Rarely do these poems have any plot to speak of. Though this tradition was long-standing even in Milton's day, it was around this time that poets like him began flexing and warping the form to suit changing poetic needs.

For example, in *Il Penseroso* (ca. 1631), Milton's poetic meditation on melancholy, the speaker grieves no one, precisely, nor even eulogizes some ideal everyman or metaphorical abstraction. Instead, the poem constitutes Milton's extended disquisition on the value of melancholy, as a feeling in and of itself, a state of mind, and a way of understanding life, as well as a subject of poetry and generator of poetic genre. (Its companion piece *L'Allegro*, conversely, celebrates the poetic possibilities of joy.) Milton addresses the poem to the hypothetical "goddess" Melancholy, and after detailing the sensations and anthems associated with such a muse, concludes that "[t]hese pleasures Melancholy give,/ And I with thee will choose to live"¹⁸⁵ Thus, while gloomy almost by definition, *Il Penseroso* departs from elegiac tradition by largely dispensing with both a specific person to mourn and mourning as poetic subject. John Donne, in "A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day, Being the Shortest Day"—written at nearly the same time (1633)—departs from the conventions of the form in similar ways. Besides more or less establishing a new poetic sub-genre with his verse—the "nocturnal," or nocturne (night-scene poem), a word borrowed from the liturgical term for nighttime prayers—Donne eulogizes night itself, since it is "as shadow" that the night demonstrates that "a light and body must be here."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ "Il Penseroso," lines 151-2.

¹⁸⁶ Line 36.

In both cases, what may be said to have changed about these new poetic expressions—in their relation to elegiac convention—is their shift away from the concrete act of grieving a specific person’s death, toward more abstract thoughts on mortality and change. Perhaps the ultimate expressions of what would become the graveyard ethos may be found in *Hamlet* (1603)—not only its now-ubiquitous soliloquy, but also the graveyard scene (Act V, scene 1) in which the prince contemplates the skull of Yorick. It is these moments, combined, that establish what scholar Eric Parisot calls “the frustrated knowledge of the afterlife and the immediate vicinity of the dead” as key thematic elements of the Graveyard School.¹⁸⁷ The graveyard poets, whose work dates to the early 1700s, simply move from concrete instances, like Yorick’s skull, to abstracter thoughts of Hamlet’s “undiscovered country.”¹⁸⁸ It is this movement, and the poetry’s reliance on floral diction and cliché, that Tiffany has identified as being “an important new source of aesthetic pleasure” originating in eighteenth-century mass culture.¹⁸⁹

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, such innovations had been taken up by a number of British poets whose work specifically moved graveyard meditations toward both the abstract and the (relatively) optimistic. The four most commonly grouped together are Thomas Gray, Thomas Parnell, Robert Blair, and Edward Young. These men openly admitted to being devotees of the preceding generation of elegists and meditators upon death, Milton above all. (Gray, for example, mentions in his most famous elegy that even a simple country poet, now deceased, might be “some mute inglorious Milton” in

¹⁸⁷ See Parisot’s *Graveyard Poetry: Religion, Aesthetics and the Mid-Eighteenth-Century Poetic Condition* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

¹⁸⁸ *Hamlet* II.i.79.

¹⁸⁹ Daniel Tiffany, *My Silver Planet: A Secret History of Poetry and Kitsch* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014), 2.

the grave. Edward Young is more direct: “Milton! thee; ah, could I reach your strain!”¹⁹⁰) While it is difficult to call the graveyard poets a true “school,” given their general lack of biographical or bibliographic ties, their work is united by both temporal proximity and thematic unity. Building on the legacies of Milton, Donne, and others, these poets extend the poetics of mourning into a new mode, one in which the poet (or the speaker of the poem) meditates on human mortality while examining a specific poetic object: the grave, or graveyard. This so-called graveyard poetry¹⁹¹ may be said to comprise, at the very least, four verse works, each now generally considered their poet’s most famous literary production: Parnell’s “Night Piece on Death” (1721), Blair’s *The Grave* (1743), Young’s *Night-Thoughts* (1745), and, by far the most well known today, Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard” (1751). As with many verse genres, prose absorbs poetic themes and forms; so, although it is not graveyard poetry, among prose tracts on similar topics James Hervey’s *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746) almost certainly deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as the four poems above. Beyond these five writers, the Graveyard School may be said, and has been said, to encompass a number of poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though who these people might be has been historically difficult to agree on. I will note that, in the absence of any better rule of thumb concerning the membership of the Graveyard School, one may say that if William Blake illuminated their work, there is a good chance they belong to the Graveyard School: see as examples Blake’s twelve watercolors for Gray’s “Elegy” (commissioned

¹⁹⁰ See Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” line 59; and Young’s *Night-Thoughts*, “Night First,” line 452.

¹⁹¹ I say “so-called” because even in Whitman’s day the term did not yet exist. In his book-length study of the Graveyard School, Eric Parisot attributes the phrase’s coining to literary historian William Macneile Dixon in 1898. See Dixon’s *In the Republic of Letters* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1898), 191. For his part, Dixon gives as examples Parnell’s “Night-Piece on Death,” Blair’s “The Grave,” and the largely forgotten “Fancy” by Joseph Warton (1722-1800).

by John Flaxman, 1777-1778); his 537 watercolors for Young's *Night-Thoughts* (commissioned by Richard Edwards, 1795); his forty illustrations for Blair's *The Grave* (of which twelve appeared in the volume commissioned by Robert Hartley Cromek, 1805); and his *Epitome of James Hervey's Meditations among the Tombs* (painted sometime between 1820 and 1825). Besides his need for commissions, Blake's recognition of the graveyard poets likely had to do with their thematic attention to the sublimity and transience that he himself saw underpinning Western ideas of death.

Even if Blake doesn't unite the school, these themes do. While a great number of other verses written during this time period might be (and often are) labeled graveyard poetry, at minimum these four poems (and one prose tract) are generally agreed to have not only established the tradition of ode-like attention to the graveyard itself, but also paid the most complex thematic attention to "the transience of life, the immanence of death, and (on most occasions) the consolation accorded by a Christian afterlife."¹⁹² In particular, it is important to note that these works focus on the *emotional* state associated with meditation on mortality, as much as or more than they mourn or celebrate death itself. In this way, the Graveyard School may be said to have helped pave the way for that element of Romanticism that turns away from the mechanics of loss and mourning and toward more abstract expressions of dejection, melancholy, existential wonder, and sublimity.¹⁹³ (See, for example, Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," Keats' "Ode on Melancholy," Emerson's "Dirge," Bryant's "Thanatopsis," and Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," among many others.) These

¹⁹² See what is probably the most thorough monograph on the subject, Parisot's *Graveyard Poetry*, 1.

¹⁹³ An irony here is that in paving the way for a poetics of detachment, graveyard poets still represented the commonplace poetry of the everyday worker (Gray's "rude swain"), in contradistinction to the Romantics, whose reliance on this abstract movement nevertheless appropriated working-class culture, as in its use of "patronizing colloquialisms." See Tiffany, *My Silver Planet*, 52 ff.

are not “poems about being left behind,” as Max Cavitch describes elegies—nor are they works that accomplish what he calls the psychological and cultural “work” of grief—so much as they are poems that saturate the speakerly self, and by extension the reader, in the sensation of impermanence.¹⁹⁴ Poems of this sort had a notable influence on Whitman’s poetic attitudes toward death, in particular his cheerful acceptance of fate.

Indeed, Whitman’s familiarity with the graveyard poets is unquestionable, as is their influence on his poetry and prose. It is almost inconceivable that he had not read Thomas Gray in his early years—at the very least, Gray’s “Elegy”—given both Whitman’s omnivorous reading and Gray’s near-universal popularity at the time.¹⁹⁵ Jerome Loving posits the influence of Gray’s “Elegy” on a number of Whitman’s early poetic efforts, chief among them his first known published work, the poem “Fame’s Vanity.”¹⁹⁶ Appearing in the *Long Island Democrat* in 1839 (when Whitman was just twenty years old) and later republished under the title “Ambition,” this meditation on the transience of glory posits that those who “hope to win renown o’er earth/ From Glory’s priz’d caress” will find themselves led, as Gray famously suggested, but to the grave:

¹⁹⁴ See Cavitch’s *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007), 1.

¹⁹⁵ As Edmund Gosse writes of the “Elegy” in his 1918 biography of Gray:

It is curious to reflect upon the modest and careless mode in which that poem was first circulated which was destined to enjoy and to retain a higher reputation in literature than any other English poem, perhaps than any other poem of the world, written between Milton and Wordsworth. The fame of the *Elegy* has spread to all countries, and has exercised an influence on all the poetry of Europe, from Denmark to Italy, from France to Russia. With the exception of certain works of Byron and Shakespeare, no English poem has been so widely admired and imitated abroad; and after more than a century of existence, we find it as fresh as ever, when its copies, even the most popular of all, those of Lamartine, are faded and tarnished. It possesses the charm of incomparable felicity, of a melody that is not too subtle to charm every ear, of a moral persuasiveness that appeals to every generation, and of metrical skill that in each line proclaims the master. The *Elegy* may almost be looked upon as the typical piece of English verse, our poem of poems; not that it is the most brilliant or original or profound lyric in our language, but because it combines in more balanced perfection than any other all the qualities that go to the production of a fine poetical effect.

See Gosse’s *Gray* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1918), 97-98.

¹⁹⁶ See Loving’s *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 44.

