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Nameless wonders and dumb despair: rhetorics of silence in mid-nineteenth-century U.S. poetry and culture

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NAMELESS WONDERS AND DUMB DESPAIR: RHETORICS OF SILENCE IN MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY U.S. POETRY AND CULTURE

by

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.

Virginia Woolf
"A Sketch of the Past"

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

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ABSTRACT

Taking a cue from the occasional reticence of the often-exuberant American Romantic poetics, this project tracks what I call "rhetorics of silence" in verse: those moments where words are declared to be inadequate, impertinent, unavailable, unintelligible or otherwise unsuitable for a task that the poet has proposed. In this respect, the term "silence" functions here as a broad metaphor encompassing a number of meta-linguistic or meta-poetic gestures aimed at highlighting the shortcomings of knowledge and representation.

Whereas earlier critics have noticed these silences in haphazard ways, this project looks toward a systematic account of why and when nineteenth-century poets rely on gestures to the space beyond language. This intervention is especially useful for reading the seminal American poets Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Because Whitman seems celebratory and Dickinson doleful, it has often been difficult to offer productive readings of the two in tandem. Where Whitman does resemble Dickinson, it is often thought to be in his poems that abandon or despair of his project for a democratic poetics. By contrast, working through the lyric and political verse of the lesser-known poetry of John Rollin Ridge, this project reads visionary and despairing silences as similar rhetorical gestures, aimed at highlighting the common humanity of the poet and the reader. "Silence" is therefore an outgrowth of American ideology, albeit one that frequently allows poets to expand and query that ideology in ways that are not possible in the many corresponding but often blither deployments of rhetorical silence in the culture at large.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Poetry is made from language, and nothing else: what could it mean, then, for a poet to call language useless or inadequate? It would seem to counteract the very purpose of writing a poem. Nevertheless, it is something that even the most optimistic of nineteenth-century U.S. poets did with surprising regularity in their verse. This project takes a look at this counterintuitive "rhetoric of silence" in the poetry (and the culture) of the United States at midcentury and concludes that silence is just as crucial as speech to how Americans understood themselves and their nation on the cusp of Civil War.

Considering such ideas as a "universal" human nature, a "manifest" national destiny, and a "transcendent" vision of truth, this project lays out the unspoken or unspeakable assumptions that always underlie nineteenth-century Americans' deepest convictions about their world. Together, the poets John Rollin Ridge, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman can help us to examine both the comforts and the perils of assuming that "we" are all essentially alike, and that this sameness can speak where language itself falls short.

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INTRODUCTION: POE'S "NAMELESS ELF"; OR, HOW NOT TO SAY IN THE AMERICAN ROMANTIC POEM

There are some qualities—some incorporate things,
That have a double life, which thus is made
A type of that twin entity which springs
From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.
There is a two-fold Silence—sea and shore—
Body and soul. One dwells in lonely places,
Newly with grass o'ergrown; some solemn graces,
Some human memories and tearful lore,
Render him terrorless: his name's "No More."
He is the corporate Silence: dread him not!
No power hath he of evil in himself;
But should some urgent fate (untimely lot!)
Bring thee to meet his shadow (nameless elf,
That haunteth the lone regions where hath trod
No foot of man,) commend thyself to God!

—Edgar Allan Poe, "Sonnet—Silence" (1839/1845, *Collected* I.323)

Poe's poem may seem an odd choice to open a dissertation on United States poetry. What Thomas Ollive Mabbott wrote of this sonnet when he edited Poe in 1969—that it is "one of Poe's most enigmatic poems, and has troubled the few commentators who have ventured to discuss it" (*Collected* I.320)—remains materially true today. Stylistically the poem is enigmatic indeed: a fifteen-line sonnet, convoluted in its syntax, and philosophical to the point of abstraction. But the poem's topic—"silence" and its place in the intellectual landscape—is hardly novel in the context of what we have come to call "Romantic" poetry. Most immediately, of course, we characterize "Romantic" poetry by its bold proclamations on its own behalf, as when Shelley claimed that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World" or Emerson

declared that the poet "stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth" (Shelley *Poetry and Prose* 535; Emerson III.4).

Nevertheless, if the Romantic turn in literature might be said to mark the most optimistic period for aesthetic theory to date, it could just as truthfully be called the birth-date of new sorts of aesthetic doubt. The generation that produced exuberant manifestos like Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1815), Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* (1821), Emerson's "The Poet" (1844), and Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), to name only a few prominent examples, would also incite M. H. Abrams to define this group of writers as having replaced the "mirror"—that metaphor for the reliable attempts of art to imitate life—with the "lamp"—a powerful but unpredictable illuminator of the mind and the world. Mario Praz, who was an early theorizer of Romantic silence in *The Romantic Agony* (1933/1950), writes that "the essence of Romanticism . . . comes to consist in that which cannot be described. . . . The Romantic exalts the artist who does not give material form to his dreams—to the poet ecstatic in front of a forever blank page" (14-5). Alongside the sometimes overbearing optimism of Romantic poetics is a darker side, an aspect of doubt, negation, and silence. When William Blake declares in *Jerusalem* (1804) that language is a "rough basement," a "stubborn structure" built by the poet for fallen humankind, "who must else have been a Dumb despair" (184), his statement exemplifies a generation of thinkers and artists who celebrated and doubted poetic expression at the same time—indeed, often in the same breath.

This is a dissertation about the rough basement of language—and also about dumb despair. It is a dissertation about the ways that poetic language falls short and then talks about its own shortcomings. The project looks at what I call "rhetorics of silence" in mid-nineteenth-century poetry and culture with a particular focus on the poetry of John Rollin Ridge, Walt

Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. The term "rhetorics of silence" comprehends the features of a poem that are grounded in strategies of not-saying. Most often these "silences" nevertheless announce themselves in the poem in deliberate and explicit ways, so that the poem and its shortcomings become a subject of the writing. I take "rhetorics of silence" to include those moments where words are declared to be inadequate, impertinent, unavailable, unintelligible or otherwise unsuitable for the task the poet has proposed. In this respect, the term "silence" functions here as a broad metaphor encompassing a number of meta-linguistic or meta-poetic gestures aimed at highlighting the shortcomings of knowledge and representation. "Silence" is the lens through which I consider what J. Hillis Miller has called the "linguistic moment" in poetry and take a closer look at Roy Harvey Pearce's insight that "[t]he American poet has always felt obliged, for well and for ill, to catch himself in the act of being a poet" (*Continuity* 10). This definition of "rhetorics of silence" encompasses direct tropes of speechlessness, as with the "Soul's retaken moments" in Dickinson that "are not brayed of Tongue -" (Fr360). It also includes more indirect considerations of poetic failure, like John Rollin Ridge's recurring conceit of a harp with broken strings (in Parker *Changing* 74, 98). I argue that the rhetorics of silence in midcentury poetry illustrate that poetry's intersection with politics, culture, and ideology. Both in poetry and in public discourse, it is what *cannot* be said that illuminates both the anxieties and commitments of Americans in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Rhetorical silence is hardly limited to the nineteenth-century United States, of course. The Greeks and Romans handed down a taxonomy of silences in their rhetoric books: *aposiopesis* (the silence of being overcome with emotion or of halting speech mid-sentence), *apophasis* (the silence implied by negation), *aporia* (the silence of doubting whether and how it would be possible to begin a subject), *preterition* or *occupatio* (pretending to remain silent about

a subject in order to say something about it), and others (these definitions follow Gideon O. Burton's *Silva Rhetoricae* and the *OED*). To be sure, the student of almost any era of literature in English could furnish examples of silence-driven rhetorical devices. Every age and culture has had something to say about the limitations of language and the nature of what cannot be said.

However, it is with the move toward Romanticism that "silence" takes on a more pervasive and quintessential role in poetry and culture alike. Romantic poets were somewhat original in their overweening emphasis on the world beyond the word. Thomas Pfau argues in "Mourning Modernity: Classical Antiquity, Romantic Theory, and Elegiac Form" (2010) that the Romantic era of literature was the first to conceive its task as essentially *elegiac* in character: time and experience became explicitly un-representable, and the poet's role was one of indicating and tracing a correspondence version of reality that could never exist. Pfau describes the "inherently aporetic situation" of the modern poet whose task is to imitate an inimitable, naïve, Edenic past that he has only experienced retroactively and through his sense of longing (557).[1] This project traces the legacy of that "aporetic" Romanticism in an American context.

These elegiac underpinnings for "silence" tell only half the story, however, and Romantic aporia may take other forms than the elegy. American Romanticism, says Leon Chai in *The Romantic Foundations of The American Renaissance* (1987), follows its counterpart across the Atlantic in the transition from "allegory," which expresses through "signs," to "symbolism," which expresses through "revelation (apocalypse)" (7). In other words, Romanticism has lost faith in a perfect correspondence between the Sign and the Truth and must work both more indirectly *and* more immediately through symbols of direct communion between the mortal and

[1] "Aporia," as noted above, is the rhetorical expression of doubt about whether and how it is possible to begin speaking about a subject.

the divine realms. Poetic silence is every bit as likely to be caused by an abundance of inspiration as by inspiration's deficit, and therefore to symbolize the visionary poet's unmediated but incommunicable access to the immortal plane. In either case, "silence" in Romanticism takes the form of fracture and strain on the poetic effort, so that an imperfect craftsman with an imperfect tool works but imperfectly to convey his impressions of or his longing after a lost or distant perfect realm.

All of this is to say that this project is beholden to a certain archival reality: that seemingly disparate modes of writing are actually united, at least in part, by a shared rhetoric of silence. Two examples from Whitman make this point effectively. In the first, from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (initially published in 1856 as "Sun-Down Poem"), Whitman offers silence as a tacit nod to his sympathetic reader: "We understand, then, do we not? / What I promised without mentioning it, have you not accepted?" (*LG*56 219).[2] Here the bard is triumphant—complacent, almost, in the power of his expression to bridge the physical and temporal gap between the poet and the reader. There is a symbolic, "apocalyptic" aspect to this extra-textual communion of poet and reader that the poem's silence mediates but cannot state outright. This is the sort of bardic stance that prompts an early reading of Whitman like T. S. Eliot's (1926), who argues that "for him there was no chasm between the real and the ideal" (153). Standing in apparent contrast is the dejected silence in "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life" (initially "Bardic Symbols" and "Leaves of Grass" 1 in 1860):

O baffled, balked,

[2] For reasons explained in Chapter 3, most Whitman quotations are from the poem's earliest appearance in *Leaves of Grass*, with the edition indicated in the citation as *LG*, for *Leaves of Grass*, followed by the last two numbers in the publication date (e.g. *LG*56 indicates the 1856 edition of *Leaves*). I quote from the texts in facsimile and transcription at *The Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price.

> Bent to the very earth, here preceding what follows,
> Oppressed with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
> Aware now, that, amid all the blab whose echoes recoil upon me, I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
> But that before all my insolent poems the real ME still stands untouched, untold, altogether unreached. (*LG*60 197)

Here Whitman seems altogether to have abandoned his project of unity and communion in favor of self-indulgent lyric wallowing. He stays silent not from an overabundance of signification, but from frustration at the lack of any significance at all. In fact, this second poem has often been cited in revisionary readings of Whitman that have him abandoning the naïve project to unite the nation through his poetry that he had begun in the 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Kenneth Price finds that this Whitman of "debris" and "scatter" in some of the 1860 poems is philosophically opposed to the Whitman of "compost" and "unity" who holds court in earlier poems like "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" ("'Debris'" 59).

But each of these poems relies on a gesture through language to that which lies outside of or beyond language—a gesture of radical silence. As Chapter 3 shows, each poem engages in its way with Whitman's assertion, at the outset of "Song of Myself," that "every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you" (*LG*55 13). What has changed is not the nature of language itself, but the relative position of the speaker, so that the distance between world and word is cause for confidence in the one case and despondency in the other. Apocalypse and elegy; sublimity and despair—these all stand as consistent concerns in American Romantic poetics, and they all take the guise of what the poem and the poet *cannot* say. That is the formal invitation that this project follows.

Silence and the Genealogy of American Literature

This invitation asks us to consider whether certain key aesthetic impulses, often thought to be at odds with one another, ought not instead to be considered in tandem. Is poetry an aspect of liberty, unfettered from slavish adherence to political and social expectations; or is it the sublimation of the political and the social sphere, a harbinger of the coming utopia? Is the inner life itself ungoverned, no more than a series of isolated and contingent experiences; or is it ordered by a system of ideas rooted in God or Nature or the Imagination? Is "America" the land of unbounded freedom; or is it only another sort of tyranny? Is a poet merely an intractable, individual selfhood; or is he also a national bard?[3] Whenever mid-nineteenth-century Americans ask themselves these questions, whether in poetry, politics, science, or elsewhere, "silence" plays some role in the answers that they give, suggesting that the dichotomies are not as stringent as they might first seem.

