

CHAPTER 2

WALT WHITMAN'S JOURNALISM

THE FOREGROUND OF LEAVES OF GRASS

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WALT WHITMAN WROTE THAT HIS POETRY VOLUME *Leaves of Grass* (1855) grew from cultural ground that was "already ploughed and manured"; he declared that it was "useless to attempt reading the book without first carefully tallying that preparatory background."¹ Much of this preparation came in the form of the writings he contributed to newspapers during the two decades just before *Leaves of Grass* appeared. Exploring this journalistic apprentice work puts the lie to the standard view of Whitman as a solitary rebel against an American culture that was tame, prudish, or sentimental. To the contrary, many characteristics of Whitman's poetry—its defiance, its radical democracy, its sexual candor, its innovative imagery and rhythms—reflect his long-term participation in new forms of boisterous journalism that mirrored Jacksonian America's bumptious spirit in a time of urban growth, territorial expansion, and zestful reform movements. Whitman experimented with virtually every type of journalistic writing then popular, whose themes and images fed directly into his major poetry. If journalism helped generate his themes, it also led him to view poetry as the surest means of healing his nation, which was on the verge of unraveling due to the slavery controversy. In his newspaper pieces, Whitman, a free-soil Democrat, lambasted abolitionists and proslavery Southern fire-eaters, who were both calling for a separation of the North and the South. His journalistic denunciations of disunionists led him to fashion a new kind of poetic persona, a loving, democratic "I"

Thesis paragraph - anticipates the whole paper.

give

They say

I say

main Thesis

main Thesis (cont.)



Figure 2.1 Walt Whitman, 1819–92, engraving by Samuel Hollyer.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

who embraced not only Southerners and Northerners but people of all ethnicities and nationalities in verse of unparalleled expansiveness.

Whitman's introduction to journalism came in the summer of 1831 when, as a twelve-year-old Brooklynite trying to help out his struggling family after having dropped out of school the year before, he became a printer's apprentice for Samuel E. Clements's Democratic weekly *The Long Island Patriot*. Whitman soon switched newspapers, taking a job as a compositor for the Whig *Long Island Star*, edited by Alden Spooner. He stayed with the vibrant, influential Spooner for three years before taking on a similar job in Manhattan. These printing jobs, which involved working with an iron hand press, instilled in him a lifelong appreciation for the physical process of making books. He would help format and typeset the famous 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and he had a controlling hand in printing later editions of the volume. "I like to supervise the production of my books," he would say, adding that an author "might be the maker even of the body of his book (—set the type, print the book on a press, put a cover on it, all with his own hands)."²

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In 1835, a tremendous fire destroyed much of Manhattan's newspaper district, and Whitman for a few years traversed Long Island, teaching in one-room schoolhouses while keeping his hand in journalism. In the spring of 1838, in between teaching jobs, he founded a weekly newspaper, the *Long Islander*, which he ran out of Huntington. Not only did he serve as the paper's editor, compositor, and pressman; each week he also did home delivery by riding his horse Nina on a thirty-mile circuit in the Huntington area.

Transition

He was no entrepreneur, however, and the exigencies of a daily schedule did not suit one who would famously write, "I lean and loafe at my ease."³ After ten months he sold the *Long Islander*. He worked briefly as a compositor for a Manhattan newspaper and then as a typesetter for the *Long Island Democrat* in the town of Jamaica. For the latter paper he wrote "The Sun-Down Papers," a series of short prose pieces, including a didactic essay that denounced the use of tobacco, coffee, or tea and an allegory that questioned the idea of religious certainty.

Pursuing journalism, which at the time appeared to be his career choice, Whitman started writing in earnest for a variety of newspapers. After his arrival in New York City from Long Island in May 1841 he wrote for John L. O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review*, which would continue to publish works of his for years. In the fall he became a compositor for Park Benjamin's *New World*, a weekly magazine with a circulation of nearly 25,000. By January 1842 Whitman's writings were appearing in John Neal's magazine *Brother Jonathan*, which promised the "Cheapest Reading in the World." That spring Whitman edited the New York *Aurora*, a patriotic daily that leaned to nativism. After being discharged from the *Aurora*, apparently for laziness, he worked on an evening paper, the *Tattler*, for which he wrote a bulletin of murders.

Next he became a penny-a-liner for the *Daily Plebeian*, a Democratic Party paper run by the fiery, red-haired locofoco Levi D. Slamm. Whitman's most popular work, the temperance novel *Franklin Evans*, appeared in late 1842 as part of a weekly shilling-novel series. The next spring he edited the *Statesman*, a semiweekly Democratic paper, and that summer he covered the police station and coroner's office as one of eight reporters for Moses Beach's famous penny paper, the New York *Sun*. Early 1844 saw him writing for a time for the *New-York Mirror*, the popular weekly edited by N. P. Willis and George Pope Morris. In July he briefly edited the *Democrat*, a daily morning paper that was supporting James Polk for president and Silas Wright for governor of New York. The following spring he was writing tales for Thomas Dunn English's magazine, *The*

The remarkable variety of his journalist jobs.