For mighty one and lowly wretch,
 Dull, idiot mind, or teeming sense
 Must sleep on the same earthy couch,
 A hundred seasons hence.¹⁹⁷

Whitman echoes Gray in “link[ing] together the ‘lowly’ and the ‘rich’ in the democracy of death.”¹⁹⁸ It is a longstanding theme in the poetics of death. There is something cosmically egalitarian, after all, in the fact pondered by Hamlet, that the dust of Alexander might now be found to “stop a beer barrel,” that “Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,/ Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.”¹⁹⁹ In Whitman’s earliest poem, too, there is another theme common to graveyard poetry: the suggestion that this leveling-out of humanity in death negates much of the value of ambition (to use the poem’s later title). Indeed, in the second incarnation of the poem, Whitman adds stanzas at the beginning and end that reframe the body of the poem as words spoken by “a shape/ Like one as of a cloud” to “an obscure youth,” who has “his airy castles thus dashed down.”²⁰⁰ So early on, the Graveyard School had already made its mark on the young Whitman, especially in its emphasis on death as a lesson for those whose aspirations blind them to the poetry of the ordinary, or tempt them into egotism and the hope they might escape our universal fate.

In this way, quite a few of Whitman’s early poetic efforts foreshadow his later radical democratic ideals, by foregrounding the egalitarianism enforced by mortality.

¹⁹⁷ “Ambition,” *Brother Jonathan* 1 (January 29, 1842), [113], available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

¹⁹⁸ Loving, *Walt Whitman*, 43. Whitman also borrows from the same proverb that would later appear in Emerson’s essay on “Montaigne; or, The Skeptic” (1850): “Keep cool: it will be all one a hundred years hence.” See Emerson’s “Montaigne; or, the Skeptic” in his *Representative Men* (1850), available online at <<http://www.emersoncentral.com/montaigne.htm>>.

¹⁹⁹ *Hamlet*, V.i.192-194.

²⁰⁰ “Ambition,” *Brother Jonathan*, lines 9-10.

Such themes often concern young artists who feel the double-edge of their yearning for fame, and Whitman is no exception. Indeed, his desire for reputation is one of his earliest and most constant literary concerns, as can be seen in periodical poems like “The End of All” (1840, also in the *Long Island Democrat*) and “Each Has His Grief” (1841, in *The New World*). In each case, Whitman takes as his subject one of the central themes of graveyard poetry: the transience of worldly rewards, fame and glory being chief among them. In “The End of All,” for example, he again imitates Gray in asking the reader to

Behold around us pomp and pride;
 The rich, the lofty, and the gay,
 Glitter before our dazzled eyes,
 Live out their brief but brilliant day;
 Then, when the hour for fame is o’er,
 Unheeded pass away.²⁰¹

In line with the narratives of many such “night meditations,” Whitman emphasizes the brevity of life and the anonymity of our common end, underscoring the vanity of pursuing glory: “this silly strife/ After the bubble, fame!”²⁰² As with Gray’s comparison of the poet to the flower that wilts and “waste[s] its sweetness on the desert air,” Whitman equates humans with smaller and more fleeting forms, like the mayfly:

Why, then, O, insects of an hour!
 Why, then, with struggling toil, contend
 For honors you so soon must yield,
 When Death shall his stern summons send?

²⁰¹ “The End of All,” *The Long Island Democrat* (September 22, 1840), [1], lines 1-6. Available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

²⁰² “The End of All,” lines 47-48.

For honor, glory, fortune, wit,

This is, to all, the end.²⁰³

Of course, neither Gray nor the other graveyard poets were the first to make such comparisons. But what intensifies the relationship between their poetry and Whitman's, and what informs the Good Gray Poet's lifelong engagement with thoughts of the graveyard, is just how thoroughly he and they strive to re-envision death as a subject less melancholy, more familiar, more optimistic or revitalizing, even without the promise of a Christian afterlife—making graveyard poetry something of a tonic for those concerns about “the undiscover'd country” that give Hamlet pause.

All of the graveyard poets enact this reconfiguration, retooling the symbolism of the proverbial six-foot hole into something more encouraging, less dour. Blair's “The Grave” is a prime example. Even the sound of the word, he admits, is unpleasant: “The Grave, dread thing!” he begins, “Men shiver when thou'rt named.”²⁰⁴ By his lights, it is a problem of connotation: not what the grave is, but what it makes readers *feel* when they see or hear the word itself, or think of the gaping hole that awaits them. As examples, Blair initially presents the grave as a place of stereotypical nullity, “[wh]ere nought but silence reigns, and night, dark night.” Per the usual depictions of the grave, the “low-brow'd misty vaults/ (Furr'd round with mouldy damp, and ropy slime)” are “[d]ark as was chaos, ere the infant Sun/ Was roll'd together.” These are the images from which Blair wrests the object of his conceit, in the attempt to recast it as a place of comfort. And

²⁰³ “The End of All,” lines 31-36.

²⁰⁴ Lines 9-10. Cf. Whitman's “The Time to Come” (1842): “O, Death! a black and pierceless pall/ Hangs round thee, and the future state;/ No eye may see, no mind may grasp/ That mystery of Fate./ [...] The grave will take me; earth will close/ O'er cold dull limbs and ashy face;/ But where, O, Nature, where shall be/ The soul's abiding place?”

by the end of his poem, Blair has done just that: he has reconfigured the grave to be a welcoming passage to rest, and “[t]hrice welcome death” as a welcome end

That after many a painful bleeding step
Conducts us to our home, and lands us safe
On the long-wish’d-for shore.—Prodigious change!
Our bane turn’d to a blessing!—Death, disarm’d,
Loses his fellness quite.²⁰⁵

One might call this passage something of a prospectus for all graveyard poetry, even down to what Tiffany would call its “Gothic intensification of poetic diction.”²⁰⁶ Besides its meditations on the meaning and transience of earthly actions, the Graveyard School and its later devotees—from Blake to Bryant to Whitman—invariably take their graveyard poems as an opportunity to reevaluate the very symbolism and terminology that had long defined poems on death and mortality. Blair’s “The Grave” is a central example of the tradition in which Whitman’s graveyard work follows. Not incidentally, it is clear that Whitman read Blair; in a notebook containing plot notes for *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*, Whitman slightly misquotes a passage from “The Grave” when he jots down that “[t]he cup goes round,/ And none so artful as to put it by.”²⁰⁷ Indeed, the Graveyard School seems to have directly influenced that novella’s nineteenth chapter, a passage that in turn anticipates moments of graveyard meditation in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

²⁰⁵ “The Grave,” lines 707-711.

²⁰⁶ Tiffany, *My Silver Planet*, 100.

²⁰⁷ See the notebook traditionally titled “a schoolmaster” (after its first words), available at the *Walt Whitman Archive* online.

<<http://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/notebooks/transcriptions/loc.04588.html>> Though written in the same hand as the novella’s notes, this excerpt does not appear in the book—though it has strong thematic connections, as explored below.

That the influence of the graveyard poets on Whitman is little remarked upon, is perhaps no surprise. For one thing, they are not his *only* influences; when asked later in life which writers had had the greatest effect on what Emerson had called his “long foreground,” Whitman named quite a few, including Homer, Dante, Ossian, Shakespeare, Milton, Epictetus, Hafiz Saadi, and Omar Khayyam.²⁰⁸ For another, the influence of the Graveyard School on Whitman’s writings is partially mediated by the opposing school of the Romantics—Wordsworth and Coleridge, Byron and Shelley and Keats, as well as Bryant and Emerson in America—a tension of some interest, in light of Daniel Tiffany’s history of this breach.²⁰⁹ Regardless, graveyard poetry suffuses Whitman’s early poetics. Indeed, as Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price have written of Whitman’s influences, “Bryant—and the eighteenth-century graveyard school of English poetry—probably had the most important impact on his sensibility, as can be seen in his pre-*Leaves of Grass* poems,” though they are careful to note that these poems lack the originality of his work written in the early 1850s, by which time he was “committed to write not in the manner of his predecessors but against them.”²¹⁰ With this in mind, I focus here not only on the work of the four poets traditionally designated the Graveyard School, but also here and there on Wordsworth and Bryant, whose work seems to have been formative in Whitman’s developing graveyard prose-poetry.

Indeed, beyond the Graveyard School itself, Wordsworth and Bryant may be most to blame (or praise) for this development—and their influence, especially Bryant’s, may be seen in Chapter 19 of *Jack Engle* (below). Throughout his life, Whitman singled out

²⁰⁸ For one of Whitman’s many recollections of his literary influences, see the annotation “Books of WW” at the *Walt Whitman Archive*. <

<http://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/marginalia/annotations/loc.03426.html> >

²⁰⁹ See Tiffany’s *My Silver Planet*, especially 52 ff.

²¹⁰ From Folsom and Price’s *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

Bryant especially for praise as a major literary forebear, as in an 1881 essay in the *Critic* titled “How I Get Around at Sixty and Take Notes (No. 3),” later included in Whitman’s *Specimen Days* (1882). Whitman admires Bryant not least for his poetic fondness for thoughts on nature and death, for

pulsing the first interior verse-throbs of a mighty world—bard of the river
and the wood, ever conveying a taste of open air, with scents as from
hay-fields, grapes, birchborders—always lurkingly fond of threnodies—
beginning and ending his long career with chants of death, with here and
there, through all, poems, or passages of poems, touching the highest
universal truths, enthusiasms, duties—morals as grim and eternal, if not
as stormy and fateful, as anything in Eschylus.²¹¹

In later interviews Whitman would be even more unequivocal about Bryant: “He is our greatest poet,” he says in an 1884 interview with poet Sadakichi Hartmann. “He had a smack of Americanism, American individuality, smack of outdoor life, the wash of the sea, the mountain, forests, and animals. But he is too melancholy for a great representative of American poetry.”²¹² This last remark is telling: Regardless of Bryant’s relative positivity in poems like “Thanatopsis,” the influence of graveyard poetry on Whitman’s thoughts of the grave does not preclude his engaging with, and modifying, the form to match his own outlook on death and decay, one that infuses graveyard poetry with more optimism and revivifying possibility than it had ever previously borne.

²¹¹ See Whitman’s *Prose Works 1892*, 2 vols., ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York UP, 1963), 1:267.