There are compelling reasons for literary criticism to get to the bottom of this odd rhetorical concurrence. Looking closely at the convergence of silence as liberty and silence as conscription, it is possible to determine, for example, whether Whitman was a systematic poet in 1855 but merely a stymied one by 1860; to answer whether Dickinson can accurately be

[3] Scholars of early national American literature have often highlighted the centrality of this dialectic between liberty and coercion in the formation of American identity. Jay Fliegelman, in *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (1993), writes of the public, oratorical performance of sincerity as a means of eliding anxieties about imperfect representation in politics and art; Edward Cahill, in *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States* (2012), considers the ways that political and cultural elites harness the discourse of liberty without, in fact, surrendering political rule to the unfettered democratic whims of the masses; and Michael Warner, in *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1990), considers the cooptive nature of a seminal document like the Constitution, in which "We the People" become the fictional, universal author of a legal document crafted by particular, interested men (97-117). These scholars suggest that at the heart of American nationalism—or perhaps of many other nationalisms, but certainly of American—lies the hope that one man's boundless vision of history, liberty, and destiny might independently match that of every other man. Failing that coincidence of vision, violence and coercion become tempting means for the preservation of order.

characterized as some sort of proto-postmodern, ahead of her time and at odds with her contemporaries; and to illuminate whether John Rollin Ridge, whose poetry often strikes our modern palate as programmatic, jingoistic, and to that extent aesthetically deficient, should be counted as altogether removed from more lyrically interesting peers like Whitman and Dickinson.

Perhaps the best reason of all for undertaking this study of American Romantic silence is that through this lens, it is possible to bring together Dickinson and Whitman, those two odd godparents of American verse, whom Adrienne Rich called a "strange uncoupled couple" ("Beginners" 447). That the two poets have been so far "uncoupled" in our criticism is a point both astounding and true: despite their largely undisputed places as the co-founders of whatever we might try to call an American poetic tradition, getting the two poets into the same scholarly monograph has proven to be a remarkably rare achievement. Most of the lenses that scholars propose to view early American literature seem able to comprehend only one but not the other of these "radically innovative but strikingly dissimilar forms and voices," to use Ed Folsom's phrasing ("Transcendental" 265).

F. O. Matthiessen's seminal account of the *American Renaissance* (1941) does but little justice to Dickinson, who appears mostly by way of footnote to the major figures of Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman. This cannot be attributed solely to the fact that Matthiessen had not yet been introduced to the more radical Dickinson who would emerge with Thomas H. Johnson's 1955 publication of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, for it is a circumstance that has haunted Dickinson throughout her critical afterlife. Consider Matthiessen's archival justification: "The one common denominator of my five writers . . . was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy" (ix). "American" literature, it has often been supposed, must be

somehow *about* America, and Dickinson's work is not, at least not outwardly. For Matthiessen, even though Dickinson shared many of Melville's dark and cynical insights on the human mind, "her own drama, however intense, remained personal and lyric" (434). Despite its lyrical achievements, Dickinson's poetry remains irrelevant to the project of America as such. On the other hand, when Roy Harvey Pearce wrote his pioneering study on *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), in which he articulated an American poet "on the margin of the American sensibility, yet plunging directly to its vital center" (4), he did manage to include Dickinson in his canon of American iconoclasts. However, whereas the rest of Pearce's poets engage with the American culture at large, so that "a poem is ordered not only in and of itself but in relation to the culture out of which it comes" (12), Dickinson functions as an exception to this rule for her severe and uncompromising poetics of the self, where "for one with such an exquisite sense of the inevitable pain of isolation and loneliness, there could be no mitigation or attenuation of suffering through faith" (182). Thus Pearce's claim that Dickinson is the "greatest" of American poets, for being the only one to fully embrace the results of an Adamic conception of poetic ego, rings somewhat hollow, in that this "greatness" comes at the price of a complete withdrawal from all contemporary considerations of community, nation, or even readership. While we may agree with Pearce that Dickinson was no "cosmic optimist" (and that Whitman *was*), it seems an uncomfortably grand further leap to say that her withdrawal from contemporary consciousness was therefore absolute (190-1).

If subsequent genealogical work on U.S. literature has in some measure critiqued the early efforts of Matthiessen and Pearce, it has often done so by taking the same terms of definition and turning them on their head. Most trenchantly, Sacvan Bercovitch writes in a skeptical vein of "the American jeremiad" or the "rites of assent" by which the supposed mission

and destiny of "America" informs and sanctifies all of its literature and limits the extent to which that literature can genuinely explore or critique the central elements of the culture. In *Rites of Assent*, he warns against the poetic and critical tendency to redeem all aesthetic uncertainties in the name of an American destiny, where, "in every case . . . the writer converts revolution into the service of culture" (170). As Bercovitch tells the story of American literature, it is circumscribed, from the Puritans to the present, by the myth of a special national destiny, and so far guaranteed to be recuperative, fulfilling, and communally productive. Dickinson, again, with her many abortive and furtive gestures, is ill-fitted to this narrative.

Dickinson scholars, for their part, have been inclined to make a virtue of her typical exclusion from nationalistic accounts of U.S. literature. Sharon Cameron describes a poet who, in contrast to her more systematizing peers, "chooses not to choose" whether representation is effective; and in a meta-critical vein, Marjorie Perloff notes that Dickinson has rarely become the object of deconstructive or historicist critiques, having not left the "loose stone" by which such criticism typically dismantles the illusions of representation. Thus has grown up a tradition in which, at least implicitly, Whitman and Dickinson represent two mostly distinct strands of U.S. poetry: Whitman bardic, nationalistic, and celebratory; Dickinson furtive, idiosyncratic, and doleful.

Silence and Ideology

At the heart of the tension between "silence" as visionary overflow and "silence" as thwarted poetic power lies the central theoretical preoccupation of Romanticism itself. The poems considered in these pages give a specifically American bent to an old Romantic problem regarding the foundations of poetic language: whether that language is natural, organic, springing

from within the poet, or whether it is contingent, uncertain, inherited from without. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1815) is perhaps the most robust treatment of this problem. There, Coleridge plays the philosopher and searches for the ground of knowledge itself, "a primary intuition from which every science that lays claim to *evidence* must take its commencement" (VII.250). The Kantian critique of Enlightenment epistemology (from which Romantics like Coleridge took their cues) holds that reason alone cannot establish such a "primary intuition" or "first principle." Coleridge argues that revelation necessarily supersedes logic. To make revelation into an orderly and natural rather than a capricious and illusory phenomenon, Coleridge searches out "a truth self-grounded, unconditional, and known by its own light" (VII.268). For Coleridge, of course, this truth comes from the plastic, creative nature of mind or "Imagination," which collapses subject and object and reveals the inherent order of human perception. If—but only if—the animating force of Imagination is also the animating force of Nature or God, then poetry can, with its silences, signify the immortal realm, as with Wordsworth's mysterious certainty of "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" (*Poetical* 262). If, on the other hand, the poet begins to doubt the primacy of his own consciousness, then the result is "dejection," as when Coleridge the poet could merely "see, not feel how beautiful" were the wonders of nature (XVI.ii.699).

With few alterations, Emerson transposes Coleridge's "Imagination" to an American context as "Spirit" or "Over-Soul" and so sanctifies the American Romantics with an aura of the eternal. "There is one mind common to all individual men": so begins Emerson's influential 1841 *First Series* of essays (II.3), and all of the poets considered in these pages would at least entertain the possibility that their individual intuitions partake of the universal mind. The

indelible mark of the search for "first principles" makes a canon of the American rhetoric of silence, where the practitioners are more alike than different.

Identifying the universalizing impulse of "first principles," Jerome McGann describes a "Romantic Ideology." McGann's work, both in *The Romantic Ideology* (1984) and subsequently, provides one of two key anchors for the critical intervention I wish to stage in this project. McGann is wary of critical attempts—both by Romantic writers themselves and their subsequent, modern commentators—to frame Romantic poetry as a systematic and internally consistent pursuit. For McGann, so far as Coleridge and other poets insist upon the sanctity of their "first principles" and post them as guarantors of authentic expression, their writing is "ideological" (totalizing, brooking no possible deviance from its putatively visionary foundations). In reality, poems cannot be so neat, and "dissatisfaction cannot produce a satisfactory account of itself, only—as with Coleridge—a complete account" (47). But critics have been all too ready to accept these "complete accounts" as the final word on the matter. Marjorie Levinson, who explores the history of Romantic silence in the guise of the "Romantic Fragment Poem," writes that traditionally, critical readings of Romantic poetry "merely rephrase the question and in an equally Romantic language," supplying the systematic completion that the Fragment Poem omits (7). And so the work of McGann, Levinson, and others reading in the New Historicist tradition prevents top-down, systematic critical approaches from overdetermining a materially rigorous account of the historically situated poems.[4] For these reasons, my project

[4] This unflinching dedication to the facts of a poem's composition circumstances, McGann would eventually come to call "philological" (see especially *A New Republic of Letters*, 2014). This definition of "philology" stands in partial contrast to the nascent nineteenth-century discipline of "comparative philology," the early version of linguistics discussed at length in these pages. The latter, despite its nominal concern with the scientific study of languages, had its conclusions largely predetermined by the era's teleological, Eurocentric sense of progressive or "universal" history and is closer to McGann's definition of "ideology" than "philology."

pays close attention to "history" in its account of poems and poets—especially "history" as the formation and cultivation of ideology.

Bercovitch's "American jeremiad" or "American destiny" is a version of this systematic ideology, and it is clearly one spring of "silence" in nineteenth-century American discourse. In the United States, a vast continent and a swelling tide of national accomplishment partly mitigated the modern elegiac impulse, and a more sanguine outlook on national history meant that the foreclosed "silence" of the past existed alongside the infinite "silence" of the future. Whitman's characteristic, extra-textual silence, which gestures at a future more perfect than the present—"We understand then, do we not?" and "I stop somewhere waiting for you"—is related to the silence of a progressive national history and national destiny. Crucial to an American rhetoric of silence is an emerging understanding of history as uniquely American. George Bancroft, one of the earliest historians of the United States, would speak in an 1854 lecture on "The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race" of history and its inexorable march onward: "The subtle but irresistible movement of mind, silently but thoroughly correcting opinions and changing society, brings liberty both to the soul and to the world" (515). Bancroft's sense of "mind," or what Emerson called "oversoul," operates with indefinite means but definite ends in so many accounts of human or national progress. America seemed destined to overspread the world with liberty, the specifics of "how" and "when" notwithstanding and sometimes even confounding description.

Even George Colton, Whig editor of *The American Review*, whose party was opposed to projects of territorial expansion, could write in 1846 of "the silent, resistless legislation of the Omnipotent Lawgiver" that "must, ere long, place California beneath other sovereignty" (86). This nationalistic rhetoric of silence is born of a pervasive ideology, wherein the special destiny

of America in capital-H History seems self-evident and incontrovertible, even as the messier, quotidian realities of lower-case-h history leave some doubts both moral and practical. As historian Anders Stephanson writes, Americans were much fixated on a sort of mythical "futurity" for democratic government, even as "Not much…was said about this 'futurity,' or about what the United States might actually do, other than being marvelous, to smite the tyrants of the world unto death" (41). While this rhetoric tends toward "manifest destiny," that doctrine itself was reserved to a relative few political Democrats and tells only part of the story of American ideology in the nineteenth century. The key principle of American destiny is in fact more all-pervading, and Stephanson notes that the groups who opposed territorial expansion usually did so "in the name of the very same destinarianism as that of the expansionists" (32).[5] While not all writers are as explicit as Colton, with his "silent, resistless Omnipotent Lawgiver," all who write of the self-evident History of America thereby rely on a similarly "silent" operation of law, truth, "mind," or "oversoul" to sanctify their intuitions and lend them their manifest character. As both McGann and Bercovitch point out, when transferred to the realm of literature, this sort of pre-sanctified system or endpoint limits the authenticity of aesthetic exploration.

However, my purpose in invoking the context of American nationalist discourse in conjunction with McGann's "Romantic Ideology" is not at all to reduce nineteenth-century poetry to a mere extension of that ideology. It is instead to posit the idea of "America," or of a broader theory of "universal history," as a key field of aesthetic exploration in the American midcentury, united to public discourse through a partly shared set of rhetorical maneuvers. The

[5] See also Shelley Streeby, who argues that while "manifest destiny" may have been a controversial political doctrine, less controversial was American exceptionalism and the idea that its national culture should be protected (esp. 20); and Larzer Ziff, who makes the case that American Renaissance writers of all political affiliations accepted the necessity of a new American nationalism in spite of the "naked avarice" it revealed (311).

pervasive silences of American poetry, which seem at times to fracture and confuse its purposes, may be read instead as thorough and consistent engagements and entanglements with key cultural concerns.