Aristidean. By August 1845, when his family returned to Brooklyn after five years in Dix Hills, Whitman left Manhattan for Brooklyn, where he would remain, with only brief periods away, for the next 17 years. In the fall of 1845 he wrote nearly a score of articles for Alden Spooner's *Star*. He had gained enough visibility to be hired as editor of the Democratic organ of Kings County, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which he edited from March 1846 to early 1848.

His antislavery views alienated his conservative employer, Isaac Van Anden, who fired him in January 1848. He was not long out of work. Within a few weeks he met a Southern newspaper owner, J. E. McClure, who hired him as a clipping and rewrite man for the *New Orleans Daily Crescent*. Along with his brother Jeff, Walt traveled south by train and boat, arriving in New Orleans in late February. He was there for three months, working for the *Crescent* and tasting the exotic delights of New Orleans life. His time in New Orleans gave him an attraction to Southern culture that, despite his antislavery position, never left him. As he later wrote, "O magnet-South! O glistening perfumed South! my South!"⁴

In late May, Walt returned to Brooklyn, where in the fall he founded and edited another Brooklyn newspaper, the *Daily Freeman*, designed to advance the cause of the antislavery Free-Soil Party. Like the party it supported, however, the paper was short lived; by the following fall it was taken over by conservative Hunker Democrats. He then entered a long period when he worked as a freelancer and sometime editor for a variety of newspapers and magazines—journalistic work that continued even beyond 1855, when his main creative energies were directed toward the successive editions of the ever-expanding *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman as journalist and Whitman as poet were thus closely intertwined. By looking at his journalistic career, we see where many of his major themes came from.

This period saw a revolution in American journalism. Improvements in technology and distribution made possible the rapid printing and circulation of a new brand of popular journalism. With the publication of Benjamin Day's *New York Sun* in 1833 and James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* two years later, American papers suddenly became mass oriented. Papers that cost just one or two pennies largely supplanted the stodgy six-cent papers of the past. Lively, democratic, and informative, the penny papers attracted the attention of nearly all observers of American culture, including Whitman, who wrote of them in the *Aurora* in 1842, "Everywhere their influence is felt. No man can measure it, for it is immeasurable."⁵ Whitman saw the penny papers as a democratizing influence that

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of Themes
in Walt's
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brought knowledge to the masses. "Among newspapers," he wrote, "the penny press is the same as common schools among seminaries of education."⁶ This positive attitude toward the penny papers was reflected in "A Song for Occupations," where Whitman mentions among things to be sung "the column of wants in the one-cent papers" and "Cheap literature, maps, charts, lithographs, daily and weekly newspapers."⁷

glue
in his poetry

Transition

Though Whitman saw the penny press as a force for egalitarianism, he knew well the brutal, sensational side of American journalism. He noted "the superiority of tone of the London and Paris press over our cheaper and more diffused papers," and concluded, "Scurrility—the truth may as well be told—is a sin of the American newspaper press."⁸ The newspaper world he inhabited was an explosive one of colorful personalities and crude behavior. Newspapers editors often resorted to the bare-fisted tactics used also by the street gangs of the day. The controversial penny-press editor James Gordon Bennett was attacked on the street no fewer than three times; he played up the incidents in his *Herald*, regaling readers with details of each assault. Whitman leaped into the rough competition. As editor of the *Aurora* in 1842, he branded Bennett as "a reptile marking his path with slime wherever he goes, . . . a midnight ghou, preying on rottenness and repulsive filth, . . . [a] despicable soul . . . whom no one blesses."⁹ He would later use such slashing rhetoric in his political tract *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, where he compared corrupt politicians to lice, corpses, maggots, and venereal sores. Similarly demonic imagery governs his darkly ironic political poems "Respondez!," "Wounded in the House of Friends," and "Blood Money."

Topic sentence

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America's penny newspapers were known for their sensational content. Anything juicy or diverting—a "Mysterious Disappearance," a "Horrible Accident," a "Double Suicide," or "Incest by a Clergyman on His Three Daughters"—was considered fit news to print. Emerson noted in his journal that his countrymen spent their time "reading all day murders & railroad accidents" in newspapers.¹⁰ Thoreau knew the popular press well enough to speak of the "startling and monstrous events as fill the daily papers."¹¹ In 1842 the London *Foreign Quarterly Review* generalized, "[T]he more respectable the city in America, the more infamous, the more disgusting and degrading we have found to be its Newspaper Press."¹²

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Allied with the penny papers was a racy genre of urban fiction, on the "mysteries and miseries" of American cities, that was produced by best-selling writers such as George Lippard and George Thompson, who doubled as novelists and journalists. City-mysteries fiction ran with blood and reeked of murder and madness. It was voyeuristically erotic,

featuring women whose "snowy globes" and sexual adventures were regularly described. Thompson's city-mysteries novels treated various kinds of sex: adultery, incest, child sex, orgies, miscegenation. In a newspaper article Whitman described the popularity of "blood and thunder romances with alliterative titles and plots of startling interest." "The public for whom these tales are written," he noted, "require strong contrasts, broad effects and the fiercest kind of 'intense' writing generally."¹³