²¹² C. Sadakichi Hartmann, “Walt Whitman: Notes of a Conversation with the Good Gray Poet by a German Poet and Traveller,” *New York Herald* (April 14, 1889), 10. Available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*. <<http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/interviews/transcriptions/med.00560.html>>

Judging from his early works, it was not at all clear that Whitman would ever make this evolution, which may account for the critical dismissal of these writings as derivative. Certainly some of his poetry from the 1840s acts less as graveyard meditation than as straightforward (and rather bleak) *memento mori*. In “The End of All,” for example, Whitman warns of the vanity of vanities, Ecclesiastes-like, but offers no hope that in death there is any affirmation or renewal. If anything, poems like this one present death in much the way Blair attempted to set aside. “Beauty, sweet,” writes Whitman, and

all the fair
That sail on fortune’s sunniest wave,
The poor, with him of countless gold,
Owner of all that mortals crave,
Alike are fated soon to lie
Down in the silent grave.²¹³

Whitman’s poetic diction and syntax here display every evidence of what Wordsworth saw as the “inane phraseology” of graveyard poetics, as well as the reliance on cliché that Tiffany has argued both “defies and legitimates the triviality and mimeticism associated with kitsch.”²¹⁴ One might expect the young Whitman to at least craft the above image into one of the democracy of death, or of hope for the suffering, as he does in “Each Has His Grief”: “dread ye not the fearful hour—/ The coffin, and the pall’s dark gloom,/ For

²¹³ “The End of All,” lines 25-30.

²¹⁴ Tiffany, *My Silver Planet*, 23.

there's a calm to throbbing hearts,/ And rest, down in the tomb.''²¹⁵ Instead, Whitman warns the reader to

Think not, when you attain your wish,
 Content will banish grief and care!
 High though your stand, though round you thrown
 The robes that rank and splendor wear,
 A secret poison in the heart
 Will stick and rankle there.²¹⁶

Whitman can hardly be accused of stoicism here; even the Stoics found the brevity of life and of worldly things comforting, since it reaffirmed for them the value of each day left alive. Instead, Whitman seems to be engaging with that element of graveyard poetry that emphasizes the finality of death, its negation of the meaning of much of everyday life's affairs. Yet, as he matured and explored the genre, Whitman's engagement with graveyard verse opened up his writings to a more thorough and complex use of the graveyard as poetic conceit. His early poetic tribute "To Bryant, the Poet of Nature" (1842) suggests that readers may have Bryant to thank for this evolution. In the poem, a regularly rhymed near-sonnet, Whitman pays homage to Bryant's metaphorical use of the Earth as one large, rolling grave, one that is

For ever fixed in its eternity—
 A monument God-built! 'Tis seen around—
 In mountains huge and many gliding streams—
 Where'er the torrent lifts a melancholy sound,

²¹⁵ "Each Has His Grief," *The New World* 3 (November 20, 1841), [1], lines 25-28. Available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

²¹⁶ "The End of All," lines 37-42.

Or modest flower in broad savannah gleams.²¹⁷

Such usages of graveyard metaphor, at first inconstant in Whitman's periodical poems, become a common thread in his many publications throughout the year 1842, including "Ambition," "The Death and Burial of McDonald Clarke," "Time to Come," "No Turning Back," and "A Sketch." This would be the last year (until 1860) in which Whitman would regularly publish poetry in periodicals, and it is one in which Whitman seems to have decidedly adopted the graveyard as poetic conceit—a conceit that is hopeful, as well as variously meaningful.

It is hardly a surprise that a New Yorker of the 1840s and 1850s would find cemeteries an object of fascination. After all, they were multiplying at an astonishing rate. Entombment within places of worship being costly and limited by space, the urban graveyard had been the standard convention for interment in New York City all through the 1600s and 1700s, a standard based on European custom. But as the population of industrializing New York City began to climb in the early 1800s, even modestly sized urban burial grounds quickly became insufficient for the huge numbers of dead requiring burial. For example, Manhattan's most famous cemetery, Trinity Churchyard (founded in 1697), had fallen into crisis by the early 1820s, by which time New Yorkers had packed more than 120,000 corpses into its two and a half acres of ground. (The nearby Negro Burial Ground, itself a mere six acres, contained similar numbers of dead.) There was positively no room for more burials, and Manhattanites who approached to within a few blocks complained of "offensive smells" emanating from the Churchyard and other

²¹⁷ "To Bryant, the Poet of Nature," *New Era* (July 26, 1842), [2], lines 11-15. Available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*. This poem was only recently unearthed; see Wendy J. Katz's "A Newly Discovered Whitman Poem about William Cullen Bryant," *WWQR* 32 (2014), 69-76.

cemeteries, such as that of a Presbyterian church on nearby Wall Street.²¹⁸ In 1822, the city banned any further burials in Manhattan, though illicit interments continued, sometimes left under less than a foot of loose earth. Soon, bodies were being packed into graveyards higher up the island, in what is now Washington Square Park, but even these spaces filled up rapidly. Fortunately, new designs, exemplified by Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery (founded 1831) and Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery (1838), provided a solution. Locales like these—park-like in size and verdure, with a new emphasis on sculpture and gravestone adornment—offered not only a great deal more acreage for interment, but also what would become a new model for American burial culture: the rural cemetery. They soon overspread much of the American northeast, ringing around city centers and bringing a new landscape of death to the consciousness of city-dwellers.²¹⁹ “We love to see the multiplying of such places as Greenwood,” Whitman writes in an 1846 book review.²²⁰ Later, in *Jack Engle* (1852), the soon-to-be author of *Leaves of Grass* comments on this very multiplication (and its implications for sanitation) when he notes that

[t]he better feeling of our times has created ample and tasteful cemeteries, at a proper distance from the turmoil of the town; the elegant and sombre Greenwood, unsurpassed probably in the world for its chaste and

²¹⁸ Calvert Comstock, David Everett Wheeler, and Reuben H. Hine, *Report of the Select Committee in Relation to the Quarantine Laws of the Port of New York*, for New York Assembly No. 60 (January 22, 1846), 61.

²¹⁹ For information on the rise of the rural cemetery in the US, see Kenneth T. Jackson and Camilo J. Vergara's *Silent Cities: The Evolution of the American Cemetery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural P, 1989); David Charles Sloane's *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995); and Marilyn Yalom's *The American Resting Place: 400 Years of History Through Our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

²²⁰ See Whitman's review of R. Martin's *Greenwood Illustrated* (1846), published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 5.197 (August 15, 1846), [2]. Reprinted in Whitman's *Journalism*, 2 vols., eds. Herbert Bergman, Douglas A. Noverr, and Edward J. Recchia (New York: Peter Lang, 1998 and 2003), 2:19.

appropriately sober beauty; the varied and wooded slopes of the cemetery of the Evergreens; and the elevated and classic simplicity of Cypress Hills. And correct sanitary notions have properly made interments in the city limits illegal.²²¹

Though, he adds, “the few old grave-yards that lie in some of the busiest parts of our city, are not without their lesson; and a valuable one” (*JE* 331). That lesson, and its implications for Whitman’s life’s work, are the subject of this chapter: namely, the poet’s use of the graveyard conceit to promote a cheery optimism about death and decay, one that puts forward Whitman’s “prudence” as a physical model of eternity, in which one’s atoms, and actions, diffuse from the coffin into the cosmos.

It is clear from Whitman’s writings on graveyards that those he saw in Manhattan and Brooklyn were very different from the tiny parish cemetery he might have been familiar with from his birthplace in rural Huntington, Long Island. The many graveyards in Brooklyn symbolized, for Whitman, the long story of America: “The old graveyards of Brooklyn! What a history is contained in them!” They were, as he would write during the Civil War, a “fit illustration of the rapid changes of this kaleidoscope of alteration and death we call life.”²²² They also illustrated—contra his early poetry on the ethereality of fame—the lasting nature of certain contributions to humanity. Trinity Churchyard, in particular, offered up a number of exempla of Whitman’s injunctions to cosmic prudence, men and women for whom fame was no soap bubble, but a lasting testament to prudent living. To be sure, it contained some of the city’s most storied personages, including

²²¹ [Walt Whitman], “Life and Adventures of Jack Engle: An Auto-Biography,” ed. Zachary Turpin, *WWQR* 34

(2017), 331. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *JE*.

²²² Both quotes are from “Brooklyniana, No. 10,” *Brooklyn Standard* (February 8, 1862), [1]. Available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

Alexander Hamilton and Captain James Lawrence (of “Don’t give up the ship!” fame), and it is here—in Whitman’s literary engagement with Trinity Churchyard specifically, and the graveyard-as-metaphor more generally—that readers may note the apparent contradictions inherent in Whitman’s graveyard prose-poetry, as well as what may be an early instance of his conceit of the grass as “the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (*LG*1855 16).

Of these tensions—between prominence and prudence, introspection and urban bustle—*Jack Engle* provides a good case in point. In its nineteenth chapter, the reader is treated to a break from the novella’s rather fast-paced plot as the protagonist and narrator, Jack, spends “some hours in an old New-York church-yard; where [he is] led to investigations and meditations” (*JE* 331). Indeed, the plot of *Jack Engle* screeches to a halt for the space of a full chapter, giving elbow room to Jack’s slower-paced, seemingly off-the-cuff meditations on graves, grass, lives, and afterlives. The occasion is the death of his friend and fellow clerk, Wigglesworth, a benign old alcoholic whose deathbed revelations—and gift of a cache of relevant legal documents—holds the key to Jack’s mysterious early life, as well as to the malicious designs of his employer, Mr. Covert. In the chapters since their parting, Jack and his friends have narrowly escaped being caught with these documents; for his part, Wigglesworth has died. (His departure, from what is implied to be cirrhosis, harkens back to Whitman’s first novella, the temperance tale *Franklin Evans*, published a decade earlier.) After attending “the old man’s scanty funeral,” Jack spends “the rest of that pleasant, golden forenoon, one of the finest days in our American autumn, wandering slowly through the Trinity grave-yard” (*JE* 332).