Read thus, American poetry cuts straight to the heart of central tensions in American politics—not just topically, but rhetorically. If the "silence" of uncertainty sometimes thwarts collective political action, it may also liberate the individual from stifling social institutions or autocratic federal overreach. On the other hand, if the silence of a "manifest" historical destiny sometimes opens up exhilarating and untold landscapes for the field of liberty—"democratic vistas," as Whitman called them in one essay—it may also open the door to aggressive empire in the name of historical mandate. Poetry, too, must navigate this play of liberty and coercion that undergirds each invocation of "silence" and each action of empire.

The methods proposed by McGann, Bercovitch, Levinson, and other prominent New Historicist critics have sometimes seemed ill-equipped to give a thorough account of how poetry navigates its tensions. Without drumming up the old complaint that Historicist readings are reductive—I have not found this to be the case—I would nevertheless question the Historicist's impulse to draw lines, to divide poets who might otherwise be seen to emerge from the same milieu. For all the illuminating work he has done, McGann has often been in the business of drawing such lines: consider his editorship of Byron, where he takes pains to foreground that poet's situated materiality and political engagements in contrast to the philosophical abstraction and political removal of Coleridge and Wordsworth (e.g. Byron *Poetical* II.300); or his avowed preference for Coleridge the poet and writer over Coleridge the theorist (*Ideology* 47); or, in his work as an Americanist, his focus on Poe as an anti-Emersonian poet of "event" and "undeception" (*Poet* 8-10) and his characterization of Dickinson as a logographic, modernist

poet (*Black Riders* 26-41). In questioning these distinctions that McGann makes, I do not wish to suggest that Byron and Coleridge were the same thinker, that Poe and Emerson had no quarrels worth dwelling upon, or that Dickinson is a conventional nineteenth-century poet. I merely wonder whether a criticism that must draw such hard distinguishing lines has not missed a deeper formal similarity.

To group poets in this manner is to make silence, disruption, fragmentation, and critique into characteristics that distinguish the radical encounter with language from the complacency of the Romantic Ideology.[6] But all of Romantic poetry uses silence, and so does a good deal of non-poetic nineteenth-century discourse. To qualify the Historicist's tendency to bifurcate, I turn to critics operating under the aegis of the "New Formalism" and their call for a responsible return to considerations of form. The New Formalists look to bridge history and form. In *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (1997), Susan Wolfson argues against the notion that a concern for forms always entails a commitment to organicism or ideological wholeness. To the contrary, Wolfson finds key Romantic formal achievements to be "deeply divided, incoherent, themselves in the business of critique" (14). This sounds like McGann's reading of Byron or Poe; however, Wolfson would have us apply it to Wordsworth and Whitman as well. If poetry can critique as well as participate in ideological discourse, then the "silence" in common to complacent destinarianism and despondent self-indulgence indicates a shared set of premises if not a shared set of conclusions. If we look at each of these apparently different modes of silence as encounters with the poet's cultural framework, then it becomes possible to better

[6] This is in fact the stated goal of Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey C. Robinson in their provocative anthology, *Poems for the Millennium, Volume III* (2009). They aim to jettison the Romanticism of "Imagination" in favor of a Romanticism of "Fancy," to instantiate a Romanticism that cared little for system and order and emphasized instead critique, experimentation, and the revolutionary impulse (see 1-14). See also Robinson's *Unfettered Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (2006).

discern where the poems actually *do* critique and query that framework, and also at what point that fall back upon comfortable ideological assumptions. However, without the return to form advocated by critics like Wolfson, it is easy to miss the underlying formal unity that undergirds a seemingly wide array of poetics styles.

The reclamation of form begun by Wolfson has more recently been elaborated in the collection *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (2013), edited by Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick. Here the argument emerges that, as a post-Historicist return to form, the New Formalism focuses on close readings situated within carefully considered historical-ideological frameworks. It sets itself up to read literary works as making deliberate, timely, and dynamic formal interventions in the space of culture or ideology. Echoing Wolfson's terminology, Theile writes of "form as ideologically charged," so that "a text's formal features, its aesthetics, in close conjunction with its cultural context, convey a politically and historically significant literary experience that is both intentional and affective" (17). This articulation offers a provocative way to approach nineteenth-century poetic language, though I supplement it with two important caveats: first, we need not *always* consider *all* of a poem's "formal charges" to be "intentional" in their origins; and second, we should leave open the possibility that those charges could prove ideologically reactionary. In other words, it is not at all necessary to believe, as at least Wolfson seems to believe, that the New Formalism so articulated overturns the New Historicism.[7] It is altogether possible to carry out formal readings that neither ignore the ideological foundations of a poem nor reduce the poem to a one-to-one correspondence with those foundations.[8] I find that

[7] See also Caroline Levine, "Strategic Formalism: Toward a New Method in Cultural Studies" (2006), where she argues that literary forms and cultural forms are best understood as oppositional, the former critiquing the latter.

[8] In "What Is New Formalism?" (2007), her review of the budding movement for *PMLA*, Marjorie Levinson distinguishes between "a new formalism that makes a continuum with new historicism and a backlash new formalism" (559). My study is designed as the former variety.

the *ideological* center of a poem is part of its *formal* structure, so that the poems "ask" to be read with a certain expectation of unity and coherence. Formal or rhetorical readings are best attuned to this readerly invitation; but in order to be effective and complete, those readings must situate the poet's invitation against the ideological impulses of the culture at large.

Because this project is more concerned with a historical than a theoretical reading of nineteenth-century verse, it has little to say about the poststructuralist tradition. In some respects, this is an opportunity lost, as that tradition, of course, is very preoccupied with the questions of language and silence that are the focus here. Poststructuralism is a continuation or sublimation of the obsessive concern with the foundations of language that gets its start with the Romantic turn in literature. At the height of deconstruction's critical fervor, a group of prominent theorists spent a year in contemplation of silence, many of them gathering at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The result of that year is the collection *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (1989), the foundational essay of which is Jacques Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials." There, Derrida asserts that his method is not at all like "apophatic" or "negative theology," which uses silence to better know God. The very presupposition of God is objectionable to Derrida: for him, there can be no "hyperessentiality," no "being beyond Being" toward which silence moves (7-8). Like ideology in the Historicist account, God or any other sort of endpoint undermines the poststructuralist's attempt to know the word for what it is, and not what he hopes it could be. As Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser write in their introduction to the collection, for the postmodern critic, "negativity undoes itself whenever it aspires determinatively to recuperation" (xiii).

In a follow-up essay to Derrida's, Frank Kermode recognizes and commends the severity of his colleague's commitment to indeterminacy. Yet he also wonders whether, given the

realities of existence, criticism might not be better served by an honest account of the varying available forms of "recuperation," venturing that "human kind cannot . . . live without a certain kind of error" (89). If myth-making is a sort of natural and nearly inescapable human impulse, then it were better to treat our myths with a clear taxonomy than a never-ending barrage of critique. The advantage of this approach is noted by Pearce, who proposes to describe the "basic style" of American poets, a cultural-formal inheritance which "prescribes a direction in which the poet's imagination may move" and "delimits the areas of experience on which his sensibility may be operative" (*Continuity* 13-4). Even Bercovitch offers a "non-pejorative" and "anthropological" definition of "ideology" in *The Rites of Assent*: "ideology as the web of ideas, practices, beliefs, and myths through which a society, any society, coheres and perpetuates itself" (13).[9] My assumption is that all three of the poets I discuss (or all five, to count the introductory and concluding discussions of Poe and Eliza Snow) have operative myths, that none of them has escaped "aspiring determinatively to recuperation." The ultimate design of this project, then, is to proceed through formal and rhetorical readings to an honest account of each poet's "certain sort of error," his or her foundational myths on which the possibility of language and poetry is predicated, and to situate those myths in relation to those operating in American culture at large.

[9] For a nuanced, recent articulation of this relationship between rhetorical structure, ideology, and poetry, see Shira Wolosky, "The Claims of Rhetoric: Toward a Historical Poetics (1820-1900)" (2003): "Values, attitudes, interests, and cultural directions at large in the society are expressed through rhetorical tropes, which in turn reemerge in poetry, marking such specifically poetic structures as voice, imagery, setting, self-representation, and address. Conversely, poetic representation foregrounds and sharpens the terms of a culture's rhetorical configurations. Thus, far from negating the specifically literary nature of a poetic text, rhetorical context illuminates and affirms poetry's cultural importance and aesthetic power" (14). Wherever possible, the present project invokes rhetorical contexts for the poems it discusses in order to illuminate shared engagements and ideological stakes.

How Not to Say in the Romantic Poem

Poe's odd sonnet shows us that to be found out making an "error," or participating in a myth of coherence, is not to be relegated at once to the realm of the ideological. "Sonnet—Silence" is a nuanced poem that meaningfully critiques the structures of knowledge and culture from which it emerges. What it does not do, however, is abandon the project of meaning-making altogether.

When it comes to making some headway with Poe's "troubling" sonnet, it may be wise initially to skip the first two sentences, which are convoluted both syntactically and semantically. These metaphorical accounts of the "two-fold Silence" are perhaps best revisited after the somewhat more straightforward definitions in the latter part of the poem:

> One dwells in lonely places,
>
> Newly with grass o'ergrown; some solemn graces,
>
> Some human memories and tearful lore,
>
> Render him terrorless: his name's "No More."
>
> He is the corporate Silence: dread him not!
>
> No power hath he of evil in himself;

This iteration of silence is something like the silence of lost things remembered. As a function of "solemn graces," "human memories," and "tearful lore," this silence poses only an abstract threat to the living. Coherent and customary measures of grief and mourning "render him terrorless": a dead body or a tombstone may be a temporarily frightful thing, but it cannot in itself disrupt the community of the living—or the capacity of that community for speech.

> On the other hand is the "shadow" of that "corporate silence":
>
> But should some urgent fate (untimely lot!)

Bring thee to meet his shadow (nameless elf,

That haunteth the lone regions where hath trod

No foot of man,) commend thyself to God!

Unlike the corporate silence, whose "name's 'No More,'" this other (incorporeal?) silence is a "nameless elf" about which much less can be said. It keeps a radically alterior abode: whereas the corporate silence "dwells in lonely places, / Newly with grass o'ergrown," his shadow "haunteth the lone regions where hath trod / No foot of man." The distinction between "lonely" and "lone" (or "dwelling" and "haunting") asks to be read not as one of degree, but of kind. Loneliness is a temporary condition, assuaged by the rituals of communal grieving. Loneness, on the other hand, is radically apart from human life, such that "No foot" has ever marked the way.[10] Punning suggestively on the poetic "foot," Poe also indicates that art has trouble reaching and denominating this radically "lone" region of silence. In another context, Garrett Stewart writes of death: "A part of speech only, no piece of experience, the radical abstraction death is pure construct, pure language" (234). If "No More" is the death of a friend, then its terrible shadow is the death of the self, able to be spoken of, certainly, but never to be written from within.

The poem's latter lines therefore give a fairly straightforward theory of the "twofold Silence": "No More," which is the memory of what's gone, and his "shadow," which is annihilation itself. By its very nature, however, the poem's theory creates problems for its own performance—for the poem is not only a theory of poetic language, of course, but an example of it. And since the poet's subject is partly "the lone regions where hath trod / No foot of man," its

[10] This distinction between "loneliness" as a temporal condition and "loneness" as a metaphysical condition persists in Poe's verse. See for examples "Tamerlane," "The Lake—To——," "Dream-Land," "Al Aaraaf," and "A Dream" (*Collected* I.31, I.84-5, I.343-5, I.109-11, and I.79).

subject poses a significant barrier to its very existence. How can a poem speak about loneness; how can it signify what is radically particular; how can it express from negation? In different guises, these questions about language and its limitations haunt all of Romantic poetics.

With these questions in mind, the poem's convoluted opening sentences look more like a deliberate obfuscation for a poetic task that is literally impossible. The effect of this obfuscation is a suggestive confusion of the poem's mimetic and figurative levels:

> There are some qualities—some incorporate things,
> That have a double life, which thus is made
> A type of that twin entity which springs
> From matter and light, evinced in solid and shade.
> There is a two-fold Silence—sea and shore—
> Body and soul.