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Whitman had a vexed relationship to the culture of sensationalism. On the one hand, as a journalist he catered to sensation-hungry readers. He identified the love of sensationalism as America's leading characteristic: "If there be one characteristic of ourselves, as a people, more prominent than the others, it is our intense love of excitement. We must have our sensation, and we can no more do without it than the staggering inebriate can dispense with his daily dram."¹⁴ The fact that he reported murders for the *Tattler*, wrote police and coroner's stories for the *Sun*, and used hyperbolic headlines about horrors in the *Daily Eagle* (e.g., "Horrible—A Son Killed by his Father" or "Scalded to Death")¹⁵ suggests his willing participation in this sensational culture. As editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Times* he printed reports of rapes, murder, incest, and one case of homosexual rape. Nearly two-thirds of the poetry and short fiction he wrote before 1855 were dark or adventurous. A typical early poem, "The Inca's Daughter," portrays a native woman who is tortured on the rack and then commits suicide by stabbing herself with a poisoned arrow. Another, "The Spanish Lady," pictures a woman who is knifed by "one whose trade is blood and crime."¹⁶ Whitman wrote several tales—including "Death in the School Room," "Richard Parker's Widow," and "The Half-Breed"—that likewise appealed to the popular appetite for the violent or grisly. He used dark images throughout his temperance novel *Franklin Evans*, and he began writing a city-mysteries novel, *Proud Antoinette: A New York Romance of To-Day*, involving a young man lured away from his virtuous girlfriend by a passionate prostitute who causes his moral ruin.

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examples of Whitman writing sensational materials

Still, Whitman increasingly tried to distance himself from sensational culture. In his major poetry, he included sensational imagery but made a willed effort to cleanse it of what he saw as its exploitative, purely diverting associations. Many moments in his poetry fall under the rubric of sensationalism. His most famous poem, "Song of Myself," contains an array of sensational images, including the suicide sprawled on the floor, the bedraggled prostitute, the opium addict, people afflicted with disfiguring illnesses, and the bloody battle of Goliad, where hundreds of soldiers were slaughtered. As a writer dedicated to absorbing his nation, Whitman

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There is about how he treated sensational images in his poetry

glue from his poetry

knew he had to register such sensational phenomena in order to attain his goal of being a representative poet. But he adopted sensational themes with the specific intent of cleansing or uplifting them. In his best-known poems, sensational passages are framed by affirmative ones. Horrid occurrences, he showed, are a part of the rhythm of life, which also brings to the fore the beautiful and inspiring.

He was also aware of the public's fascination with sexual themes. In the mid-1850s, when he once spotted a teenager selling pornographic books, he snarled, "That's a New York reptile. There's poison about his fangs, I think."¹⁷ Surveying the popular literature of the period, he lamented, "[A]ll the novels, all the poems, really dish up only . . . various forms and preparations of one plot, namely, a sickly, scrofulous, crude amorousness."¹⁸ Whitman sharply distinguished *Leaves of Grass* from this material: "No one would more rigidly keep in mind the difference between the simply erotic, the merely lascivious, and what is frank, free, and modern, in sexual behavior, than I would: no one."¹⁹ William Douglas O'Connor, Whitman's friend and strongest defender, asserted that *Leaves of Grass* must not be lumped with "the anonymous lascivious trash spawned in holes and sold in corners, too witless and disgusting for any notice but that of the police."²⁰

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Whitman tried to remove sex from the lurid, furtive realm of popular sensationalism and direct it toward what he described as the wholesome realms of "physiology" and "sanity." He treated sex with a candor that accentuated its naturalness and normality. Throughout his poetry, largely because of the influence of the physiologists Orson Fowler and Samuel R. Wells, who distributed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and published the second one, he treated sex and the body in what he considered to be a physiological, artistic way as a contrast to what he saw as the cheapened, often perverse forms of sexual expression in popular culture. "Who will underrate the influence of a loose popular literature in debauching the popular mind?" he asked in a magazine article.²¹ Directly opposing the often grotesque versions of eroticism appearing in sensational romances, he wrote in the 1855 preface: "Exaggerations will be sternly revenged in (human physiology). . . . As soon as histories are properly told, there is no more need for romances."²² Priding himself on candid acceptance of the body, he announced in his first poem: "Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean."²³ He sang the naturalness of copulation and the sanctity of the sexual organs: "Perfect and clean the genitals previously jetting, and perfect and clean the womb cohering."²⁴ In poems such as "I Sing the Body Electric" and "Spontaneous Me" he

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listed the parts of the human body, including the sex organs, with the openness of a physiologist.

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examples of disagreeable city life

The same improving strategy Whitman applied to sensationalism and sex in his major poetry characterized his treatment of city life. The American city then was in many respects disagreeable. In a day before asphalt, the ill-lit streets of Manhattan were mostly unpaved. As Whitman often noted, they became mud sinks in the winter and dust bowls in the summer. Since sewage was primitive, garbage and slops were tossed into the streets, providing a feast for roaming hogs, then the most effective means of waste disposal. In addition to the pigs, there were cows that were regularly herded up public avenues to graze in outlying farm areas. Since police forces were not yet well organized, crime was a problem in Manhattan, which Whitman called "one of the most crime-haunted and dangerous cities in all of Christendom."

gmc: WW complains of city.