This episode draws substantially from the graveyard-poetic tradition, even though its setting is entirely American—and therefore defined, somewhat ironically, by novelty. In their settings of scene and depictions of the many objects associated with the grave, the Graveyard School's major works, from Parnell's "Night Piece" to Gray's "Elegy," unanimously prioritize age as the key commonality tying together the School's symbols and settings. It is not difficult to see why. What Bryant in "Thanatopsis" called the "sad images/ Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,/ And breathless darkness, and the narrow house," are those that use contrast to convey the fleeting nature of life and accomplishment, by setting alongside that nature those more ancient things that symbolize the eternity of death: gravestones, ashes, skulls and bones, tombs and vaults and mausoleums, and so on. Even these tokens of mortality are themselves mortal, like Gray's "frail memorial" erected "these bones from insult to protect"; they, too, crumble.²²³ The realization aimed at is not precisely to "[m]ake thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart," as Bryant makes abundantly clear; instead, the imagery of the graveyard invests the reader in longer timescales, on which everything equalizes, and even the tokens of death become dust.²²⁴ This is why, among many conventions of graveyard poetry, the yew tree appears so commonly in these works—as in Parnell's "black and fun'ral yew,/ That bathes the charnel-house with dew."²²⁵

The yew tree has been associated with death and burial for so long, and customarily been planted so often among the cemeteries of Europe, that its origins as a graveyard symbol are not known very precisely. Its toxicity no doubt contributes to its reputation, but historians note that the yew has a richer history as a ritual object than as a

²²³ "Elegy in a Country Church-Yard," lines 77-78.

²²⁴ "Thanatopsis," line 13.

²²⁵ "A Night-Piece on Death," lines 53-54.

poison. This may be because of the tree's longevity—some older specimens are thought to be more than 5,000 years old, leading Thomas Browne to wonder “whether the planting of Yewe in Churchyards, hold not its original from ancient Funeral Rites, or as an Embleme of Resurrection from its perpetual verdure.”²²⁶ But its role in funeral ritual is unquestionable, and unquestionably ancient. In his *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, Thomas W. Laqueur connects the yew tree to the cult of Hecate in ancient Greece, the burial rituals of the Druids, and Christ's Passion. Virgil calls it “the baneful yew,” Dryden “the mournful yew.” In Shakespeare, yews grow in the churchyard where Romeo kills Paris—and, as Laqueur points out, *Twelfth Night*'s fool, Feste, sings of “[m]y shroud of white, stuck all with yew.”²²⁷ Little wonder that, among the graveyard poets, Blair follows Parnell in addressing the yew, and quite directly: he calls the “trusty yew” a

Cheerless, unsocial plant! that loves to dwell
 'Midst skulls and coffins, epitaphs and worms:
 Where light-heel'd ghosts, and visionary shades,
 Beneath the wan cold moon (as fame reports)
 Embodied, thick, perform their mystic rounds:
 No other merriment, dull tree! is thine.²²⁸

Gray follows suit, noting that beneath

that yew-tree's shade,

²²⁶ *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents and commonly Presumed Truths*, 4th ed. (London: Edward Dod, 1658), 20.

²²⁷ See Laqueur's *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2015), 135. For a thorough exploration of the early ritualistic history of the yew, including the quotes from Virgil and Dryden, see John Brand's three-volume *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849), 2:255-266.

²²⁸ “The Grave,” lines 22-27.

Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,
 Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
 The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.²²⁹

As a symbol of the grave, the yew is as longstanding as the ash or palm. But for the graveyard meditations of nineteenth-century American writers, including those of Bryant and Whitman, there was a small problem: yews are not native to the Americas. Indeed, in the Trinity Churchyard of *Jack Engle* (as well as of reality, the two being very similar), yews have never grown or been planted. Few trees grew there at all, given the amount of churchyard ground that was annexed for burial. Even fewer remained after 1846, when Trinity Church was reconstructed and enlarged for a second time. Trees were less and less a priority; outsoaring them was the cathedral itself, which until 1869 was the tallest building in the US.²³⁰ Thus, hewing to the Graveyard School's symbols of antiquity, of crumbling age, of the endless years that pass in death, would not be so easy for Whitman.

One can see how this might be a problem for American graveyard poets of the early nineteenth century, as would the relative novelty of nearly *everything* in American cemeteries: graves and mausoleums and headstones, none of them more than two hundred years old. In *Jack Engle*, the oldest inscription the titular character happens across in Chapter 19 dates to 1704, a date which does less to age America than (I presume unintentionally) to make it seem new, vital, and rapidly changing:

1704! at the time when these paragraphs are being printed, nearly a
 century and a half ago. Of the generations then upon the earth, probably

²²⁹ "Elegy," lines 13-16.

²³⁰ See "History," *Trinity Church Wall Street*, n.d. <<https://www.trinitywallstreet.org/about/history>>. In the nineteenth century, the trees still standing in Trinity Churchyard probably included mainly sycamore, elm, and oak. See, for example, the reminiscences of Felix Oldboy (the pen name of John Flavel Mines) titled *Walks in Our Churchyards: Old New York, Trinity Parish* (New York: Geo. Gottsberger Peck, 1896), 45, 64.

not a person is living. What great events have happened too, since that time! A nation of freemen has arisen, out-stripping all ever before known in happiness, good government, and real grandeur. (*JE* 334)

At the time of Whitman's writing, this stone—which still exists in the Trinity Churchyard even now—was not quite 150 years old. Today, it is more than twice that age. While certainly apt for Whitman's point about the passing of generations (more on that in a moment), the youth of the nation would seem to be an insoluble difficulty for any American writer attempting to write in the graveyard-poetic mode. Yet, rather than being a problem, the differences of the American landscape and timescape become for Whitman generative, places where new symbols signify new attitudes toward death and renewal.²³¹ Bryant had transformed them, too, a generation before; his "tomb" in "Thanatopsis" is the entire Earth, and he makes his tree of death the American oak, who "[s]hall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould."²³² Whitman, even more radically, lands upon another, smaller plant—the common blade of grass—as his seedling of the graveyard, that which symbolizes the ever-renewing power of nature. What the Graveyard School chose to symbolize brevity, Whitman chooses to symbolize eternity. And he does it, in *Jack Engle*, in a passage that locates nature and death within a new, urban frame.

Early in the nineteenth chapter, Jack begins to explore the headstones of the churchyard, because, as he says, "I felt in the humor, serious without deep sadness, and I went from spot to spot, and sometimes copied the inscriptions. Long, rank grass covered

²³¹ Bryant and Whitman were each committed, in his way, to Herman Melville's eventual dictum that "no American writer should write like an Englishman, or a Frenchman...it is better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation." See Melville's *The Piazza Tales and Other prose Pieces*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (Evanston: Northwestern UP and the Newberry Library, 1987), 247-248.

²³² "Thanatopsis," line 30.

my face. Over me was the verdure, touched with brown, of trees nourished from the decay of the bodies of men” (*JE* 332). This passage is the key to the chapter, for several reasons. For one thing, it sets a tranquil, almost celebratory tone for what might otherwise come across as a rather grave meditation (excuse the pun). While Jack has come for a funeral, he is kept in the Churchyard not by the descent of night—Gray’s “curfew [that] tolls the knell of parting day”—nor by “[b]y the blue taper’s trembling light,” as in Parnell’s “wakeful night.”²³³ And Jack certainly isn’t motivated to explore the graveyard by some sense of duty, as Blair’s speaker is when he writes that “the task be mine,/ To paint the gloomy horrors of the tomb;/ The appointed place of rendezvous, where all/ These travellers meet.”²³⁴ Whitman’s graveyard scene is closest to Gray’s “Elegy,” perhaps, but only if it were set in the blaze of day with greenery all around, with birds chirping rather than “the moping owl...to the moon complain[ing],” and, rather than “[t]he lowing herd wind[ing] slowly o’er the lea,” the air’s being alive with what Whitman would soon call “[t]he blab of the pave . . . the tires of carts and sluff of bootsoles and talk of the promenaders” (*LG* 1855 18). It is a graveyard meditation in which the speaker is far from alone; though unaccompanied, he is set dead center in the busiest city in the country. “Out there in the fashionable thoroughfare,” the speaker says of the sounds of Broadway carried to the Churchyard, “how bustling was life, and how jauntily it wandered close along the side of those warnings of its inevitable end. How gay that throng along the walk!” (*JE* 337). Though there is a certain irony intended here—*how little they think of the proximity of death!*—Whitman and his speaker do not seem to wish to undecieve those many pedestrians walking blissfully by. Unlike the graveyard

²³³ “Elegy,” line 1; *Night-Piece*, lines 1-2.

²³⁴ “The Grave,” lines 4-7.

mode from which Whitman borrows, in this chapter the graveyard thinker (Jack) may *himself* be undeceived, but his realizations are of such a positive and affirming sort that he keeps his epiphany between himself and the reader. They are a pleasant secret, not a melancholy inevitability. Jack's graveyard thoughts are pulled away from the initially clear resemblance to the Graveyard School mode, away from melancholy or awed sublimity, and toward the celebration of death—nor is this the only element to be reframed for Whitman's mode of graveyard meditation. The grass itself also plays a newly symbolical role in his daytime “night thoughts.”

“Long, rank grass covered my face,” Jack continues: “Over me was the verdure, touched with brown, of trees nourished from the decay of the bodies of men” (*JE* 332). Readers familiar with any edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and with its conceit, or extended metaphor, of grass leaves will acknowledge a connection here. In contrast with Hamlet's view of the soiled world as “an unweeded garden/ That grows to seed,” one possessed by “[t]hings rank and gross in nature,” Whitman finds beauty in the same rankness—that is, thickness, lushness to excess—in the “[l]ong, rank grass [that] covered my face” (*JE* 332).²³⁵ “Rank” is a word Whitman attaches with special care to his grasses; its connotations layer not only thickness, lushness, and coarseness upon the image of the grass, but also strength, lust, scent, decay, and profusion.²³⁶ It is an adjective that captures just how generative this conceit will be for a graveyard poetics of recirculation and revitalization, one of procreation and dissolution, as in Whitman's declaration in “Song of Myself” that “[c]opulation is no more *rank* to me than death is” (*LG* 1855 29, emphasis mine). Grass symbolizes both; it is Whitman's “elected figure”—

²³⁵ See *Hamlet*, I.ii.135-136.