One might well wonder from the outset in what sense "qualities" and "incorporate things" can rightly be considered synonymous. Where does this "double life" inhere: in the "things" themselves, or in the "qualities" attributed to them by the mind of the human observer? Setting aside that confusion, it remains difficult to distinguish the abstract from the actual in Poe's description. This owes in part to the sentence's syntax, which lacks clear referents and a clear locus of agency. The qualities—or incorporate things—"have a double life, which thus is made / A type." "Thus" is ambivalent here: how is the "double life" made into a "type"? Whence derives its figurative status—does the mere fact of a double life inherently suggest some figurative relationship? Further complicating matters is the passive construction, "is made": not only the *how,* but the *by whom* is lacking here.

Then, the nature of this figurative relationship is every bit as ambiguous as its source. The "double life" becomes "A type of that twin entity." I expect most readers could not immediately articulate the difference between a "double life" and a "twin entity," much less define a plausible "typical" or figurative relationship between the two. Both are abstract concepts without clear mimetic referents, which makes it difficult at best to establish a figurative relationship. That the twin entity "springs / From matter and light" and is "evinced in solid and shade" is only small help. Both verbs, "spring" and "evince," suggest a self-evident character that the reader may well doubt, but let us take the poet at his word that matter and light, solid and shade naturally bring to mind the twin entity in question.

Looking at solid and shade, then, one naturally thinks of a "twin entity," a "double life" that exists in certain things or qualities, at least figuratively. The reason for these layers of obfuscation is that, as we know from the latter part of the poem, one half of this double life or twin entity is a "nameless elf," a radical silence that spurns denomination. Indeed, when the defining moment arrives at last in the fifth line, it leaves us with a blanket term—"two-fold Silence"—but beyond that only a few more quick exemplifications: "sea and shore— / Body and soul." Like "matter and light" or "solid and shade," these suggest rather than define the two poles of the poem's dialectic. Presumably, "shore" and "body" exemplify the "corporate" or "lonely" silence, while "sea" and "soul" typify the incorporeal or "lone" silence. Thus the apparent chiasmus of "sea and shore— / Body and soul" adds one more layer of potential obfuscation to what is surely a deliberately obfuscating set of definitions.

By his own stated principles, it makes sense that Poe would work only coyly in his verse, even in an explicitly philosophical poem like "Sonnet—Silence." In an 1842 review of Longfellow, Poe laments the "didacticism" of Longfellow's verse: "His invention, his imagery,

his all, is made subservient to the elucidation of some one or more points (but rarely of more than one) which he looks upon as *truth*" (*Critical* 73-4). This overweening purposefulness saps the poems of their singular power and reduces them, reduces life, to a morality tale. Seizing on this anti-systematic impulse in Poe, McGann concludes that "Poetry in his view should not be approached as a repository of ideas or as an expression of feelings but as an event of language" (*Poet* 2). It is perfectly in line with language as unsystematic "event" that Poe's account of two-fold Silence should be tentative, imperfect, merely suggestive. Such an account does justice to the chaos of perception and the imperfection of representation—it respects the poet's and the reader's lived realities.

However, there is ground between pure system and pure chaos, and Poe, both in his poetry and in his criticism, occupies that ground in ways that McGann may be unwilling to acknowledge when he writes that "Poe's commentary forces us to consider poets as baulked and willful children rather than as pilgrims of eternity" (*Poet* 41). By 1848, the general offense of didacticism had become for Poe "the heresy of *the Didactic*," an unpardonable poetic sin (*Critical* 234). Still, revising and expanding his review of Longfellow for his 1848 essay "The Poetic Principle," Poe writes at length on the limitations of human knowledge—but also of humans (and poets in particular) as pilgrims of eternity:

> He who shall simply sing, with however glowing enthusiasm, or with however vivid a truth of description, of the sights, and sounds, and odors, and colors, and sentiments, which greet *him* in common with all mankind—he, I say, has yet failed to prove his divine title. There is still a something in the distance which he has been unable to attain. We have still a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not shown us the crystal springs. This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an

> indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry—or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods—we find ourselves melted into tears—we weep then—not as the Abbate Gravina supposes—through excess of pleasure,[11] but through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses. (*Critical* 236)

These remarks help to illustrate what Poe does and does not mean when he censures the "heresy of *the Didactic*" in poetry. Given the limited nature of human knowledge, to write a poem with a clear and unambiguous purpose would be hubris. On the other hand, Poe's comments attest to the legitimacy of longing after eternity. That longing is not just a willful impulse: it is "at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence." Here, in spite of his skepticism, Poe approaches something resembling Coleridge's "first principles," where the existence, fervency, and persistence of the intuition confirms its validity. Because this "thirst" is self-evident in its legitimacy, and because it is indicated only indirectly through the "multiform combinations" of the poet's earthly attempts, Poe clearly considers it to be free from the charge of didacticism. And yet it would be misleading to say that Poe here advocates a poetry without a defined

[11] Gian Vincenzo Gravino (1664-1718) was an Italian aesthetic theorist who, in his *Ragion Poetica*, argued that the well-written poem induced a state of delirium in its reader or listener, and that in this state of delirium it was possible to perceive truth. See Tatarkiewicz III.443-4.

purpose: clearly, the purpose of poetry to Poe is to hint at, however, imperfectly, and to reach after, however futilely, the eternal essence of life. As he writes in an early poem, "Al Aaraaf" (1829), "Ours is a world of words: Quiet we call / 'Silence'—which is the merest word of all. / All Nature speaks, and ev'n ideal things / Flap shadowy sounds from visionary wings—" (*Collected* I.104). The task of the poetry is clearly to trace and indicate this still small voice of Nature, with whatever means, and however feebly.

Poe's writing thereby lays out the entangled possibilities for a Romantic rhetoric of silence. In its mildest form, "silence" in the poem is comfortable and harmless: the communal reminiscence or the respectfully bowed head. In its most extreme form, it is pure negation or pure sublimation—death itself, chaos, or God. Somewhere in between are the poems of the poet styled as prophet, which partake more or less of the sublime or eternal realm. At least, they keep that realm of absolute sublimity, of "lone regions" and "nameless elves," as points of constant reference, as palpable lacks that may, with sufficiently vatic prompting, become tentative presences.

One of Poe's key insights is that the quotidian silence and the radical silence are not wholly distinct. This is not a binary but a "twofold Silence," no more separable than solid and shade. It follows that the seemingly disparate goals of poets and other writers must be read together so long as they work through tropes of silence and the unsayable. If they have different answers, they have nevertheless asked many of the same questions. Poe's foreboding, gothic-inflected final note of despair—"commend thyself to God!"—is a far cry from some of the blither, destinarian proclamations on behalf of the indiscernible American future. Still, each is informed by an incontrovertible "first principle," the bare *knowledge that* human existence is

mirrored by and contained within a greater eternal totality. That basic level of recuperative faith remains consistent throughout the various rhetorics of silence considered in these pages.

One of the most accomplished studies to bring Whitman and Dickinson together does so with Poe as mediator. Daneen Wardrop's *Word, Birth, and Culture: The Poetry of Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson* (2002), illuminates both the strengths and the limitations of a critical approach that selectively treats aspects of an author. For Wardrop, American literary genealogy must be conceived anew if it is to continue to satisfy the postmodern awareness of contemporary readers. Thus, we should focus not on the bardic but on the self-critical aspects of these poets:

> What makes Whitman and Dickinson the poets they were and are, whom we still chafe to read, is their striving to follow language to the brink at which it disperses, to find, for example, the "sumptuous Destitution / Without a Name -" (Fr1404), that Dickinson invokes. Their willingness to lean to this cusp at which language disintegrates compels our readings and rereadings of their poetry. Not Emerson's transparent eyeball but Poe's sense of the supernatural offers the means by which we can find Whitman's and Dickinson's most audacious uses of language. Not Emerson's *Nature* but Poe's "Nevermore" provides the model for redetermining the latter two poets' strategies. (3)

It is probably accurate to say, as Wardrop says, that the poetic reputations of Whitman and Dickinson have endured because of their capacity to push the reader's limitations and the limitations of the reader's language. But the severity of her bifurcation between Emerson and Poe points to its limitations. True, Emerson never wrote a poem like the enigmatic "Sonnet—Silence" that opens this introduction. But neither was he all transparent eyeball. To cast Wardrop's "dispersed" and "disintegrated" language as a concern with "silence" is to see a preoccupation shared in common by writers we might otherwise be tempted to divide as radical

and conventional. In fact, Adam Bradford, in *Communities of Death: Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Nineteenth-Century American Culture of Mourning and Memorializing* (2014), points out that precisely the elements of Whitman and Poe that we are inclined to read as radical and alienating—their concern with death, their inconsolable anguish, even their visceral descriptions of suffering—were actually comfortably accommodated to contemporary readers' views about the mourning process. Bradford makes those poets only two among many representatives of "a nineteenth-century American culture of morbidity" and a "sentimental culture of mourning and memorializing" (8). In this reception history of American silence and mourning, there is reason to doubt that some Romantic poems are altogether radical and alienating while others are altogether ideological and consoling. This project searches for the common centering principles of American Romantic silence.

Poe has his "Sonnet—Silence," with its "nameless elf"; Emerson has "Merops," a meditation on language's shortcomings with its acknowledgement, "Ye taught my lips a single speech, / And a thousand silences" (IX.239). Dickinson has her "Destitution / Without a Name -"; William Cullen Bryant feels "deep distressful silence" when Nature fails to respond to his sympathetic calls (*Poetical* I.92). Whitman himself has both the silence of "What I have mentioned without speaking" and the "baffled, balked" silence of frustrated poetic utterance. All of this is to suggest that the "cusp at which language disintegrates," to use Wardrop's phrase, is not only a preoccupation of a few idiosyncratically radical poets but a thoroughgoing aspect of midcentury aesthetics. American writers lean on "silence" at both their most optimistic and their most cynical moments, and this circumstance, far from being incidental, rather profoundly indicates the shared American cultural, Transcendentalist metaphysical and ideological framework from which they all take their first steps.

The most successful studies to combine Whitman and Dickinson have done so by identifying this shared metaphysical and ideological framework in specific terms, giving each poet a common jumping-off point from which to create a characteristic, novel poetics. Christine Gerhardt's *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (2014) shows how a study of history and culture might serve to unite rather than divide two seemingly different poets. Looking at emerging nineteenth-century sciences like geology, geography, and evolutionary biology, Gerhardt situates the two poets within a world that was growing infinitely vaster in scope and wondrousness even as Western civilization became more arrogant and overweening in its claims on behalf of description and taxonomy. Gerhardt finds that "both poets, in spite of their preoccupation with the powers of the human mind, keep expressing a sense of affinity and awe in relation to nature, and perceive themselves as potentially erring and indeed responsible for their limited insights" (12). Placing Whitman and Dickinson within the competing poles of humility and certainty, Gerhardt shows how they are able to unsettle the ideals of human knowledge and control that predominated in proto-ecological discourse, even as they maintain a central place for poetic consciousness.[12] My study undertakes similar work, albeit with a broader conception for the sources of History, so that various fields of public discourse, identity formation, scientific inquiry, and social reform come into play at different moments to illuminate the stakes of aesthetic exploration. Whitman's and Dickinson's particular forms of aesthetic exploration therefore emerge from cultural, ideological concerns that subtly informed and overtly preoccupied writers across the wide American republic of letters.

[12] See also Agnieszka Salska, *Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: Poetry of the Central Consciousness* (1985), where Salska situates each poet in relation to Emerson's dilemma on how to embrace wholeness while acknowledging fragmentation.

The Structure of the Work

Chapter one, "Silence, Outlaw, and 'Sovereign Law': John Rollin Ridge in Search of Authority," offers a complete treatment of the abstract lyric "silence" defined in the introduction, but with this novel contribution: John Rollin Ridge is motivated by the myth of a *sublime order*. In the seminal articulation by Edmund Burke, the "sublime" aesthetic experience operates at a magnitude that throws the senses into disarray; Ridge, however, takes the sublime force to be accessible and foundational. Offering sublimity as the basis for aesthetic order is suspect, but it can be plausibly accomplished through an ideologically-motivated "rhetoric of silence" that leaves the details untold and appeals to the common humanity of the writer and the reader. Ridge finds a model for this type of writing in the nature poetry of the British Romantics and earlier Transcendentalists like William Cullen Bryant. But while his predecessors most often left the order found in transcendent nature as an abstract aesthetic principle, Ridge complicates this in poems like his favorite "Mount Shasta" by positing the sublime, silence-driven aesthetic experience as a basis for civil government or "Sovereign Law." This suggests an intimate but problematic connection between "authority" in the poem and "authority" in the commonwealth. It is furthermore surprising to find in Ridge, a displaced Cherokee in the wake of the Trail of Tears, a champion of "Sovereign Law" in any form that resembles the United States government. Yet this he appears to be at least in a limited sense. In spite of his own suffering, Ridge remains committed to the idea of a universal American character representing a historically progressive achievement. The chapter therefore traces the sources of Ridge's "education" in Cherokee Nation, California, and the wider domain of American letters. In the end, Ridge permits a rubric to emerge for the readings of Dickinson and Whitman that follow. He makes explicit the social, cultural, political, and racial stakes of what may otherwise appear to be abstract lyric meditation.