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Whitman complained in newspaper articles that even his relatively clean home city, Brooklyn, had problems similar to Manhattan's. Since the city's drinking water still came from public pumps, Whitman feared Brooklynites were being slowly poisoned. He wrote in the *Brooklyn Daily Advertiser*, "Imagine all the accumulations of filth in a great city—not merely the slops and rotteness thrown in the streets and byways (and never thoroughly carried away)—but the numberless privies, cess-pools, sinks and gulches of abomination—the perpetual replenishing of all this mass of effete matter—the unnameable and unmeasurable dirt that is ever, ever filtered into the earth through its myriad pores, and which as surely finds its way into the neighborhood pump-water, as that a drop of poison put in one part of the vascular system, gets into the whole system."²⁵

gmc: WW's harsh words on city life

As for street animals, Brooklyn featured an even greater variety than Manhattan, since it was a thoroughfare to the farms on nearby Long Island. The problem provoked this outburst by Whitman in the *Star*: "Our city is literally overrun with swine, outraging all decency, and foraging upon every species of eatables within their reach. . . . Hogs, Dogs and Cows should be banished from our streets. There is not a city in the United States as large as Brooklyn, where the cleanliness and decency of its streets is so neglected as here."²⁶

gmc: WW on unsanitary Brooklyn

- TOPIC SENTENCE

The city that appears in Whitman's poetry is not the squalid, perilous place he lamented in his journalism. In his most famous urban poem, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," he views both Brooklyn and Manhattan from the improving distance of a ferryboat that runs between them. The poem cleanses the city through distancing and through refreshing nature

Transition →
to his poetry: the majestic, cleansed city.

city in his
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imagery. Manhattan is not the filthy, chaotic "Gomorrah" of Whitman's journalism but rather "stately and admirable . . . mast-hemm'd Manhattan."²⁷ Brooklyn is not the hog-infested, crowded city of his editorials but rather the city of "beautiful hills" viewed from the sparkling river on a sunlit afternoon.

If in his journalism he often lamented the city's filth and crime, in "Song of Myself" he turned to its dazzle and show: "The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders."²⁸ In his poetry he calls New York City "Mannahatta," an ennobling Native American word that he called a "choice aboriginal name, with marvellous beauty."²⁹ Whitman used it as a synonym for "city of hurried and sparkling waters."³⁰ The water connotation became increasingly important to Whitman as urban squalor and political corruption grew in the late fifties. His poem "Mannahatta" delectates in the name while it minimizes less admirable features of the city:

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I see that word nested in nests of water-bays, superb,
Rich, hemm'd thick all around with sailships and steamships, an island
sixteen miles long, solid-founded,
Numberless crowded streets, high growth of iron, slender, strong, light,
splendidly uprising toward clear skies.

transition

Just as he poeticized the city, so he improved on the denizens of the city streets. Because prostitution was by far the best-paying work women could then get, it was ubiquitous on the streets of Manhattan. If Whitman tried to uplift the city as a whole in his poetry, he also attempted to dignify the prostitute. In "Song of Myself" he mentions the "tipsy and pimpled" prostitute whom the world derides. He writes, "Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer at you."³¹ He devoted a poem, "To a Common Prostitute," to investing a sex worker with dignity. "Be composed—be at ease with me," the persona announces. "My girl I appoint with you an appointment, and I charge you that you make preparation to be worthy to meet me."

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He also presented flattering portraits of two types of males common on urban streets: the "b'hoj" (or "Bowery Boy") and the "rough." When Whitman describes himself as "Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding," he is not giving an accurate account of himself.³² If the hard-hitting machismo of his persona says little about Whitman, it says a lot about the roistering street types he wrote about in newspapers. The b'hoj was typically a butcher or other worker who spent after-hours

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running to fires with engines, going on target excursions, or promenading on the Bowery with his g'hal. The b'hoj clipped his hair short in back, kept his long side locks heavily greased with soap, and perched a stove-pipe hat jauntily on his head. He always had a cigar or chaw of tobacco in his mouth. As a New Yorker who fraternized with common people, Whitman mingled with the workers who made up the b'hoj population. One of his goals as a poet was to capture the vitality and defiance of the b'hoj:

The boy I love, the same becomes a man not through derived power, but in his own right,
Wicked rather than virtuous out of conformity or fear,
Fond of his sweetheart, relishing well his steak,
Unrequited love or a slight cutting him worse than sharp steel cuts,
First-rate to ride, to fight, to hit the bull's eye, to sail a skiff, to sing a song or play on the banjo,
Preferring scars and the beard and faces pitted with smallpox over all latherers,
And those well-tann'd to those that keep out of the sun.³³

quote from WW poem.