²³⁶ See the many senses of “rank, *adj.* and *adv.*,” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. online.

as John Crowe Ransom calls such a multitudinous symbol—one that in both *Jack Engle* and *Leaves* conveys nothing less than pure joy and optimism.²³⁷

In the first edition of *Leaves*, Whitman establishes early the rank grasses as his metaphor of choice, not only in the title itself (which hearkens back to then-recent sentimental titles, like Fanny Fern's *Fern Leaves*) but also in his Preface, wherein he establishes his poetic philosophy as one that celebrates the interconnections of a cosmos like ours:

What has ever happened . . . what happens and whatever may or shall happen, the vital laws enclose all . . . they are sufficient for any case and for all cases . . . none to be hurried or retarded . . . any miracle of affairs or persons inadmissible in the vast clear scheme where every motion and every spear of grass and the frames and spirits of men and women and all that concerns them are unspeakably perfect miracles... (LG1855 viii, emphasis mine)

“Miracles” in particular is a word loaded with theological meaning, one that ascribes teleology to all the natural processes and cycles that appear in *Leaves*. But its appearance is not to affirm this ascription, so much as to explode it. “Miracles,” and many related terms, appear in *Leaves*—like “God,” “the Lord,” “christened,” “Christ,” and so on—not to make it a traditional meditation on eternity but to interrogate the very concepts on which those words rest, to redefine them according to Whitman’s more circulatory, non-theological conception of the cosmos. “Miracles,” for Whitman’s speaker, are everyday objects, like a spear of grass—not the grandiose or inexplicable acts of devout believers. The grass grown of graves symbolizes the everyday miraculous, a shift markedly away

²³⁷ See Ransom’s “Shakespeare at Sonnets,” in *The World’s Body* (New York: Scribner’s, 1938), 286.

from older dendritic symbols of death and eternity, the mournful yew being the primary example.

Crucially, in both *Leaves* and *Jack Engle*, Whitman's grass symbolizes not merely natural renewal, but also an eternity in which the dead do not "go" anywhere except back into the cycle of nature. In this regard, Whitman takes his cues much more from Bryant than any of the English graveyard poets. Consider his meditations on the grass in the opening poetic sequence of *Leaves* (later titled "Song of Myself"). In it, Whitman presents himself as one who "lean[s] and loafe[s] at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass" (LG1855 13). As he makes clear, the speaker is unsure of what this small green thing might represent, when asked by a child "What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands" (LG1855 16). What Whitman ventures is not one symbol or meaning, but instead a symbolism that is manifold. Like Hester Prynne's scarlet "A," it seems to represent more concepts than can be reasonably grouped into anything resembling a single, irreducible relationship. It is a meta-symbol, with "some deep meaning in it most worthy of interpretation, and which," as Hawthorne says, "stream[s] forth from the mystic symbol, subtly communicating itself to [the] sensibilities, but evading the analysis of [the] mind."²³⁸ There are simply too many meanings to communicate. Yet the speaker's answer to the reader (not, presumably, the child) is that of the grass's many meanings, those that are personal—"it must be the flag of my disposition," he says at one moment, "out of hopeful green stuff woven"—or theological—"I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,/ A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped"—do not move the speaker to further meditations in the way that his subsequent assays do (LG1855 16). "Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . . the produced babe of the

²³⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Brian Harding (New York: Oxford UP, 1990), 31.

vegetation,” he adds, “[o]r I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,” meaning a universal symbol, something that means the same to everyone, though they may not be able to express those meanings (*LG*1855 16). But what meanings? “And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (*LG*1855 16).

Here is the interpretation to which, of all the meanings Whitman finds in his grass, he returns most often in *Leaves of Grass*. It is as decidedly secular as Whitman’s treatment of graves in *Jack Engle*, and herein lies the crux of Whitman’s use of graveyard poetry’s devices, in that he locates the reader in a tradition before exceeding that tradition. The poems of the Graveyard School, as well as of many of the Romantics to follow, often maintain a certain gloom or uncertainty about the grave. Even Wordsworth is prey to this melancholy about the grave, and this from a poet who admitted to feeling

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.²³⁹

Wordsworth’s thoughts on the infinite are not the most traditional, but he was certainly devoted to Christian theology enough to write, to choose just one example, his “Ecclesiastical Sketches” in 1822. In other words, in spite of the “presence that disturbs

²³⁹ “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” lines 94-102.

[him] with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts,” Wordsworth, like the graveyard poets and his fellow Romantics, tends to meditate on the grave in traditionally melancholic, theologically inflected ways. Indeed, his approach to the grave-as-symbol is no doubt influenced by the Graveyard School, as in his poem “To the Sons of Burns, after Visiting the Grave of Their Father” (1803), in which he ends by cutting through the hope of life with the warning of the grave:

Let no mean hope your souls enslave;
 Be independent, generous, brave;
 Your Father such example gave,
 And such revere;
 But be admonished by his grave,
 And think, and fear!²⁴⁰

This admonishment to “think, and fear” is perhaps the common element among all the work produced or influenced by the Graveyard School: a wariness of death as an ending to earthly pursuits, even if it initiates heavenly ones. The “undiscovered country” gives graveyard poets pause; there is something inherently negative about death, its sublimity and largeness make the poet small, leading to melancholy or the feeling of what Keats calls “dejection.” Bryant comes closest to exceeding this stance. In “Thanatopsis,” he still makes use of the most common Graveyard School tropes—such as *ubi sunt* and the theme Parisot has labeled “death as the great leveler”—but modified so that his theology is unapparent, and his attitude toward death one largely of acceptance, and even joy, a reparative stance to be sure.²⁴¹ He is undoubtedly harking back to the Graveyard School,

²⁴⁰ “To the Sons of Burns, after Visiting the Grave of Their Father,” lines 43-48.

²⁴¹ Parisot, *Graveyard Poetry*, 2.

and consciously deflecting the melancholic tradition, in the moment in which he famously warns that

When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings...²⁴²

Neither nature nor the grave, in other words, should engender even the slightest bit of melancholy, since a person's place in death (he goes on to suggest) is not an end, but endlessness:

Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements...²⁴³

If Bryant modifies the graveyard-poetic stance this far, Whitman takes it even further in *Jack Engle*, and further still in *Leaves of Grass*. As in Bryant, gone is any suggestion—against the *ubi sunt* motif—that the grave leads to a higher plane, or that a person who has died is anywhere other than the grave. If anything, Whitman carefully emphasizes

²⁴² Bryant, "Thanatopsis," lines 8-15.

²⁴³ "Thanatopsis," lines 22-26.

that the deceased are nowhere but beneath the turf, as he commits to the grave as symbolizing not an ending but a return, a renewal. As he does in *Leaves*, his allusions to scripture are signposts that he is *leaving*, rather than entering, strict theological territory. “Human souls,” Jack supposes, while among the tombstones of Trinity Churchyard, “are as the dove, which went forth from the ark, and wandered far” (*JE* 333). But—and here is the turn—that soul is positioned as wandering with the body in life but not leaving it, nor the Earth, in death. Rather, the soul “would repose herself at last on no spot save that whence she started. To what purpose has nature given men this instinct to die where they were born? Exists there some subtle sympathy between the thousand mental and physical essences which make up a human being, and the sources where from they are derived?” (*JE* 333). And what sources might those be?

Whitman does not answer any of these questions. Instead, his narrator, Jack, reads the inscriptions on tombs and ponders the similarities between them—even the famous, like Hamilton and Lawrence—and himself. There is no melancholy here, but rather a sense of connection and identity. “Could it be,” he asks, “that coffins, six feet below where I stood, enclosed the ashes of like young men, whose vestments, during life, had engrossed the same anxious care—and schoolboys and beautiful women; for they too were buried here, as well as the aged and infirm” (*JE* 337). Here is a clear echo of Bryant’s “Thanatopsis,” in which the latter poet insists, reassuringly, that “the sons of men,/ The youth in life’s green spring, and he who goes/ In the full strength of years, matron and maid,/ The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—/ Shall one by one be

gathered to thy side.”²⁴⁴ It is also echoed in “Song of Myself,” when the speaker says to the grass that:

It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
 It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;
 It may be you are from old people and from women, and from offspring
 taken soon out of their mothers’ laps,
 And here you are the mothers’ laps.
 This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
 Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
 Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths. (*LG*1855 16)

A common enough image: the crowd of the dead, so like those living persons we know. Yet, unlike all the poets here mentioned, Whitman does not take the opportunity to find some shopworn or storied symbol of eternity: the yew, the skull, even the Earth itself (Bryant’s “great tomb of man”). Instead, he concentrates on the ordinariness of the graveyard, its simple pleasures, on the factor common to all graves, what they all emit, what comes from the “red roofs of mouths” in the grave, what is right beneath the bootsoles: the grass.

The power of the grass as graveyard metaphor is not merely in its egalitarianism—after all, death is the greater leveler—but its evidence that death is not the end, its reopening of the conversation between the living and the dead. In all the major works of the Graveyard School, from Parnell’s “Night Piece” to Gray’s “Elegy” to Hervey’s “Meditations” to Bryant’s “Thanatopsis,” the graveyard poem is an apostrophe, not a dialogue. There is no sense that the dead can speak for themselves, or in any way

²⁴⁴ “Thanatopsis,” lines 67-71.

have an effect on life as lived after them. They are mute. That is the dilemma, after all: as with Hamlet's "dread of something after death,/ The undiscovered country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns," the tension inherent in graveyard writings till Whitman is the speaker's identification with the dead, with whom no communication is possible.²⁴⁵ They are, for all intents and purposes, gone, apotheosized to a higher plane. Whitman's dead, on the other hand, are souls who rest where they are planted, whose tongues are now the grass, who speak in a language—that "uniform hieroglyphic"—it is poetry's task to translate. Or attempt to translate, because, as both Jack Engle and Whitman's speaker in *Leaves* agree, what the grass says exceeds the words of mere tombstone inscription. It is more than the bare facts of a single life; it is the essence of all lives, and so eludes all paraphrase, but speaks directly to the figure sitting in the graveyard, listening:

This grass is very dark [...] to come from under the faint red roofs of
mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues!