He therefore opens a conceptual bridge between the relatively abstract Dickinson and the relatively political Whitman.

In chapter two, "Figures Like Death: Emily Dickinson's Impossible Tropes," I query the salient critical assumption that Dickinson is best read as a proto-postmodern, always doubting and never systematizing. Tracing the function of Dickinson's silences reveals a complex, troubled relationship to authority and authorship in the poem. Dickinson often positions her speakers as diminutive, terrified, impotent, or otherwise displaced from the locus of agency in the poem: what claim does she therefore have to revelation or truth? The poet's silences—her many moments of frustration and impotence—can often be read as rhetorical flourishes designed to raise the stakes for her final poetic accomplishment: her expressions of the inexpressible. And yet the sublime forces of her poetry retain a level of alterity and authority that is never fully breached, so that to give them utterance in poetry is a dangerous or violent act. Authorship itself becomes an unconscionable but finally inescapable form of authority through language, and Dickinson's poems explore the implications of this fact for the writer, the reader, and the subjects of consciousness. Her rhetoric implies a poetic praxis less solitary and less resigned than has often been assumed: with their reliance on riddle and suggestion, they require *readers* as a formal component. Dickinson's "ideological" commitments show through in the demands she placed on this readership, demands that just as often led to violence as to intimacy, just as often implied autocracy as democracy.

In chapter three, "'I utter and utter / I speak not'; or, Walt Whitman In-Forming the Nation," I take up the problematic of Whitman's alleged recapitulation. More so than any other poet in this project, Whitman proudly bears the mantle of nationalism and union suggested by the hierarchical accounts of language and culture put forth in the new German-inflected comparative

philology. Positioning himself as national bard, Whitman set out to craft a "language experiment" expressing the spirit of American democracy. But like others of his generation, the garrulous Whitman also displays a surprising reliance on moments of silence. Focusing on these moments allows a more nuanced picture of Whitman's aesthetic politics to emerge and shows that Whitman—even the Whitman of 1855—is more vulnerable and supple than he often gets credit for. Poems that, to many critics, have looked like evidence that the later Whitman doubted or rejected his initial aims as a poet actually serve to advance and clarify his designs as the American bard. This chapter argues that in Whitman, "silence" may indicate *either* transcendent unity *or* sublime uncertainty—and that these two phenomena are not wholly unrelated. Both are buttressed by Whitman's centering principle—that "every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you"—which furnishes a justification for political and aesthetic unity even as it suggests the reader's radical autonomy. In this sense Whitman develops a reader-relationship in which atomic unity is inescapable, but atomic scatter is only logical. Whitman's poetic forms enact the sort of inclusive authority that eluded the nation itself.

The conclusion to the project—"'Description's ablest powers grow lame'…Or Do They? Eliza R. Snow's Abandoned Rhetoric of Silence"—takes up the verse of a different sort of Western pioneer than John Rollin Ridge: Eliza R. Snow, Latter Day Saint, wife to Joseph Smith and then to Brigham Young, and unofficial poet laureate of the "American religion." The conclusion clarifies the three previous chapters by using Snow as antithesis, for while Snow's early verse flirts with Romantic or Transcendentalist rhetorics of silence, her mature work settles on a cluster of rhetorical strategies of a wholly different nature. While publishing in magazines in Ohio and Illinois, Snow reflects the preoccupations with aesthetic ambiguity shared by other writers in this project. But within the more insular, homogeneous community of Mormon Utah,

she can take certain religious and ideological assumptions as foundational, removing the need for "silence" as a vulnerable and exploratory mode. The result is an oeuvre of hymns and epics that, instructively, is less suited to 20th- and 21st-century tastes than were her youthful lyrics. If Ridge is sometimes embarrassingly blunt in his linking of the aesthetic to the political, and so seems at times to intrude upon his "good" poems with base ideology, Snow discomfits us because she abandons "good" poetry altogether at the cusp of a promising young career, leaving behind the provocative landscape poems and nature odes of her early days in order to become the hymn-maker laureate of Mormon Utah. Yet neither Ridge nor Snow, well-considered, does anything untoward except perhaps to state with insufficient subtlety the usually-unstated premises that structure an American Romantic rhetoric of silence and guard it from disintegrating altogether into non-verbal, non-republican aesthetic and political chaos. Snow demonstrates how something *like* religious conviction undergirds the ideological commitments of a typical rhetoric of silence, even as she finally surrenders to a level of spiritual conviction that renders silence a less relevant mode of aesthetic discourse. By the end of this project, at stake is a genealogy of American "silence" capable not only of encompassing Whitman and Dickinson but of moving from the still small voice of the woebegone Poe to the assembled chorus of the Mormon tabernacle choir.

CHAPTER 1: SILENCE, OUTLAWS, AND "SOVEREIGN LAW": JOHN ROLLIN RIDGE IN SEARCH OF AUTHORITY

A Stranger in a stranger land,
Too calm to weep, too sad to smile,
I take my harp of broken strings,
A weary moment to beguile;
And tho' no hope its promise brings,
And present joy is not for me,
Still o'er that harp I love to bend,
And feel its broken melody
With all my shattered feelings blend.

—Opening stanza, "The Harp of Broken Strings" (1850/1868, 98)[13]

In "The Harp of Broken Strings," which a 23-year-old John Rollin Ridge penned shortly after his arrival in California, the young poet establishes a lifelong preoccupation with the agonies of hope and the consolations of despair. Ridge, half-Cherokee and half-white, whose father, grandfather, and uncle were murdered by rivals in a political coup, and who spent most of his years in California, lawfully exiled from Cherokee Nation but longing for a triumphant return in which he would solve the Nation's many problems and successfully mediate its conflicts with the United States, had many reasons to explore the terrain of despair. The broken-stringed harp aptly symbolizes Ridge's concept of the poetic craft, where an imperfect singer with an imperfect instrument gestures feebly at some perfect reality that lies beyond his artistic grasp. A song *acknowledged* to be imperfect also implies a sort of silence: its conscious imperfection

[13] There is, as yet, no comprehensive scholarly edition of Ridge's poetry. The closest is the ample selection of Ridge poems in *Changing Is Not Vanishing: A Collection of Early American Indian Poetry to 1930* (2011), superbly edited by Robert Dale Parker. Parker has compared variants and reproduced many of the poems that appeared only in periodicals during Ridge's life. In my text, citations that include only a page number are from Parker. However, because Parker's text is an anthology, he has not included every known Ridge poem. Where I discuss a poem that does not appear in Parker, I follow John Rollin Ridge, *Poems* (collected posthumously by Ridge's wife, Elizabeth, and published by Henry Payot in San Francisco in 1868). These cases are indicated with '*Poems*' in the citation.

indicates some other, better song that cannot be made heard. Still, the "broken melody" that the poem describes is consoling to the poet, even though it is inadequate by definition. In a similar poem, called "My Harp" and published in the *Arkansas State Democrat* in 1848, Ridge defends the value of an imperfect song: "Oh, tell me not to spurn this harp, / Although it may not be divine, / For thou hast felt no pangs, as I, / And my sad soul's unlike to thine" (74). Ridge's poetic mode is overwhelmingly elegiac in this way: he writes of past loves, remembered melodies, bygone childhoods, and other versions of lost or inaccessible paradise. Elegy, especially Romantic elegy, draws attention to the limitations of language: while the poem may do something to soothe the grieving hearts of the speaker and the listener, it also foregrounds that which eludes it. This holds true for Ridge's poems on the broken-stringed harp, where "hope" and "present joy" are ruled out from the beginning, but the "broken melody" becomes a site of aesthetic inquiry in its own right.

However, for many Romantic poets, loss and longing were largely abstract modes, the Edenic aspirations of noblemen's sons who found hollowness in commerce and empire and sought prelapsarian organic alternatives. Not so for Ridge, who often published as "Yellow Bird"—the translation of Chees-quat-a-law-ny, his Cherokee name.[14] Already at age 21, he truly was the "stranger in a stranger land" that his poem makes him out to be. In spite of a happy and tranquil childhood on his grandfather's and father's prosperous farms in Cherokee Nation in present-day Georgia, Ridge's adolescence and young adulthood were tumultuous and trying. In 1837, when Rollin Ridge was ten, his family relocated to the new "Cherokee Nation West" in Arkansas. A short time later, most of the rest of the Cherokees followed the Ridges under compulsion on the notoriously deadly "Trail of Tears." In 1839, members of a rival Cherokee

[14] The biographical circumstances of Ridge's life are taken from James Parins, *John Rollin Ridge: His Life and Works* (1991).

political party, angry at the Ridges' role in negotiating the 1835 Treaty of New Echota, which set the terms of Cherokee removal from the East, murdered three members of Rollin's family in one bloody coup: John Ridge, his father; Major Ridge, his grandfather; and Elias Boudinot, his uncle. Twelve-year-old Rollin was forced to look on as his father was pulled from bed, stabbed repeatedly, and left to die. Ridge's mother fled south to Fayetteville, Arkansas, with her children, and John Rollin was never again to take up permanent residence on Cherokee territory. From 1843 to 1845, he attended private school in Barrington, Massachusetts, and from 1845 to 1849 he rode tirelessly around the American Southwest, engaging in politics and studying—first classics, later law. In 1849, he shot and killed a political rival, probably motivated in equal parts by self-defense and a desire for revenge. He fled to Missouri and later, in 1850, to California during the gold rush, where he would live and work, first as a miner and then as a literary agent and newspaper editor, until his death in 1868 at the young age of 40.

To look at Ridge's ideological education—what he absorbed, what he rejected, and how he examined and reproduced his commitments through poetry—is a rich task for criticism. If New Formalism looks to combine ideological and rhetorical criticism, it could not ask for a messier or a more illustrative case study than Ridge, whose life and work are entangled with almost every major field of antebellum discourse. From boyhood onwards, his commitments were split. He was the son of a middle-class white woman from Massachusetts and a Cherokee lawyer. His family valued Cherokee history, but his father and grandfather imitated the life of the Southern plantation gentleman. He was a proud American who witnessed Jackson's America force his kinsmen onto the Trail of Tears. He was a proud Cherokee who witnessed the murder of his father by fellow Cherokees. An ardent proponent of liberty and self-determination in his poetry and journalism, he wrote pro-slavery and xenophobic editorials as a Know-Nothing and

Democratic California journalist. He believed the United States to be the most advanced, most civilized nation in the history of the world, even as he often spoke out against its barbarous social policies—some of which he experienced and witnessed first-hand. And while his most accomplished poem, "Mount Shasta," sings the praises of American "Sovereign Law," his now-famous novel, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854), mythologizes and celebrates a Mexican-American outlaw.

None of this is to say that Ridge lacked strong opinions: in fact, he was often impulsive, quick to quarrel, and, as a newspaper editor in the hotly contested, somewhat yellow climate of California political journalism, thunderous and decisive in his pronouncements. But his education, his circumstances, and his disposition prevented him from becoming either a blind nationalist or an iconoclast. This chapter looks closely at the education, both formal and informal, that helped to produce Ridge's rhetoric of silence. It shows that this education not only tore him asunder—as the preceding list of contradictions suggests—but also pushed him to resolve the contradictions he lived with. To study Ridge's ideological education through the medium of the poems he wrote is to see a man haunted by division but hoping for unity. It is to see despair tenuously but unmistakably mitigated by faith. Because of the growing critical appreciation for his novel, Ridge is emerging as an important early voice for anti-imperial sentiment.[15] But any attempt to read Ridge as nothing more than a disaffected rebel, the defiant mythologizer of bandits and outlaws, misses the strong counter-current of American nationalism

[15] See, for examples, Jesse Alemán, "Assimilation and the Decapitated Body Politic in *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta*"; Jordan Tracey, "Joaquín Murieta, Cherokee Outlaw-Hero: Yellow Bird's Vindication of Cherokee Nature"; Mark Rifkin, "'For the wrongs of our poor bleeding country': Sensation, Class, and Empire in Ridge's *Joaquin Murieta*"; Cheryl Walker, *Indian Nation: Native American Literature and Nineteenth-Century Nationalisms* (111-38); Karl Kroeber, "American Indian Persistence and Resurgence" (esp. 5-10); Franklin Walker, *San Francisco's Literary Frontier* (53); the introduction, by Luis Leal, to the Arte Público Press *Life and Adventures of the Celebrated Bandit Joaquin Murrieta: His Exploits in the State of California* (esp. xlviii-l and xcv-xcvii); and Louis Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (esp. 32-40).

and historical progressivism in his work.[16] Consistently, Ridge's impulse to dwell in the agony of aesthetic transcendence or political anarchy is balanced by a reverence for the realized greatness of a *United* States of America.