His whole persona in *Leaves of Grass*—wicked rather than conventionally virtuous, free, smart, prone to slang and vigorous outbursts—reflects the b'hoj culture. One early reviewer opined that his poems reflected “the extravagance, coarseness, and general ‘loudness’ of Bowery boys,” with also their candor and acceptance of the body.³⁴ Others referred to him simply as “Walt Whitman the b'hoj poet” and “the ‘Bowery Bhoj’ in literature.”³⁵

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Another street group Whitman wrote about in newspapers was variously called the “roughs,” “rowdies,” or “loafers”: a class of gang members and street loungers who roved through Manhattan's poorer districts and often instigated riots. Rival companies of roughs formed gangs with names such as the Plug Uglies, the Roach Guards, the Shirt Tails, or the Dead Rabbits. In a time of rapid urbanization and economic dislocation, gangs provided certain of the urban poor a sense of identity and an outlet for violent impulses.

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Whitman's poems presented an improved version of street types whose tendencies to violence and vulgarity he lambasted in newspaper articles. One of the constant themes of his journalism was that rowdiness and bad habits were all too common among the street toughs of New York and Brooklyn. He thought urban loafing was often mingled with viciousness. In an 1845 article he asked, “How much of your leisure time do you give

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gme. → | to loafing? What vulgar habits of smoking cigars, chewing tobacco, or making frequent use of blasphemous or obscene language?"³⁶ In "Rowdyism in Brooklyn," a piece he wrote for the *Eagle*, he lamented the anarchic violence and loud obscenities of roving youths. A decade later, he feared the situation had worsened. "Mobs and murderers appear to rule the hour," he wrote in 1857 in the *Brooklyn Daily Times*. "The revolver rules, the revolver is triumphant."³⁷ "Rowdyism Rampant" was the title of an alarmed piece in which he denounced the "law-defying loafers who make the fights, and disturb the public peace"; he prophesied that "someday decent folks will take the matter into their own hands and put down, with a strong will, this rum-swilling, rampant set of rowdies and roughs."³⁸

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Transition

gme from
his poetry

If he chastised the rowdies and loafers in his journalism, he presented an improved version of them in his poetry. "Already a nonchalant breed, silently emerging, appears on the streets," he wrote in one poem, describing the type in another poem as "Arrogant, masculine, naive, rowdyish[. . .] Attitudes lithe and erect, costume free, neck open, of slow movement on foot."³⁹ Early reviewers of *Leaves of Grass* saw the link between the poet and New York street culture. The very first reviewer placed Whitman in the "class of society sometimes irreverently styled 'loafers.'"⁴⁰ Another wrote, "Walt Whitman is evidently the 'representative man' of the 'roughs.'"⁴¹

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Some, however, realized that Whitman was a rough with a difference. Charles Eliot Norton in *Putnam's* called him "a compound of New England transcendentalist and New York rowdy."⁴² Those who saw Whitman's infusion of a philosophical, contemplative element into street types accurately gauged his poetic purpose. Appalled by squalid forms of urban loafing, he outlined new forms of loafing in his poems. "Walt Whitman, an American, (one of the roughs) a kosmos": this famous self-description in "Song of Myself" uplifts the rough by placing him between words that radiate patriotism ("an American") and mysticism ("a kosmos").⁴³ Purposely in his poems Whitman shuttled back and forth between the grimy and the spiritual with the aim of cleansing the quotidian types that sometimes disturbed him.

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The same recuperative process that governed his poetic treatment of popular literature and city life characterized his depiction of politics. He deployed his poetic persona to heal a nation he thought was on the verge of coming apart. Although Whitman associated with reformers of all stripes and absorbed their subversive spirit, he adopted none of their programs for social change. He feared was what then was called "ultraism,"

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or any form of extreme social activism that threatened to rip apart the social fabric.

His ambivalence toward abolitionism was especially revelatory. On the one hand, he hated slavery and wished to see it abolished. As an anti-slavery, Barnburner Democrat, he came out against slavery in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the *Daily Freeman*. He editorialized on behalf of the Wilmot Proviso, a congressional proposal that would have banned slavery in any new territories conquered during the Mexican War.

At the same time, he could not tolerate abolitionism as it was advocated by the era's leading antislavery reformer, William Lloyd Garrison, who condemned the Constitution as "a covenant with death" and "an agreement with Hell" because of its implicit support of slavery. Garrison's battle cry, "No union with slaveholders!," reflected his conviction that the North should immediately separate from the slaveholding South.⁴⁴

In the *Eagle*, Whitman, who prized the Constitution and the Union, called the Abolitionists "a few and foolish red-hot fanatics" and an "angry-voiced and silly set."⁴⁵ He wrote, "The abominable fanaticism of the Abolitionists has aroused the other side of the feeling—and thus retarded the very consummation desired by the Abolitionist faction."⁴⁶ He hated the nullification doctrines of Southern fire-eaters as much as he did the disunionism of the Garrisonians. He explained, "Despising and condemning the dangerous and fanatical insanity of 'Abolitionism'—as impracticable as it is wild—the *Brooklyn Eagle* just as much condemns the other extreme from that."⁴⁷