And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,

And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out

of their Laps. (*LG*1855 16)

It is as if the grass speaks not only to the poet, but for the poet. Here, I think, is where *Leaves* fully departs from even *Jack Engle*'s rather radical approach to the graveyard, and from graveyard poetry in general: while in *Jack Engle* the grass of the graveyard symbolizes renewal and the tangibility of eternity, it does not speak for those in their

²⁴⁵ *Hamlet*, III.i.78-80.

graves. Instead, their inscriptions do. For example, when Jack comes across the tombstone of

JAMES M. BALDWIN,

Aged 22 years,

Wounded on Lake Champlain,

it is the inscription that speaks of the dead, not yet the “long, rank grass”: “By the date of the time of his wound, and als[o] that of his death, both of which were given on the stone,” Jack concludes that “the latter took place about a year after the first” (*JE* 332.)

These are the facts of this man’s life, and they resonate with the speaker: “Was it—for I felt in a musing vein—hard for him to die? Hung round about his prospects a gay-colored future? Twenty-two: that was my own age” (*JE* 332). Yet, the speaker is not spoken to, in turn, by the grass itself, whose message is one of untranslatable renewal. That is left for *Leaves of Grass*, whose conceit finally explodes the meditations of graveyard poetry entirely. In it, it is the grass who now speaks, the speaker who now listens, who does not speak for himself, precisely, but hears and relates as best he can the speech of eternal growth: “I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven,/ O suns O grass of graves O perpetual transfers and promotions if you do not say anything how can I say anything?” (*LG*1855 54). Here, what was the Graveyard School’s emphasis on humility and a sense of brevity becomes transmogrified, turned inside out by Whitman’s equation of the grave with grass, grass with tongues, tongues with speech, speech with reassurance, the reassurance that the speaker (and by extension, the reader) is at one with the earth and the cosmos and need find no mystery in death, nor bother with humility:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?

And what do you think has become of the women and children?
 They are alive and well somewhere;
 The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
 And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest
 it,
 And ceased the moment life appeared.
 All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses,
 And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.
 Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
 I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it. (LG1855
 17)

He *knows* it. His knowledge comes from the evidence not of meditation or reason, but simple sensory perception. He feels the grass, and knows its disproof of death. Whitman may celebrate himself, and sing himself, and grow to huge proportions, not because he is any better or any different than the dead, but because “[t]he smallest sprout” has negated the great question of graveyard poetry: what comes after death? Whitman’s answer: “there is really no death” (LG1855 17). What the novelist Whitman takes from the graveyard, and the poet Whitman brings to *Leaves*, is more than a sentimental empathy with a deceased Other, more than a connection based on embodiment or suffering: it is an equality, an identity. The dissolution of the corpse into grass, and thence out into the universe, blurs the boundaries between selves, which is why the speaker says he is “not/ contained between [his] hat and boots” (LG1855 17). He and the corpses of the grave, and the people of the street, and the reader holding *Leaves of Grass*, are

indistinguishable. “Who need be afraid of the merge?” (LG1855 17). The connotations of “merge” are, as with “rank,” both sexual and mortal, mirroring again Whitman’s blurring of the boundary between life and death, such that death only implies life and life again. In *Leaves*, Whitman leaves behind the last hallmarks of his early graveyard poetry: the *ubi sunt* motif, the ruminations on the brevity of fame and existence, the irony of the “close proximity of the dead,” as Eric Parisot has it.²⁴⁶ In their place, the reader will find what Jack Engle found in Trinity Churchyard: a sense that the dead *are* the living, that the grave *is* life, “open[ing] enjoyment and pleasure on every side” (JE 333).²⁴⁷ Little wonder, then, that Whitman’s speaker ends “Song of Myself” by considering his own grave with joy: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/ If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles” (LG1855 56). It is a sentiment that would survive thirty-five years of poetic revisions, and an invitation that is anything but rhetorical.

²⁴⁶ Parisot, *Graveyard Poetry*, 2.

²⁴⁷ Compare Whitman’s merging of all people in death with a trope common to both graveyard poetry and elegy: the sense that each individual will be reconstituted *individually* after death, rather than collectively. See Blair’s *The Grave*, for example, which promises that “[w]hen the dread trumpet sounds, the slumbering dust,/ Not unattentive to the call, shall wake;/ And every joint possess its proper place,/ With a new elegance of form, unknown/ To its first state.”

Conclusion: Whitman in the “Great Unread”

The literary field is still incomplete, its kinship network only partially actualized, with many new members still to be added. -Wai Chee Dimock (2006)

Eventually, we reach the utmost limits of our telescopes. There, we measure shadows and search among ghostly errors of measurement for landmarks that are scarcely more substantial. -Edwin Hubble (1936)

As noted in the Introduction, the impetus for this book was my rediscovery of a lost work written by Walt Whitman—a work that I’d spent a good deal of time actively seeking, specifically for the purpose of its recovery. However, I did not spend that time unreflectively. On the contrary, I often think about the textual recovery process and my motivations as a researcher for engaging in it. Beyond selfish reasons—the excitement of sleuthing, the pleasure of nonlinear reading, the potential for collaboration, the synergy between digital and physical archival retrieval—beyond all those things, I have more than once questioned the need for this activity. The operative question being, why recover works by Whitman? It isn’t as if he were a relatively unknown author, after all; Whitman is widely considered one of the best and most influential poets of all time, influencing virtually every major poet of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His *Leaves of Grass* has never been out of print; indeed, as of this writing it is the fifty-fifth bestselling book of poetry on Amazon.com, just a few slots below Tupac Shakur’s *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*. So, from a public-awareness point of view, it isn’t as if Whitman’s oeuvre

“needs” the attention. Nor is the vast majority of Whitman’s work thought to be lost. So why find more?

For twentieth-century scholars of nineteenth-century literature, textual recovery was not an uncommon activity, given their temporal proximity to the objects of their study. But more than nearness, these scholars often seem to have been motivated by the desire to establish coherent bibliographic and biographical narratives. Thus, the rediscovery of Melville’s *Billy Budd* manuscript in 1919 led to the reevaluation not only of Melville’s *Moby-Dick* as a classic of American literature (by enthusiastic readers like John Middleton Murry and D.H. Lawrence), but also of his later career, which Murry and others framed as one not of poetry, but of his long “silence” between works of fiction.²⁴⁸ In other words, the recovery of *Billy Budd* served the purpose of grounding a critical narrative, whose interest (in seeing Melville enshrined as a great novelist) relied on the establishment of a mythology (in this case, that Melville spent his last thirty years as a dormant novelist-genius, not an unpopular poet). Similar critical narratives abound in early twentieth-century scholarship—Dickinson as eccentric recluse, Poe as drug-addled maniac, Emerson as presiding dean of American letters, and so on—because mythologies are peopled by types, and types tend toward simplicity. In establishing a mythology of the birth and maturation of an American literature, early scholars peopled it with oversimplified heroic types, something like what Emerson calls “representative men”—and their textual recoveries (*Billy Budd*, for example) often contributed to these oversimplifications. It has been the great work of later waves of scholars—poststructuralists, new historicists, postcolonialists, queer theorists, critical race theorists,

²⁴⁸ See Murry’s anonymously published essay, “Herman Melville’s Silence,” in the *Times Literary Supplement* (July 10, 1924), 433.

ecocritics, and so on—to explode these simplified conceptions of American authors and authorship. To complicate them, expose the complexities, contradictions, and shifting networks of forces inherent in individual authors, as well as the American literary marketplace. The place, I believe, of textual recovery is to continue this same work, and to complicate easy notions of nineteenth-century authorship and literary history.

Thus, this volume is meant not only for those who study Whitman professionally, but also for those who are new to his work. By putting *Jack Engle* in conversation with both Whitman's early poetry and prose, and his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, I hope to draw readers into the larger generic, cultural, political, and philosophical tensions of the 1850s—to generate discussions of Whitman's style, aesthetics, and his approach to the relationship between “high” and “low” art—to introduce readers to affective responses to *Leaves* and their temporal contingency—to teach Whitman to a new generation of readers and thinkers, a more complex and unsimplifiable Whitman, leaving behind some of the old trappings of the “Whitman myth” and expanding his corpus. But I also hope, perhaps eccentrically, to explode the very idea that we may know and describe his corpus with precision. The haziness of bibliographic boundaries, and thus the limits of my understanding of “Whitman” and “Whitman's poetry and prose,” will be the subject of this final section. After discussing what Margaret Cohen has called the “great unread” in American literature, and Whitman's place in it, I will conclude by anticipating the recovery of several more specific texts by Whitman, as well as the prospects of recovery of many more known and unknown American authors. These texts will not “complete” Whitman's or anyone else's roster of primary writings. Rather, their recovery underscores the importance of directing students and readers to the larger Archive in its

entirety, wherein they may encounter a much larger universe of texts and contexts, whose collective existence defines not one but many American literatures.

*

First, “teaching Whitman”: I know what I *think* I am doing when I am teaching “Whitman.” In my conception of the practice, I am engaging with Whitman’s primary texts (often, as many as can be wedged into a semester’s reading), as well as with a dynamic web of paratexts, contexts, and critical responses, all generated about the poet, his work, and his and its evolving place in culture. This is my rough working definition of “teaching Whitman” whether it is for a broad survey course of American literature, a capstone class on lyric poetry, or an in-depth seminar focused on the Good Gray Poet.