Ridge's verse is animated by impulses of unity and fragmentation alike, and, somewhat confusingly, these impulses often manifest as "silence." Ridge's attempts to negotiate the apparent contradiction between silence as certainty and silence as despair make clear that the tension can only be concealed and never vanquished. Ultimately, Ridge's uncertain certainty, in aesthetics and politics alike, reveals the typical commitments of an antebellum rhetoric of silence. Ridge's life limns most of the entanglements of antebellum U.S. politics, and in many of his most accomplished poems, he reconfigures those political entanglements as aesthetic entanglements. Through Ridge, "silence" negotiates belief *about*, which is to say that it negotiates political institutions, poet-reader relationships, and other social centers where meaning is made *in common*. And so, through Ridge's politicized aesthetics, a rubric emerges by which the concrete Walt Whitman and the abstract Emily Dickinson can be evaluated side by side. This chapter, then, serves two purposes: first, it further contributes to the emerging critical understanding of John Rollin Ridge as a significant American poetic voice; and second, it helps to elaborate a genealogy of U.S. literature that can better comprehend both of its two most significant early poetic voices.

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[16] See Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (esp. 264-7) and John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (97-119). Peter G. Christensen, in "Minority Interaction in John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta*," argues that Ridge establishes a clear racial hierarchy that groups the Cherokees, the Mexicans, and the ancient Aztecs and Incas with contemporary White Europeans at the expense of socially marginal, historically backward minority groups like the Chinese and the California "Digger" Indians. Erica Stevens also gives a nuanced account of the novel in "Three-Fingered Jack and the Severed Literary History of John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*," where she claims that Ridge manages to condemn U.S. racism without advocating factional rebellion (esp. 89-93).

"What I may ne'er embrace on earth": Divisions and Decisions in "A Night Scene"

The sparse commentary to date on Ridge's poetry has focused especially on his public-facing, commemorative verse. Alanna Hickey, in "'Let Paler Nations Vaunt Themselves': John Rollin Ridge's 'Official Verse' and Racial Citizenship in Gold Rush California" (2015), writes of the ways that Ridge addresses himself to California's population on formal occasions in order to chastise the state's moral failings, especially regarding its attitude toward North America's Native populations, even as he seeks finally to reaffirm a common, republican purpose for America and the West. Similarly, in *American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet* (2010), Edward Whitley describes Ridge's posture as a "white aboriginal," a citizen of the young republic who represented its best possibilities for brilliance. Whitley seems typical in his claim that "[t]he lyric voice of inward contemplation that predominates in Ridge's early poetry is replaced in his later poetry by the authoritative, even proscriptive, voice of the bard" (132). In these readings, Ridge is remarkable for a sort of bardic expression that little resembles our traditional critical picture of "American Renaissance" writing.

Standing in partial contrast to these more recent readings of Ridge's verse is James Parins' account of Ridge the poet in his 1991 biography. There, Parins notes that Ridge would have read from the canon of British and American Romantics during his school days in Georgia, Massachusetts, and Arkansas; and Parins traces similarities of form and structure between the poems of Ridge and predecessors like Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Poe, and Bryant (see 76-91). Robert Dale Parker's assessment that "Ridge was a remarkable lyric talent, arguably at least among the several most powerful American poets before Whitman," rings true in my

assessment as well (70). Throughout his life, Ridge was a rare poetic innovator, tackling the main preoccupations of the Romantics with metaphysical insight and structures that ranged easily from blank verse to ballad to heroic couplets to nonce forms. Whatever his other pretenses, it is undeniably true, as Parins says, that part of Ridge's poetic program is to offer "an epistemology based on mystical and transcendental experience" that "closely follows Wordsworth and Shelley" (86). Working most often through the image of the ideal female form and the metaphor of the irrecoverable memory, Ridge explores silence and transcendence with a keen sense of longing and loss and an equally keen sense of consummation and unity.

It is when Ridge's traditional, Romantic lyricism is placed in conversation with the racial, political, national goals outlined by Hickey and Whitley that Ridge's contributions to the American poetic landscape are most clear. To keep an eye out for both of these strains is ultimately to see that Ridge's aesthetics are political, his politics aesthetic.

In "A Night Scene," an early lyric poem, the aesthetic-political stakes of Ridge's poetry can already be discerned. The poem did not find its way into print until after Ridge's death; it was likely discovered by Elizabeth in her husband's notebooks from the late 1840s and early 1850s, from the period stretching from just before his departure for California to a few years following his arrival. In this "scene" poem, Ridge's subject is the triple profoundness of the sea, the night, and the Muse. The speaker, a Romantic hero of sorts—typical both of Ridge's poetry and of the public persona he cultivated throughout his life—sits on the shore at night, listening to the waves and meditating. A beautiful, musical woman appears to him on a distant hill—another typical Ridge move. The speaker is struck by the figure's perfection—both her physical perfection and the perfection of her singing and harp-playing. And yet he cannot reach her, and so he ends the poem by hoping for an eventual communion in the hereafter.

The poem appears to be a thematically coherent piece about the humility demanded by mortal longing after immortal perfection. Within its eight short stanzas, however, it contains at least three versions of "silence" not so easily reconciled to one another. Ultimately, each valence of silence has political implications with which Ridge wrangled in his life and work. For the moment, however, it is only necessary to draw them from the poem and examine them in light of the aesthetic work that they do. Much of the poem's power derives from the way it foregrounds *silence* in a relentlessly *sonorous* scene. This means that while the poem has much to say, much of what it has to say pertains to what it cannot say. The poem begins:

> Unbroken silence! save the melody
>
> That steals on silence unawares, and makes
>
> It seem scarce more than silence still; that takes
>
> Possession of the senses bodily,
>
> And claims the slumbering spirit ere it wakes. (101)

In this opening stanza, "silence" is rapture and oneness. To be precise, "silence" is not "silence" at all, but rather the "melody" of the waves that drowns out all noises extraneous to the visionary state. But the visionary state brought on by silence seems somewhat dangerous, as well, "tak[ing] / Possession of the senses bodily." At this juncture, it appears that to heed the visionary summons entails a submission of sorts, a forfeiture of autonomy. This is consistent with Edmund Burke's influential characterization of the "sublime" aesthetic experience: according to Burke, the sublime derives from "astonishment" or "terror," so that the sublime "robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning" (130). Romantic poets are only ever partly at ease with the idea that profound aesthetic experiences proceed from a state of mental disarray. Wordsworth, for example, in his 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, proposed "the spontaneous overflow of

powerful feelings" as the definition of poetry, but he maintained as well that it is "emotion recollected in tranquility" that gives rise to the actual process of composition and lends formal order to the wild chaos of experience (*Prose* 127, 148). Ridge's speaker, too, will soon look to control his visionary state, but it is important to identify the poem's opening silence as its most dangerous variety, the entrancing sort of speechlessness that "takes possession of the senses" and takes its subject for a ride to an unknown and maybe unknowable (and certainly unspeakable) destination.

This dangerous uncertainty is probably why, throughout the poem, Ridge's speaker seems conflicted about how much control he is willing to cede to make way for his vision. Already in the second stanza, he re-positions his speaker as the central actor in the scene:

> Save this low melody of waves, no sound
>
> Is heard among the circling hills. I sit
>
> And muse alone—the time and place are fit—
>
> And summon spirits from the blue profound,
>
> That answer me and through my vision flit. (101)

Now actively "summoning" his vision, which obediently "answer[s]" his call, the speaker directs the scene in which he immerses himself. Though his senses are usurped in this situation, the silence rather consummates than annihilates meaning. As a variety of "silence," this is the complacent speechlessness of the visionary: a Romantic hero lost in meditation, the speaker is united to the world through an organic "utterance" that requires no words beyond the murmuring of the waves. Still, the first two stanzas are divided on the locus of control for immersive silence: whether it is imposed as a trance by some force from without, or whether invoked by the poet-seer as a force from within.

In either case, the melding of self and world sets the stage for the speaker's vision of aesthetic perfection:

> What beauteous being stands upon yon hill,
>
> With hair night-hued, and brow and bosom white?
>
> Around her floats the evening's loving light—
>
> Her feet are lost amid the shadows soft and still,
>
> But 'gainst the sky her form is pictured to my sight. (101)

This stanza introduces another important tension into the poem, which is whether the visionary form has worldly or merely aesthetic reality. Her perfection is ethereal rather than physical—verging indeed on a Platonic Ideal. The singing woman on "yon hill" is at a physical remove from the speaker, and it is unclear whether her feet, "lost amid the shadows soft and still," make contact with the mortal earth. But set against this ethereal quality, in (poetically) productive tension, is the figure's *presence* in visionary terms: "But 'gainst the sky her form *is* pictured to *my* sight"—with emphasis added to show the poet's privileged, liminal state as the mediator for what is otherwise a transcendent and other-worldly reality. But what kind of a reality is a "pictured" reality? And what about a "formal" reality, to read a meta-poetic pun into the stanza's final line? If the artist can realize the woman's "form" on his canvas (or on his page, as the case may be), does that give her a "form" in fact? The question is fundamentally a meta-poetic one, in that it has to do with the upshot of a well-written poem: does such a poem *instantiate* eternal truth and beauty, or does it merely gesture at what cannot be fully realized in a mortal framework? To put this question another way: can the poem properly describe its emblems of perfection, or is it bound to silence beyond a certain point?

In lieu of an outright answer to these questions, the following stanza continues with an appraisal of the woman as emblem of eternity:

How still! how motionless! yet full of life

As is of music-tones the sleeping string

As is of grace the blue-bird's restless wing!

She pauses there—each limb with beauty rife—

As if through boundless space her foot might spring. (101)

This stanza describes the visionary woman as the essence of what *could* be: the perfect song implied by the "sleeping string," the perfect grace implied by the "restless wing." These things are not *themselves* aesthetic perfection, but they are the suggestion thereof. Likewise, when the visionary woman pauses "*As if* through boundless space her foot might spring," she conjures for the speaker an infinite aesthetic essence which he can glimpse, if not grasp. This is the essence that Poe describes in his essay on "The Poetic Principle" as the source of "an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave." In spite of Poe's concomitant claim that "*through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses" of these immortal glories (*Critical* 236), he, Ridge, and virtually every poet whom we have come to call "Romantic" is hardly willing to cede to the blindness without a brilliant struggle.

In the exciting throes of his vision, the speaker looks for confirmation that his own song can offer more than fantasy and more than a gloss of aesthetic potential. With everything at stake, he calls forth his Muse's song to match his own:

But hark! what tones are filling all the air,

That drinks them, with the star-light blended now,

And wavelet-murmurings from below?

Her voice! her harp! Swept by the white hand rare

That moon-like guides the tide-like flow.

This stanza is a masterful half-evasion. Without compromising the previous stanza's characterization of the woman as ideal rather than real, this stanza nevertheless ventures actual imagery to characterize her song. When the speaker asks, "what tones are filling all the air . . .?," the questions seems partly rhetorical, as in, 'who is it that could describe these tones?' The move hints at the classical rhetorical tropes of *apophasis* or *prolepsis,* as when Virgil (in Dryden's translation) asks of his battlefield, "What god can tell, what numbers can display, / The various labors of that fatal day?" (*Aeneid* Book XII). Because Virgil then goes on to describe the "fatal day" in question, he answers his question in asking it: I can tell, and I will. The declaration of silence is rhetorical, meant to demonstrate, in this case, the difficulty of the utterance. The images that Ridge calls up testify to this difficulty: these are tones that sate the thirsty air and synaesthetically blend with both star-light and wave-murmuring. The collapse of sensual distinction contributes to the desired effect: evocative confusion. Describing the scene with imagery that is abstract rather than concrete, Ridge maintains the claim that the ideal woman exists outside of daily reality, but he also demonstrates the scope of his visionary power. In fact, because the woman's song is likened to the "tide-like flow," itself (as the opening stanzas recall) a "melody . . . scarce more than silence still," it is possible that the entire visionary experience is an outgrowth of the poet's silent meditation, a "summoned spirit," as the second stanza says, wholly at the beck and call of the artist-master, self-contained within his wordless wisdom. As a version of "silence," this puts the poet-seer squarely at the center of eternal truths, which he fully understands and partly emblems forth in his powerful songs. The silence has more to do with language's shortcomings than the poet's.