His views were similar to those of Lincoln, who also opposed slavery yet hated abolitionism because he prized the Union above all. Despite their similarity of views, Lincoln and Whitman chose different methods of dealing with slavery. Lincoln chose the accepted method of politics. Whitman, in contrast, thought that politics, which he considered corrupt and impotent, could not resolve the slavery crisis. Only poetry could. His earliest jottings in his characteristic prose-like verse showed him attempting to balance antislavery and proslavery views in poetry. Fearing above all a separation of the Union, he penned lines in his notebook in which an imagined "I" identified lovingly with both sides of the slavery divide: "I am the poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves / I enter into both."⁴⁸ The message of these lines was clear: balance and equipoise by poetic fiat. The kind of balance he asserted in his notebook entry became far more crucial with the disturbing occurrences of the fifties, especially intensifying sectional debate over slavery. The poet was to be the balancer or equalizer of his land. "He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the

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glue for his dismissal of both political extremes

like Lincoln

glue for WW's "I" as unifier

key," Whitman emphasizes in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*. "He is the equalizer of his age and land . . . he supplies what wants supplying and checks what wants checking."⁴⁹ Seeing that the national Union was imperiled by Northern Abolitionists and Southern fire-eaters, in the 1855 preface he affirmed "the union always surrounded by blatherers and always calm and impregnable."

He knew that Southerners and Northerners were virtually at each other's throats, so he made a point in his poems constantly to link the opposing groups. In the 1855 preface he assures his readers that the American poet shall "not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern."⁵⁰ In his opening poem he proclaimed himself "A southerner soon as a northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable down by the Oconee I live, / [. . .] At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or the Texan ranch." Whitman creates "a loving "I" who assumes simultaneously a Northern and a Southern perspective."

In his search for healing agents to repair social divisions, Whitman didn't turn solely to an imagined first-person singular. He also drew off of several cultural phenomena—particularly art and music—he had come to know as a journalist.

Nearly half of his newspaper articles in the late 1840s and early 1850s were related to art. He wrote pieces on all the major New York-area art galleries. He became so closely associated with the art scene that he was chosen to give the keynote address at the Brooklyn Art Union's prize ceremony on March 31, 1851. He was nominated to be president of the Union and probably would have been elected to the position had the organization not disbanded later that year.

The galleries Whitman wrote about were filled with life-affirming, nature-affirming works: the Hudson River paintings of Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, and Thomas Doughty; the Greek revival sculpture of Horatio Greenough and Hiram Powers; the peaceful landscapes of Fitz Hugh Lane, Sanford Gifford, and John F. Kensett; the epic luminist canvases of Frederic Edwin Church. Whitman was committed to the union of matter and spirit, the real and the ideal that informed antebellum painting. He responded especially favorably to Doughty, whom he called "the prince of landscapists" and "the best of American painters," and Durand, about whom he wrote, "all he does is good."⁵¹ These painters used a near-photographic style in the faith that nature in its unembellished details always pointed toward God's harmonious universe. They tried to allow the viewer to experience creation afresh, particularly in the form of still

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landscapes tinged with iridescence. Whitman, following the democratic trend to get directly back to the creation in art, gave the Adamic promise of unadulterated, sun-washed nature and a return to origins:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand.⁵²

Whitman regarded art as a powerful force for social unity and healing. In a newspaper article titled "Polishing the Common People," he called for the widespread distribution of artworks: "We could wish the spreading of a sort of democratical artistic atmosphere among the inhabitants of our republic."⁵³ He felt this democratic spirit especially strongly in the genre paintings of the day. Genre painters like George Caleb Bingham, William Sidney Mount, George Catlin, and Alfred Jacob Miller depicted hearty outdoor types (farmers, hunters, trappers, riverboat men) good-humoredly engaged in some form of leisurely, often prankish activity—ample fodder for similar images in Whitman's exuberant poetic catalogs. Genre painting also offered the promise of interracial bonding, since it treated blacks and Indians with little of the overt racism that permeated then American society. Whitman, in his concern over his nation's sectional and ethnic divisions, appreciated the sympathetic portraits of blacks by his fellow Long Islander William Sidney Mount. In an article on American art, Whitman mentioned having seen "Mount's last work—I think his best—of a Long Island negro, the winner of a goose at raffle."⁵⁴ Whitman's scenes of racial harmony, like the passage in "Song of Myself" about the African American team driver, whom the poem's speaker praises as a "picturesque giant," had precedent in Mount paintings.⁵⁵ Whitman also had high regard for genre paintings of Indians. In the *Daily Eagle* he wrote that George Catlin's paintings of Indians were a national treasure, and his moving description in "Song of Myself" of the marriage between the white trapper and the native woman is based on Alfred Jacob Miller's interracial painting *The Trapper's Bride*.⁵⁶

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Just as important to Whitman as painting was music, which he often wrote about in newspaper columns. Surveying all the entertainment experiences of his young manhood, he wrote, "Perhaps my dearest amusement reminiscences are those musical ones."⁵⁷ Music was such a strong force on him that he saw himself less as a poet than as a singer or bard.