An immediate difficulty, of course, is in choosing which of Whitman’s many primary texts merit inclusion, so that they may be read in a reasonable amount of time, interconnected, and considered as potentially representative of Whitman, American literature, or American culture and thought. It is a fortunate problem to have—too many texts, too little time—and one that, as a dilemma for the individual reader, has been addressed at length by scholars like Gregory Crane and Stephen Ramsay, and on the cultural level, by too many scholars to name as part of the Canon Wars of the 1980s and 1990s.²⁴⁹ However, at a more intermediate stratum—on the classroom or curricular level—there is less said on how one teaches an author whose texts exceed the time available to read and discuss them. It is a dilemma every teacher faces, and certainly a pleasant and instructive one to open up to students as a topic of engagement, but a

²⁴⁹ See Crane’s “What Do You Do with a Million Books?,” *D-Lib Magazine* 12.3 (March 2006), <<http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march06/crane/03crane.html>>; and Ramay’s “The Hermenautics of Screwing Around,” *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*, ed. Kevin Kee (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2014), 111-120, <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dh/12544152.0001.001/1:5/--pastplay-teaching-and-learning-history-with-technology?g=dculture;rgn=div1;view=fulltext;xc=1>>.

dilemma nevertheless. “How do I teach Whitman?” And perhaps more pointedly: “*Am I teaching Whitman, exactly? Which Whitman am I teaching?*”

Sometimes, a few central texts seem obvious. I doubt I could justify teaching a Whitman seminar, for example, without assigning the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855); a good deal of *Leaves of Grass* (1881) encompassing “Calamus,” “Children of Adam,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” *Drum-Taps*, “Memories of President Lincoln,” and so on; and *Specimen Days* (1882), plus light helpings from his letters, notebooks, manuscripts, and late-life dictations. I recognize, however, that the centrality of any text to a corpus is historically and culturally contingent, based on a long series of valuations, reevaluations, and devaluations—the first of which is often the author’s own valuations of his or her work. Whitman is perhaps the *ur*-example of this principle in play. As a literary revisionist par excellence, Whitman took years—thirty-seven years, or what he would call *Leaves of Grass*’s “subsequent adjusting interval”—to frame and reframe and expand and re-expand his central poetic project in an effort to get it just so, to emphasize or de-emphasize (or occasionally, eliminate) its disparate elements according to his evolving sense of the work’s summative meanings and relationships to its individual parts. And the whole time, he expended a great deal of additional energy managing its public reception, writing anonymous reviews of *Leaves*, co-writing hagiographic accounts of his life with his literary acolytes, and publishing (without permission) Emerson’s high estimation of the first edition of *Leaves*. By determining his work’s many forms (singlehandedly) and steering its reception (to a certain degree), Whitman has had a lasting influence on those elements of it which are so often viewed as central to his artistic project. Thus, it is inevitable that when I teach Whitman, I am to some degree

reinscribing his own valuations of his work, and reinforcing a hierarchy he himself helped establish. Jason Stacy has written extensively on the ways in which Whitman's maintenance of different public personae further guided the reception of his revisions—an issue now further complicated by Whitman's use of additional narrative personae (pen names and anonymity) to publish in other genres and contexts.

And that is just the beginning. Complicating this hierarchy further—reshuffling it at times and re-intrenching it at others—are a whole host of other elements: Whitman's reviewers' and contemporary readerships' responses, his publishers' preferences, his executors' wishes and finances, his work's subsequent saleability in academic and trade markets, that work's reception and valuation by critics, its framing by biographers, its reevaluation by researchers and scholars, its reframing and reconfiguration by theorists, and its ongoing effects on readers, culture, and the literary marketplace. In any body of work, centrality depends. Thus, teaching Whitman requires not only those tough decisions in deciding which texts to read and discuss, but also a direct engagement with all the above elements that have factored into this textual superposition.

The scale of an author's body of work is a critical variable in this dynamic. Emily Dickinson's full corpus, for example—meaning every pencil stroke still extant—is relatively small. It fills “only” seven large (and sometimes expensive) volumes.²⁵⁰ Herman Melville's still rather modest life's work, including all known correspondence, stretches to a more dizzying twelve volumes, to which one must add the expanding cache

²⁵⁰ These include the three-volume *Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge: Belknap P, 1998); the 1,000-page *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward (1958); those miscellaneous fragments collected in *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems*, ed. Marta Werner and Jen Bervin (Christine Burgin/New Directions, 2013); and *Emily Dickinson's Herbarium* (Cambridge: Belknap P, 2006), plus a second, unpublished herbarium available as digital images from Harvard Library.

of his marginalia available online.²⁵¹ When one turns to even more prolific authors—my ongoing example being Whitman, but others include Twain, Bierce, Rebecca Harding Davis, E.D.E.N. Southworth, and so on—how does one choose? While readers might have less trouble describing Emma Lazarus’s two-volume life’s work or Dickinson’s seven volumes, larger corpuses resist easy description, not least because their edges seemingly recede faster than one can read (or research) toward them. (I am resisting using cosmological metaphors here, though they will come up later, specifically to analyze the limits of their utility.) Consider again Whitman’s corpus: New York University Press’s authoritative run of Whitman’s writings (poetry, fiction, memoirs and memoranda, notebooks, daybooks, unpublished prose manuscripts, and correspondence) runs to twenty-two volumes. To these must be added two (soon to be three) volumes of his *Complete Journalism* (published by Peter Lang); nine volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, a collection of the poet’s daily dictations during the last four years of his life; mountains of manuscripts, letters, annotations, marginalia, and interviews only available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive*; and even more untranscribed manuscripts, notebooks, and miscellaneous scraps, housed in several dozen archives across the US.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Of Northwestern-Newberry’s authoritative editions of Melville’s writings, the long-awaited final volume, tentatively titled *Billy Budd and Other Later Manuscripts*, is due in the near future. Melville’s marginalia may be found, expertly transcribed and systematized, at *Melville’s Marginalia Online*, <http://melvillemarginalia.org/>.

²⁵² Of course, no two bibliographic states of affairs are identical. For one thing, not all bodies of work are so sprawling as to be seriously obscured by time. It is reasonably likely, for example, that some corpuses are *largely* accounted for: Dickinson’s and Thoreau’s come to mind. (Though, to be fair, in the years prior to her death Dickinson’s was only partially accounted for.) Complicating matters is the fact that, among authors who published extensively, different ones have different bibliographic profiles: Some (like Whitman, Alcott, and Twain) made ample use of pen names and multiple publication venues to address different audiences in multiple modes. Others (like Hawthorne or Poe) occasionally used a pseudonym or alternate venue, but for the most part stuck to their “go to” bylines and venues. Still others (like Emma Lazarus) almost always used variations of their real name in bylines, and submitted to the same one or two journals without fail. And then there are wildcards, authors who follow no easy profile or pattern: who published openly and pseudonymously and anonymously while following no clear pattern; who were wedded to no clear group of publication venues; who vacillated through different genres, modes, and forms

And, at the risk of emphasizing the obvious, these are merely Whitman's primary writings! In such a case, the teacher's dilemma approaches the biographer's: Do I truly know my subject?

Such an issue is thorny enough because any single-author specialist knows the vertiginous extremes of her subject and senses the boundaries of her own ignorance. But what about ignorance of boundaries? This is a thornier question still: If we cannot draw well-defined bounds around what constitutes an author's life's work, how can we presume to describe that work accurately, much less comprehend it? By deciding on its central texts? In bibliography as in literary criticism, "centrality" is a highly vexed concept. For its utility as an aid to comprehension, centrality is often deployed as a metaphor describing the importance of texts to a corpus or culture; it is a hinge of thought and visualization, whether one uses the word "central" itself or other spatially similar terms, like "crucial" or "pivotal" or "focal" or "nuclear." Even when describing works of such magnitude as *Leaves of Grass*, the utility of this metaphor is questionable. To begin with, centrality, in spatial-metaphorical terms, exists only in relation to circumference. That is, a text may not be considered central if it is not central *to* anything more marginal. The same is true of other metaphors of spatial comparison or relation: if a text is "fundamental," it is imagined as forming the foundation to some metaphorical superstructure. If it is the "apex" of something—say, nineteenth-century lyric poetry—it is positioned spatially in relation to other, lower texts. And so on, always in a contingent or dependent relation, surfaces depending on depths, salience on obscurity, illumination on shadows, and so on. However it is to be visualized or conceived of, the question

at semi-random or, more probably, as finances dictated. (Melville and Poe come to mind.) Or who rarely published at all. (Dickinson.)

remains for any corpus: Can there be a center if there is no well-delineated edge, border, or bottom? And how might we conceive of this edge, or talk about it? Because to do so is the only way in which we might then visualize or talk about what is central, crucial, fundamental, and so on. And if there is no way to do so, then how critics conceive of corpuses or collective literatures may require a different metaphorical terminology, one that reflects the protean, holistic nature of literatures in their larger context.

That context matters, in part, because scholars can never quite know that they are working with a writer's entire life's work. Any oeuvre's "extremest verge," as Whitman might call it—its most obscure, least well known texts—are almost certainly lost in shadow. Herein lies an intractable difficulty: In any primary corpus, there are almost certainly bibliographic depths *we don't know we don't know*. The nineteenth century was the seedbed for professional authorship in the US, with an increase in publishing houses and expansion of periodical venues allowing a whole host of writers to (try to) make livings from an exceedingly diverse set of potential modes of writing, many of which privilege anonymity or pseudonymity as a condition of authorship. The texts generated in such modes include anonymous and pseudonymous novels (by Whitman and Alcott, for example), unsigned newspaper poems (Hawthorne), untranscribed lectures (Perkins Gilman), immolated drafts (Melville), lost fair copies (Whitman), unsigned editorials (Harding Davis), rejected manuscripts (Melville), missing letters (Dickinson), and so on. Indeed, the edge of bibliographic knowledge might be defined as those texts at least *known* to be missing: Brockden Brown's *Sleep-Walk* (1798). Hawthorne's letters to Melville. Melville's *Isle of the Cross* (1853), perhaps, and *Poems* (1860), potentially. Whitman's *The Sleepwalker* (1850), certainly. No less than four novels and four plays by

L. Frank Baum. And many more such works. But there will always be more. What about those works of which we are unaware we're unaware?—American literature's “unknown unknowns,” to borrow a phrase from former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Whatever they may be, they exist beyond the bounds of literary knowledge.