This version of the poem's conceit, in which the vision is a controlled outgrowth of the speaker's own creative mind, sustains the poem from its second through its sixth stanzas. But the seventh stanza calls up once more that which is *dangerous* in the sublime scene—its rapturous possibilities:

> Strange one! no harp! no voice I've heard like thine,
>
> No startling beauty like thine own have seen,
>
> The rounded world and vaulted heaven between.
>
> To gaze on thee 'tis madness all divine,
>
> But o'er the gulf my spirit loves to lean.

The superlatives of the stanza's first three lines nearly conceal a more sinister potential: that the "madness all divine" is a dangerous sort of chaos to bring into the world. No longer summoner but summoned, the speaker revels irresponsibly in his lover's powers, which suddenly look more like oblivion than salvation. If this is transcendence, it seems far from the familiar transcendence of, say, Emerson in "The American Scholar," for whom "It is one light which beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul which animates all men" (I.66). At this moment in the poem, the speaker is suddenly careless of the considerations of "all men" and gives himself over instead to selfish and potentially destructive pleasure. What would happen if he were to remain indefinitely so-entranced? The "gulf" of the final line suggests singularity and oblivion. To be so unmoored is to risk the sort of passive, capricious life of the mind that Coleridge is at pains to preempt in his defense of active, imaginative perception in the *Biographia* (see esp. VII.89-121, 232-86). "Divine" or otherwise, the sort of "madness" that Ridge's speaker entertains at this point of the poem poses a threat to Romantic ideals of imaginative perception, where the mind of the poet, which mirrors the mind of God, gives order and coherence to the world of the senses.

However, this is not to be a poem exclusively about reckless aesthetic abandon. Ridge's, like most Romantic poems, cannot abide a permanent recourse to disorder and disruption and seeks to reestablish a calmer, safer—if less satisfying—sort of formal stability. Ridge's speaker retreats, perhaps from necessity, away from the intoxicating realm of immersion and back to the relatively safer space of observation and recall:

> Thou art what I may ne'er embrace on earth,
>
> Thou sweetly moulded one, thou heavenly-eyed!
>
> But if when we do lay these forms aside,
>
> For us new forms among the stars have birth
>
> In some sweet world we'll meet, my spirit bride! (102)

Unable to sustain the immersive visionary experience, the speaker relegates his muse to the realm of spiritual longing. The failure is at once moral and artistic: the speaker finds himself unworthy to embrace his "heavenly-eyed" interlocutor (who, by the way, has without warning shed her dangerous, annihilating quality in favor of a "sweet" and angel-like character); and he also cannot properly write about her in his poem any longer. The earthly "forms"—physical and poetic alike—that at the center-point of the poem seemed so daring and otherworldly are now brought back to the mortal realm, situated unfavorably beside their divine alternatives. This new gesture toward silence self-consciously disparages mortal efforts to achieve *logos*—not unlike the efforts suggested by the speaker himself earlier in the poem. However, the stanza holds out a hope for salvation via the "new forms among the stars" that the speaker imagines and indeed insists take part of the shared destiny of himself and his lover.

If the poem were to end there, it could be considered mostly hopeful in spite of its speaker's momentary dejection. But it continues for one more stanza in a wash of melancholy frustration:

Fair worlds, like ripples o'er the watery deep,
When breezes softly o'er the surface play,
In circles one by one ye stretch away,
Till, lost to human vision's wildest sweep
Our souls are left to darkness and dismay. (102)

This final stanza's trope is blindness, the twin of silence. In some respects, it undoes the rest of the poem: whatever achievements the previous stanzas imagined are here literally and permanently lost to sight. Some of the most prominent conceits hitherto—the waves, the speaker's vision, and the woman's form—are here cast negatively as things outside the speaker's ken. The silence at the end of the poem commands humility from a speaker who was jubilant a short few stanzas previously and threatens even to undermine the immortal reunion hoped for in the penultimate stanza.

If "darkness and dismay" sound the poem's final (and all-but-silent) note, what was the purpose of the poem in the first place? Surely a proper elegy could be accomplished more directly than it has been in Ridge's dazzling "night scene." But directness is rarely the point of the Romantic poem—nor is proper elegy, at least understood straightforwardly. In this respect, it is the pleasure of aesthetic confusion that drives the poem far more than any synthesis of its various elements. The poem itself remains as a tangible testament to the vision that was—both its intoxicating, immersive beauty and its annihilating danger. As often happens with a rhetoric of silence, the poem is "successful" because of the poet's dazzling performance—and this success

partly conceals the problems of irresolution. The poet does not need to commit one way or another as to whether the poem realizes its fullest visionary potential.

Critics—historicist critics especially—have been skeptical of this Romantic tendency to leave the poem's aesthetic contradictions and meta-linguistic loose-ends as a problem for criticism. As far back as 1941, John Crowe Ransom was admonishing his colleagues' tendency to gloss over the internal contradictions of form: "Opposites can never be said to be resolved or reconciled merely because they have been got into the same poem, or got into the same complex of affective experiences to create there a kind of tension. . . . If there is a resolution at all it must be a logical resolution" (94-5). Critical movements since Crowe's time have indeed taken pains to show the problems of language and ideology that emerge from the unresolved aesthetic contradiction. McGann's arguments in *The Romantic Ideology*, treated at length in the introduction, provide the most powerful example.

Of course, in a poem like "A Night Scene," which is abstract and concerned chiefly with the problems of art and representation, there may be no pressing need to resolve or reconcile. One of the emerging maneuvers in the critical repertoire of "New Formalism" is to demonstrate that writers were not only aware of the potential contradictions within their writing, but that they harnessed those contradictions for critical purposes of their own design. Paul M. Curtis writes of "Romantic indirection," by which the reader is "urged . . . to question his/her situation *vis-à-vis* a poem or, rather, what that situation might be, as a result of the progress from idea to idea" (9). This reading is consistent with Susan Wolfson's assertion that Romantic forms are "dynamic" and "deeply divided, incoherent, themselves in the business of critique" (14). By these readings, much of the aesthetic work of the poem happens in the play between the necessity of silence and the urge to make the poem.

The "silence" of "A Night Scene" comes from several, not entirely commensurate sources. There is the poet's knowledge that his artistic powers fall short in comparison to his subject's perfection, and that he cannot presently realize that perfection, either by replicating it in his own song or by absorbing it through a physical embrace. Just as important, however, is the "silence" demanded by the poem's final hope that such perfection *will* be realized, but only in the span of eternal time. And in yet a third crucial sense, there is the "silence" of aesthetic paralysis, the usurpation of the senses in the presence of the sublime. One of the primary questions that emerges from reading "A Night Scene" is whether these different silences can or should be reconciled in Ridge's work. Demonstrably, they are all "got into the same poem, or got into the same complex of affective experiences to create there a kind of tension," in Ransom's words. They come together as several tools in one rhetoric of silence. However, even if Ridge means for his reader to encounter each of these possibilities separately, I am not sure that irresolution and critique are meant to have the final say in the poem. It is more often the case that Ridge confronts the various problems of representation and seeks to resolve them in terms that satisfy both his most hopeful and his most cynical intuitions, such that aesthetic irresolution gives way to a tentative but persistent social cohesion.

"Mount Shasta" I: Sublime Uncertainties and Political Union

"A Night Scene" is representative of one of Ridge's chief contributions to the field of American poetry: meditative, lyric poems on the subject of some sublime figure, typically a woman or a scene from nature. He writes the sublime experience with exceptional verve, always careful to reflect on the speaker's own limited perspective in the face of what is divine and otherworldly.

However, not all of Ridge's lyrics maintain the aesthetic remove of "A Night Scene." Often, Ridge's speakers venture to extend their observations to the realm of the political. Given Ridge's extensive career as a political journalist in California, this is perhaps unremarkable. Still, to the sensibilities of the modern critic, accustomed to a certain limited field of play for the Romantic poem, the effect can be jarring. Perhaps this is because, in a purely aesthetic poem, ambiguity seems to strengthen a poem's affect. On the other hand, when it comes to politics, lingering ambiguity threatens to undermine social cohesion. When a poem that relies on tropes that were seemingly exclusive to aesthetic discourse becomes suddenly and unexpectedly political, there must necessarily be a stronger impulse to resolve dichotomies, tensions, and contradictions.

Ridge's favorite poem, "Mount Shasta" (1852), is an excellent case of a poet introducing explicitly political themes where the practiced reader of Romantic poetry would hardly expect them. This is all the more unsettling because it is otherwise a very accomplished Romantic silence poem, keenly toying with many of the same categories that appear in "A Night Scene." It begins:

> Behold the dread Mt. Shasta, where it stands
> Imperial midst the lesser heights, and, like
> Some mighty unimpassioned mind, companionless
> And cold. The storms of Heaven may beat in wrath
> Against it, but it stands in unpolluted
> Grandeur still; and from the rolling mists upheaves
> Its tower of pride e'en purer than before.
> The wintry showers and white-winged tempests leave

Their frozen tributes on its brow, and it

Doth make of them an everlasting crown.

Thus doth it, day by day and age by age,

Defy each stroke of time: still rising highest

Into Heaven! (86)

In Ridge's poem, the mountain stands forth as a variation of the sublime, eternal, inaccessible figure. Whereas in "A Night Scene," the figure inspired passion and desire, here the mountain is more austere and terrible in its sublimity: "dread," "imperial," "companionless," "cold," and "unpolluted." The mountain stands apart from the mortal world, by turns inspiring onlookers and cowing them.

The second section of the poem crucially establishes the immortal and inaccessible character of the grand peak:

Aspiring to the eagle's cloudless height,

No human foot has stained its snowy side;

No human breath has dimmed the icy mirror which

It holds unto the moon and stars and sov'reign sun.

We may not grow familiar with the secrets

Of its hoary top, whereon the Genius

Of that mountain builds his glorious throne!

Far lifted in the boundless blue, he doth

Encircle, with his gaze supreme, the broad

Dominions of the West, which lie beneath

His feet, in pictures of sublime repose

No artist ever drew. He sees the tall
Gigantic hills arise in silentness
And peace, and in the long review of distance
Range themselves in order grand. He sees the sunlight
Play upon the golden streams which through the valleys
Glide. He hears the music of the great and solemn sea,
And overlooks the huge old western wall
To view the birth-place of undying Melody! (86-7)

This section of the poem mirrors the penultimate stanza of "A Night Scene," with its somewhat despondent acknowledgment of the speaker's limited ken: "Thou art what I may ne'er embrace on earth" (102). But in "Shasta," the effort to separate sublime figure from mortal observer is more thorough and explicit yet: "No human foot has stained its snowy side" and "We may not grow familiar with the secrets / Of its hoary top." In this part of the poem, the mountain-top is more significant as what it *symbolizes* than what it *is in fact*: it represents not a peak to be conquered by the intrepid mountaineer, but the eternally unreachable realm of the heavens, always inspiring but also always beyond mortal grasp. The poem offers this absolute distinction between mortal and immortal realms in order to impress upon the reader the wonder of what he cannot quite access: the "boundless blue," the "broad / Dominions of the West," and the "birth-place of undying Melody." Contributing to this rhetoric of silence are the meta-artistic puns on "No human foot" and "pictures of sublime repose / No artist ever drew." Like Poe's "lone regions where hath trod / No foot of man" (*Collected Works* I.323), Ridge's remote mountain-top repels the representative efforts of the poet, whose poetic "feet" can only proceed through suggestive figuration before giving way to silence.

A key element of that suggestive figuration in "Mount Shasta" is the process by which the connection between the mountain and the immortal realm becomes increasingly literal by the end of the poem's second section. Whereas the poem began with a simile—"*like* / Some mighty unimpassioned mind, companionless / And cold"—in the second section, simile gives way to personification—"the icy mirror which / It holds unto the moon and stars and sov'reign sun"—and then more fully to something like catachresis, as the "Genius" of the mountain "Encircle[s] with his *gaze* supreme the broad / Dominions of the West," "*sees* the tall / Gigantic hills arise," "*sees* the sunlight / Play," "*hears* the music of the great and solemn sea," and "*overlooks* the huge old western wall / To *view* the birth-place of undying Melody" (emphases added). Becoming the very face of God, the mountain looks directly at the eternal realm that humans themselves can never hope to see ("We may not grow familiar…"). The mountain's face *sees*, with its "icy mirror" of unvarnished reflection, what mortals can only imagine. In this respect, Ridge's poem exemplifies M. H. Abrams's seminal distinction between the Classical "mirror" and the Romantic "lamp": only God has the mirror—humans must content themselves with inklings and flickers of the divine revelation.