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Among the titles of his poems 72 different musical terms appear. In the poems themselves 25 musical instruments are mentioned. The dominant musical image group in his poetry derives from vocal music. Of the 206 musical words in his poems, more than half relate specifically to vocal music, and some are used many times. *Song* appears 154 times, *sing* 117, and *singing* and *singers* more than 30 times each.⁵⁸

Whitman regarded music, like painting, as a prime agent for unity and uplift in a nation whose tendencies to fragmentation he sought to counteract. He had confidence in Americans' shared love of music. In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* he mentioned specifically "their delight in music, the sure symptom of manly tenderness and native elegance of soul."⁵⁹ As he explained in an 1855 magazine article, "A taste for music, when widely distributed among a people, is one of the surest indications of their moral purity, amiability, and refinement. It promotes sociality, represses the grosser manifestations of the passions, and substitutes in their place all that is beautiful and artistic."⁶⁰ By becoming himself a "bard" singing poetic "songs," he hoped to tap the potential for aesthetic appreciation he saw in Americans' positive responses to their shared musical culture.

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America witnessed a musical explosion in the antebellum period. Whitman wrote newspaper articles about the succession of foreign musical masters—singers, instrumentalists, and orchestras—that toured America in the 1840s and 1850s. In his early journalism, Whitman reserved his highest praise for music that sprang from indigenous soil and embodied the idioms and concerns of average Americans. He discovered such music in the family singers that attained immense popularity in the mid-1840s. In a series of newspaper articles written from 1845 to 1847 he rejoiced over what he saw as the distinctly American qualities of the new family singers. The Cheneys, a quartet of three brothers and a sister from New Hampshire, thrilled him when he first heard them in November 1845 at Niblo's Theatre. In an article for the *Brooklyn Star* titled "American Music, New and True!" he raved, "For the first time we, on Monday night, heard something in the way of American music, which overpowered us with delightful amazement."⁶¹ He declared that they "excel all the much vaunted foreign artists." He revised and expanded this article four times in the next year to include other singing families, particularly the Hutchinsons. In all its versions, the message was the same: what he termed the "art music" of the foreign musicians was overly elaborate and fundamentally aristocratic, while the "heart music" of the American families was natural and democratic.

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The sudden popularity of the family singers fueled his dream that a thoroughly American musical style would overthrow the European: "Simple, fresh, and beautiful, we hope no spirit of imitation will ever induce them to engraft any 'foreign airs' upon their 'native graces.' We want this sort of starting point from which to mould something new and true in American music; if we are not greatly mistaken the spirit of the Hutchinson's and Cheney's singing will be followed by a spreading and imitation that will entirely supplant, as far as this country is concerned, the affected, super-sentimental kid-gloved . . . style of music which comes to us from Italy and France."⁶²

Whitman in his poetry would strive for naturalness and what he called "a perfectly transparent, plate-glass style, artless," characterized by "clearness, simplicity, no twistified or foggy sentences."⁶³ It was this kind of artlessness he saw in the Hutchinsons. "Elegant simplicity in manner," he wrote of them, "is more judicious than the dancing school bows and curtsies, and inane smiles, and kissing of the tips of a kid glove a la [Rosina] Pico."⁶⁴ Whitman valued the fact that the Hutchinsons sang about common American experience and the ordinary lives of average individuals. In the *Eagle* he noted that they "are true sons of the Old Granite State; they are democrats."⁶⁵

The Hutchinsons also developed the stylistic device of solo and group singing. In their performances, male and female solos by each of the four singers were interspersed with tight choral harmonies. Whitman was fascinated by the technique. He was powerfully stirred by the rich vocal mixtures the singing families introduced, a mixture best captured in his poem "That Music Always Round Me," which describes a singing group that includes a tenor ("strong, ascending with power and health, with glad notes of daybreak"), a soprano ("at intervals sailing buoyantly over the tops of immense waves"), and a bass ("shuddering lusciously under and through the universe").⁶⁶ The family singers' extraordinary power, which he had often described journalistically, yielded the memorable line: "I listen to the different voices winding in and out, striving, contending with fiery vehemence to excel each other in emotion."

Responsive to the emotional music of the singing families, Whitman was also increasingly inspired by a more sophisticated form: the opera. He admired the great opera singers who came to America in the early fifties. The opera rage began in April 1847 when a famous Italian company opened at the Park Theatre. Whitman declared in the *Eagle* that "the Italian opera deserves a good degree of encouragement from us."⁶⁷ He heard

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at least 16 of the major singers who made their New York debuts in the next eight years.

Among the opera stars, the one that shone brightest for him was Marietta Alboni, the great contralto who also sang soprano roles. Having been coached in Italy by Rossini, Alboni, after several European tours, arrived in New York in the summer of 1852 and gave more than twenty performances over the next year. Whitman reported that he attended all her concerts. He paid tribute to Alboni in "Song of Myself," where he writes, "I hear the train'd soprano (what work with hers is this?), . . . It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess'd them."⁶⁸ In another poem he writes, "The lustrious [sic] orb, Venus contralto, the blooming mother, / Sister of the loftiest gods, Alboni's self I hear."

Whitman had long sought a music that was at once sophisticated and populist, and he found it at last in Alboni. "All persons appreciated Alboni," he noted, "the common crowd as well as the connoisseurs."⁶⁹ He was thrilled to see the upper tier of theaters "packed full of New York young men, mechanics, 'roughs,' etc., entirely oblivious of all except Alboni." In an article titled "The Opera" he wrote, "A new world—a liquid world—rushes like a torrent through you."⁷⁰ He ended the piece by calling for an American music that might rival Europe's: "This is art! You envy Italy, and almost become an enthusiast; you wish an equal art here, and an equal science and style, underlain by a perfect understanding of American realities, and the appropriateness of our national spirit and body also."