Yet, from this position of handicap, Americanist scholars may still make inferences. The most basic—besides that there are almost always more texts out there, wherever “there” is—is that readers of American literature must operate in the knowledge of their semi-ignorance of these texts. That is, a general suspicion that many, perhaps even most, of a given author's writings are unknown, is healthy. By choosing texts that “matter” (stylistically, politically, historically, or however one wants), scholars and teachers do the necessary, practical work of making American literature manageable, and teachable. Yet, as I argue in this chapter, such pragmatism is not only unnecessary, but untenable. Indeed, to “manage” American literature not only does violence to the complexities of our literary history, but also presumes the existence of the information necessary to make any such choices in the first place. When I teach Whitman, or any other American writer, I simply do not have the full idea of what I am teaching.

Another, more valuable inference is this: that, even from their obscurity, missing writings still exert an influence on the ways in which scholars read, interpret, conceptualize, and teach literature. One influence, of course, is that literary researchers aim to recover a good portion of this lost literature. However, that is not the sort of influence I have in mind. Rather, I mean that, merely by existing—by being that against which or in absence of which certain works were evaluated—by being a body of texts whose style constitutes a literary laboratory or proving ground or alternate publication

venue for American authors—by containing some portion of those writings which American authors forgot, suppressed, or lost—by constituting a gap in the evidence by which readers understand broader literary careers and artistic evolutions—the “great unread” does its work.²⁵³ For that reason, I hope to more fully conceptualize and theorize this obscure, yet influential, set of texts, ill-defined or undefined as they may be. (Their ill- or un-definition is, indeed, their primary attribute.)

To leave such texts out in the dark, beyond the reach of theory and pedagogy, is to misconstrue what it is we are talking about when we teach American literature, and to overlook a major body of American literary production. This unseen archive, or “great unread” mass of texts, must not be conceived of as being buried, or hidden beyond the fringes of bibliographic perception. It is not peripheral, in other words, *nor* is it “central.” Rather, it is ubiquitous: simultaneously dissolved away from physical being, into a network of unfelt influences and counter-influences, *and* physically preserved, secreted in every conceivable place: in archives and library basements, online and on microfilm and in server farms, in flea markets and antique stores, behind wallpaper and underneath the floorboards, in trunks and middens and garbage dumps and coffins—“under your boot-soles,” as Whitman would say. The “great unread” radiates continual influences. It is part of the literary ecosystem into and against which the texts we teach came into being, as well as the bibliographical complement to those texts. As such, these unknown works are embedded in the genetic material of the known works referred to as “American literature.”

²⁵³ This term is Margaret Cohen’s, who calls the entirety of untrafficked texts the “great unread.” See her *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 23.

By framing the “great unread” in both positive terms (as a sort of framework or textual ecosystem from which now-established texts sprang) and negative (as those fringe texts obscured by a combination of systematic devaluation and chaotic accident), I hope to suggest that, far from having some small or far-removed impact on American literature—on its “central” texts, whatever those may be—the shadowy missing remainder of known corpuses defines those corpuses by opposition, while more direct engagement with it (or with theories of it, anyway) encourages twenty-first-century scholars in their efforts toward holistic redefinition of American literary production. Current trends in literary criticism and analysis mirror this shift toward a more holistic conceptualization of American literature—trends that include the reincorporation of marginalized authors and genres; the expansion or demolition of “the” American canon, or canons; the digitization of periodicals and other mass-produced materials; the macroanalysis of these materials for submerged patterns or long-scale trends; the deconstruction or complication of generic boundaries; the increasing popularity in literary journals of recovered texts and archival finds; and the longstanding ethic in criticism of de-simplification, of pushing against received norms, “reading against the grain,” “complicating,” “unpacking,” “queering,” and so on. To see American literature as it is, the “great books” and the “great unread” as a single cluster within a larger universe of texts, and to comprehend the complexities of this superposition, is difficult. It is also the task at hand for critics in the twenty-first century.

Here is where archival research and textual recovery come into play. Locate a missing text by an author like Walt Whitman—for example, a novella like *Life and Adventures of Jack Engle*, or a wellness tract like *Manly Health and Training*—and you

give newfound priority to the eccentricities of Whitman's corpus, complicating common ideas not only of his literary trajectory but also of American authorship and literary production in the nineteenth century. As readers and researchers venture into the "great unread," American literary culture gains nuance and complexity, as new texts and authors are encountered within varying bibliographic contexts. Consequently, longstanding valuations of literary merit and relevance evolve as more information comes to light. For example, regarding Whitman's literary career, Emerson famously sensed a "long foreground" preceding *Leaves of Grass*.²⁵⁴ Yet even with Whitman's preservation of a sizeable portion of that foreground, and with the efforts of generations of scholars to recover more of it, it is still unclear what literary ventures Whitman's pre-*Leaves* career may have entailed, and in what ways his now-unknown texts contributed to Whitman's evolving sense of authorship and his place in the literary marketplace.

Consider what ventures may be left to find, and how they stand to complicate critical understanding of Whitman's professional authorship. *The Sleepwalker* (1850), for example, previously discussed in Chapter 2, is a historical novel Whitman adapted for serialization. Assuming its existence (which seems likely, given Whitman's specifications about the work), the recovery of *The Sleepwalker* would more fully establish Whitman's career chronology as novelist first, poet second—more or less in line with how scholars currently conceive of Melville's literary career. It would also open up whole new literary modes in Whitman's development. As a historical novel, *The Sleepwalker* would be Whitman's first and only known work of fiction to be based on actual events—much like Melville's *Israel Potter* (1854-5). Likewise, it would be his

²⁵⁴ See Emerson's letter, quoted without his permission, in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn: Fowler & Wells, 1856), 345.

first *adapted* work of fiction, given its origins in Danish novelist B.S. Ingemann's *The Childhood of King Erik Menved* (1828, transl. 1846). The latter novel is a long and operatic depiction of a king's maturity, and it is interesting to know that Whitman likely adapted it in 1850, the same year in which he became enamored with opera.²⁵⁵ In any case, to find that Whitman had published a novel based on another (translated) novel about medieval Danish royalty—possibly resetting it in an American context—would complicate notions of Whitman's relationships to cultural transmission, European history, literary translation, creative appropriation, serialization, and sentimentalism. (*Erik Menved* is a sentimental work.) It would also support the possibility, already opened by *Jack Engle*, that Whitman enjoyed a substantial early career as a novelist.

Consider that he also wrote out plot outlines for a novel he considered titling *Proud Antoinette*. This “New York Romance of to-day”—which he also toyed with titling *The Fate of Antoinette* or *Antoinette the Courtesan*—was to be a full-length fictional work about a haughty New York prostitute (Antoinette) who falls for with a young man, drawing him away from his intended lover, “an upright noble girl...whom he has been in love with till inviegled [*sic*] by Antoinette.”²⁵⁶ Ultimately, a murder is committed, the young man's life is ruined, and Antoinette the prostitute is revealed to be a Quakeress whose real name is Ruth Anderson. As with *Jack Engle*, Whitman's notes for this story are extensive, including the establishment both of unique character names (Antoinette, Hamp Anderson, Oliver Sanclare, Josephine) and of a well-wrought city

²⁵⁵ See, for example, a trio of letters Whitman sent to the editor of the *National Era* in 1850, under the pseudonym “Paumanok.” Though ostensibly about politics and street life, they invariably return to the subject of Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind, then touring the US under the aegis of P.T. Barnum.

²⁵⁶ See Whitman's *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 6 vols., ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York UP, 1964), 1:402.

mystery tale, one with “[m]ovement—dialogue,—incident.”²⁵⁷ As David S. Reynolds has noted, these were “the same kind of steamy potboilers that were filling the pockets of sensational writers and their publishers.”²⁵⁸ He and other scholars date this particular manuscript to the late 1850s, around the time of *Manly Health and Training* (1858), given that some of Whitman’s “Antoinette” notes are on the reverse of one his drafts for a *Manly Health* placard notice. However, William White suspects that the tale or “novelette” may have been written several years earlier. In any case, *Proud Antoinette* has a good probability of having been completed, and published. A fragment of the narrative even exists, in manuscript form.²⁵⁹ Again, discovering that Whitman had finished another novel (what would be his fourth completed novel manuscript) and that he potentially sold it for publication, would reveal a great deal about his authorial practices and personae circa the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*. It would also further deepen the current critical understanding of Whitman’s relationships to sensationalism, heterosexual norms, the institution of prostitution, and the female prostitute as poetic subject (something to which Whitman returns repeatedly in *Leaves*).

Thus, by recovering such works, researchers can further illuminate a historically dim period in Whitman’s writing career. They can also more fully flesh out the literary and periodicals marketplaces of the mid-nineteenth century. But, perhaps most encouragingly of all, they can reemphasize the importance of looking to and thinking about the “great unread”—that amorphous, ill-defined, but undoubtedly huge portion of the American Archive that is untrafficked, sometimes undigitized, and largely unknown.

²⁵⁷ *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, 1:402.

²⁵⁸ See Reynolds’ *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 206.

²⁵⁹ See William White’s “Whitman as Short Story Writer: Two Unpublished Manuscripts,” *Notes and Queries* 9 (March 1962), 89.

It is this portion of our printed literature (the majority, really) and literary culture, in all its complexity, that stands as the major lacuna in American literary study today. Its reemergence, physically and digitally, will be one of the great advances of the twenty-first century—and in the meantime, its influence may be felt in every single American text known to us.

*What are those of the known but
to ascend and enter the
Unknown?*

-Walt Whitman, "Portals" (1881)