In his poems Whitman tried to forge a new kind of singing, one that highlighted American themes but also integrated operatic techniques. "Walt Whitman's method in the construction of his songs is strictly the method of the Italian Opera," he would write in 1860, and to a friend he confided, "But for the opera I could not have written *Leaves of Grass*."⁷¹ Many of the emotionally expressive, melodic passages, such as the bird's song in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" or the death hymn in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," follow the slow pattern of the aria. The more expansive, conversational passages in his poetry follow the looser rhythm of the operatic recitative.

Whitman's long and varied experience in journalism, then, exposed him to many cultural materials that provided fodder for his magnificent poetry. The poet fails, he says in the 1855 preface, if "he does not flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides." For Whitman, this cultural immersion came when he was a journalist with an eye trained on his surroundings. "Remember," he would say, "the book [*Leaves of*

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grass] arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people, for fifteen years, with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equalled.⁷² The poet who boasted "I am large, I contain multitudes" had learned lasting lessons about democracy and art as a writer for American periodicals.⁷³ He had also developed a deep devotion to communicating with readers through the written word. In the *Daily Eagle*, he wrote, "There is a curious kind of sympathy (haven't you ever thought of it before?) that arises in the mind of a newspaper conductor with the public he serves. . . . Daily communion creates a sort of brotherhood and sisterhood between the two parties."⁷⁴ This statement anticipates the famous line in his 1860 poem "So Long": "Who touches this touches a man."⁷⁵ Journalism forged deep connections between Whitman and his readers, connections that produced poetry of both unprecedented intimacy and a democratic openness to the teeming nation around him.

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NOTES

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3. "Song of Myself," *CP* 27.
4. "O Magnet-South," *CP* 584.
5. *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*, ed. Joseph J. Rubin and Charles H. Brown (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1950), 112.
6. *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*, 12.
7. "A Song for Occupations" (original version), *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems, 1855-1856*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold W. Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White, I (New York: New York University Press, 1980): 96.
8. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 8, 1847, and February 26, 1847.
9. *Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora*, 115.
10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, journal entry for May 1852 *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 433.

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13. *Brooklyn Daily Times*, December 13, 1858; and *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1921), II: 20–21.
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18. *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), IV: 1604.
19. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, IV (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959[1953]): 388.
20. William Douglas O’Connor, *The Good Gray Poet* (1866; rpt., Richard Maurice Bucke, *Walt Whitman* [New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970]), 108.
21. *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from the Brooklyn Daily Times*, ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 119.
22. *CP*, 19.
23. *CP*, 190.
24. “The Sleepers,” *CP*, 549.
25. *Brooklyn Daily Advertiser*, June 28, 1851.
26. *Brooklyn Evening Star*, May 21, 1846.
27. *CP*, 312. The quotation in the next sentence is also on this page.
28. *CP*, 195.
29. *CP*, 613.
30. *CP*, 586. The block quotation at the end of this paragraph is also on this page.
31. *CP*, 41. The quotation at the end of this paragraph is on *CP*, 512.
32. *CP*, 210.
33. *CP*, 243.
34. *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 131.
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36. *Brooklyn Star*, October 10, 1845.
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40. *New York Daily Tribune*, July 23, 1855.
41. *Washington Daily National Intelligencer*, February 18, 1856.
42. *Putnam's Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science, and Art* 6 (September 1855): 322.
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45. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 25, 1847.
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49. *CP*, 9. The quotation at the end of this paragraph is on page 8.
50. *CP* 15. The next quotation in this paragraph is on pages 203–4.
51. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 18, 1847 (Doughty) and *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 14, 1847 (Durand).
52. *CP*, 189.
53. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 12, 1846.
54. *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, I: 238.
55. *CP*, 199.
56. See *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 9, 1846 (Catlin) and *CP*, 196 (trapper passage).
57. "November Boughs," *CP*, 1187.
58. Robert D. Faner, *Walt Whitman and the Opera* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1951), 122.
59. *CP*, 6.
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62. *Brooklyn Star*, November 5, 1845.
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64. *The Gathering of the Forces*, ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black (New York: Putnam's, 1920), 346.
65. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 13, 1847.

66. "That Music Always Round Me," *CP*, 564. The quotation in the next sentence is also on this page.
67. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 13, 1847.
68. *CP*, 215. The quotation in the next sentence is on page 528.
69. *Faint Clews and Indirections: Manuscripts of Walt Whitman and His Family*, ed. Clarence Gohdes and Rollo G. Silver (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1949), 19. The quotation in the next sentence is on the same page.
70. *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, I: 98. The quotation in the next sentence is on the same page.
71. *Saturday Press*, January 7, 1860; and John Townsend Trowbridge, "Reminiscences of Walt Whitman," *Atlantic Monthly* 166 (February 1902): 166.
72. *Whitman in His Own Time*, ed. Joel Myerson (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1991), 43.
73. "Song of Myself," *CP*, 246.
74. *The Early Poems and Fiction*, 6.
75. *CP*, 611.