And yet Ridge's poem, like many Romantic poems, is not content to leave Shasta alone in its sublime alterity. After all, if humans cannot see what the mountain sees, they can at least see the mountain itself. It is the ability of the mountain to inspire and sanctify the "peaceful / Homes of men" that preoccupies the third and penultimate section of "Mount Shasta." After reaffirming the mountain's ability to function as a "vast Reflector in / The dome of Heaven," the poem begins to elaborate certain ways that the mountain also acts as a "strong purifier!" to the California communities over which it towers: "[T]he grass / Grows greener in its shade, and sweeter bloom / The flowers," for example. The mountain, it seems, is not so thoroughly

removed from human affairs after all, even "aye standing / There the guarantee of health and happiness" (87). Now, this sentiment deserves pause. How can the "dread," "cold" Mount Shasta, whereat "We may not grow familiar with the secrets / Of its hoary top," function in such a direct and practical manner as to guarantee health and happiness to the human community?

The answer has to do with the mountain's role as mediator between the human and the divine:

> Well might it win communities so blest
> To loftier feelings and to nobler thoughts—
> The great material symbol of eternal
> Things! (87)

Humans may not be able to see and hear precisely what the mountain's face sees and hears, but they *can* see the mountain itself, which serves as a guarantee that eternity *is*, if nothing more. And so Ridge's speaker predicts that this "symbol of eternal / Things" will have a tangible influence on future generations of Californians:

> . . . And well I ween, in after years, how
> In the middle of his furrowed track the plowman
> In some sultry hour will pause, and wiping
> From his brow the dusty sweat, with reverence
> Gaze upon that hoary peak. The herdsman
> Oft will rein his charger in the plain, and drink
> Into his inmost soul the calm sublimity (87-8)

The final secrets of the mountain top defy human knowledge and human art and command only silence; nevertheless, the mountain itself, as symbol, commands reverence and response through intimation and inspiration.

Before considering "Shasta's" jarring final section, it is important to establish that Ridge so far has been offering a version of a Romantic commonplace. In "A Night Scene," the speaker entertains the fantasy that, despite the remote and inaccessible character of his Muse, the fact that "her form is pictured to my sight" may be reason enough to venture a sort of faith in an eventual consummation (101). Several of the most famous English Romantic poems fixate on the possibility that an early "intimation of immortality" in response to Nature may have a real and lasting afterlife in the poet. The daffodils from Wordsworth's "I wandered lonely as a cloud" come to mind, as does the "stranger" from Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" (*Poetical* II.216-7; XVI.i.452-7). Perhaps the most important precedent, however, is to be found in Shelley's "Mont Blanc," a probable source for Ridge's own mountain-top poem (see Parins 87-8).[17] Shelley ends his long meditation on his own mountain's stark loneness and insistent silence with an affirmation of the mountain's final place *within*, rather than *outside*, the world of mortals:

> The secret Strength of things,
> Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
> Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind's imaginings

[17] The first complete American edition of Shelley's poems was published in 1845 in Boston, and from that time on the Shelley myth, already substantial, grew to impressive scope on the American continent. See American reviews in James E. Barcus, *Shelley: The Critical Heritage* (esp. 223-4, 409-22); see also Julia Power, *Shelley in America in the Nineteenth Century* (esp. 9-90).

Silence and solitude were vacancy? (435)

The poem's final, provocative rhetorical question requires no words for an answer: the correspondences between Nature and "the human mind's imaginings" lie too deep for words. The force of this rhetorical use of silence is that it guards the Romantic poem against the charge of hubris and artistic overreach: the poet acknowledges his limited place in the cosmic order and only offers a few words by way of prophecy. Whatever else he knows, he knows it only indirectly and wordlessly. He is confident that there *is* communion between the human and the divine; but he need not say *what it is*, in order to insist *that it is*. This strategy makes for Romantic poems that are at once provocative and baffling, gesturing toward capital-T Truth but always leaving the final word unsaid. Ridge's herdsman "drink[s] / Into his inmost soul the calm sublimity"; "A Night Scene" defers to a consummation in the hereafter. In order to be successful, the poem need not specify how this subtle influence occurs or what exactly its effects may be.

But this safe space of aesthetic play is challenged in the poem's final section. There, the mysterious forces of "purification" become distinctly more local and particular:

And well this Golden State shall thrive, if like
Its own Mt. Shasta, Sovereign Law shall lift
Itself in purer atmosphere—so high
That human feeling, human passion at its base
Shall lie subdued; e'en pity's tears shall on
Its summit freeze; to warm it e'en the sunlight
Of deep sympathy shall fail:
Its pure administration shall be like
The snow immaculate upon that mountain's brow! (88)

The heart of the problem is this: how can Shasta serve as the symbol for "Sovereign Law" in California if "No foot has stained its snowy side," and, more explicitly yet, "We may not grow familiar with the secrets / Of its hoary top"? The poem takes great pains to establish that the mountain is the realm of the Ideal, of the eternal, of the more-than-human: then who, or what, could possibly translate its power to something so base as civil government? Humans are involved, and humans can only gaze in awe at the splendid mountain: then can there be any such thing as "pure administration" when it comes to managing their affairs? The poem seems *explicitly* flawed—that is, flawed by its own stated logic. From the standpoint of a "rhetoric of silence," the end of this poem is clumsy so far as it gives definite parameters for the work of silence in the world. Typically, the poem relies on a purely aesthetic gesture for this work: the *suggestion* of influence, as with Shelley's final rhetorical question about "the human mind's imaginings." But law and government are much more actual than suggestion, and they cannot be realized with a nod and a wink. By breaking the delicate balance of silence and speech in the Romantic poem, Ridge's poem reveals a disconcerting possibility: that to rely on a "rhetoric of silence" may *actually* be to rely on very real, very concrete assumptions about *what exactly* is universal and eternal. "That it is" must become "what it is" in ways that require the poet to commit to certain assertions and exclusions.

In Ridge's poems, the necessary solitude of the great or the sublime figure is a constant: "And mighty things must be alone," he writes in one poem ("To a Star Seen at Twilight" [1849/68], 93). And yet he is rarely content to let them alone altogether: "From far I feel their secret charm," he writes in another ("October Hills" [1867/68], 100). These figures may dwell apart in their eternal abodes and uninterrupted solitude, but the poet nevertheless strives to find compensation in their withholding, to find something to communicate from out of their silence.

He insists, finally, on his ability to take part in and use, in the human world, the sublime, inaccessible, eternal being. That this gesture here coincides with the idea of America and the West is, I argue, far from coincidental: it may be that the "compensation" offered in Ridge's silence poems is explicitly political in only a few instances, but the rhetorical structure of the gesture that makes an intimation of eternity into the poem's concrete life in the world is much more pervasive. In settling how and why Ridge comes to sanctify California or American "Sovereign Law" as part of a divine aesthetic principle, it is possible to discern a great deal more about the aesthetic-political logic of any number of American Romantic poems. These poems, it turns out, both echo and query the social logic by which "America" in many guises sought to unite itself even as it moved ever closer to its most profound rupture.

Silence and Certainty: American Destiny and American Misgivings

Ridge's poem "Mount Shasta" indicates that it is possible to solve seemingly intractable problems by deploying a rhetoric of silence. The mere existence of the mountain sanctifies and purifies California civic life and makes possible the pursuit of "Sovereign Law," notwithstanding all the ways that, in the early part of the poem, that same mountain's secrets are shown to be guarded by a veil of eternal silence. This maneuver, as it happens, is a commonplace of progressive social and political discourse, and its advantage in the social sphere is that it permits a sort of divine or eternal certainty to supersede and even justify present or mortal confusion.

The conversations surrounding education reform and the "common school" movement provide one clear and instructive example of this collision of "silence" and "Sovereign Law." At the forefront of this movement was Horace Mann, the Whig politician who became the Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education from 1837 to 1849. As Secretary, Mann was

charged with reporting each year on the progress and the needs of the state's growing network of public schools. This he did in his *Annual Reports* to the Board, but these reports were not limited to the technical details of his office: Mann also used his *Reports* to advance the social-political cause of education itself. The following passage from his *Twelfth Annual Report* (1849) provides some sense of how his method in this regard parallels Ridge's poetic rhetoric of silence:

> Ever-expanding powers are within us; eternity lies before us; and an Infinite Being, amidst his works, is the adorable object of these faculties throughout this eternity. These, no height of attainment which our powers will ever reach, and no length of duration to which the cycles of eternity shall ever have run, will enable us to exhaust or fully comprehend. To affirm the contrary would be to affirm that our finite minds can embrace and encircle their infinite Author, as his mind embraces and encircles ours. Our relation to our Maker, then, is a moral phase of the problem of the asymptote—a line forever approaching a point which it can never reach.
>
> And, if we believe in our individual capacity for indefinite improvement, why should we doubt the capacity of the race for continued progress as long as it dwells upon the earth? (69)

It is fair to wonder why, given the relatively technical nature of his task, Mann should be discovered so often waxing poetical on humankind's relationship to the infinite divine. Mann in particular here is exceptionally reliant on a "rhetoric of silence" in which the end is clear and articulable, but the road thereto thwarts clear expression. The end—here God, and the replication of His image on earth—stands forth as a self-evident goal. But the metaphor of the "asymptote" gives Mann a curious rhetorical liberty: he can make the goal self-evident while the middle road and the means are uncertain or imperfect. Strictly speaking, this distant point is God: the

ineffable, the indefinite, the unfathomable, the inarticulable—the otherworldly silence where "hath trod no foot of man," in Poe's words, or the heaven-ascending peak whereat "We may not grow familiar with its secrets," in Ridge's. But in fact, how radically otherworldly and unreachable can this point be if Mann is able to say—with confidence—that American civilization is moving in its precise direction at all times? God himself may dwarf the consciousness with his sublime alterity, but the fact of his existence dwells in the heart of the believer as an incontrovertible truth. Well, so too with the religion of America: the final destiny of the nation is perhaps a far-off ideal; but the fact of the chosen people is real and present, as incontrovertible as the deity himself. And so when it comes to shaping the nation's institutions, the myth of the far-off ideal of the future prevails in the rhetoric of the present.

Underneath these lofty terms of far-off, inapproachable ideals lies a certain vague fear: a fear that whatever is now imperfect and disruptive in the union will finally succeed to tear that union apart. Education historians have often noted that at the heart of American education reform lies not just an ideal for a better future but the desire to control a diverse and sometimes unruly population. Carl F. Kaestle writes thus of the primary motivation for common school reform: "to integrate and assimilate a diverse population into the nation's political, economic, and cultural institutions" (x).[18] Through the lofty, idealistic language of Mann's *Twelfth Annual Report*, it is nevertheless possible to discern the outline of the more coercive aspect of common schooling, as at the beginning of his section on "Moral Education": "Moral education is a primal necessity of social existence. The unrestrained passions of men are not only homicidal, but suicidal, and a community without a conscience would soon extinguish itself" (90). The idea that any society

[18] See also Steven E. Tozer, Guy Senese, and Paul Violas, who, in *School and Society* (58-76), carefully trace the influence of Prussian nationalism on Mann's reform efforts, noting how he leveraged a "pedagogy of love" in the name of law, orderliness, and nation-building.

without a "moral education" in the Western, Christian vein is inherently "homicidal," "suicidal," and "without a conscience" reveals a certain cultural chauvinism at the heart of education reform. Education as a check on vice and a curb on "unrestrained passion" seems a far cry from education as economic equalizer or education as democracy's helpmeet, but many scholars have noted that "moral education" has been inseparable from public or charitable forms of education (like the Christian missions to the North American Indians) since their incipience.[19]

In light of this coercive, assimilationist strain in the education reform movement, Mann's rhetoric of silence takes on a slightly more sinister valence. Indeed, in that light at least, Mann's metaphor of the asymptote becomes less a visionary ideal and more a convenient justification for whatever might be uncomfortable or unsavory about his means. The logic of the metaphor demands its reader's assent: it asks us to agree that whatever else it might look like, this *is* progress. The answer is taken for granted: "America," "the Maker," "Mount Shasta": these stand forth as a "manifest" destiny, a Coleridgean "first principle." Uncertainty, sublimity, and silence therefore take the stage within the confines of these predetermined end points, and the human capacity for error is thereby limited to the extent that the end points are kept in sight.

So far does a certain amount of complacency hold sway in a rhetoric of silence. The poem is "fragmentary," in Marjorie Levinson's terms, exactly to the extent that the poet expects the reader to compensate for the poem's irresolution. Levinson describes the "fragment poem" as "a

[19] For especially useful commentary, see, in addition to Kaestle's *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society*, Douglas McKnight, *Schooling, the Puritan Imperative, and the Molding of an American National Identity*; Donald H. Parkerson and JoAnn Parkerson, *The Emergence of the Common School in the U.S. Countryside*; Neil Gerad McCluskey, *Public Schools and Moral Education: The Influence of Horace Mann, William Torrey Harris, and John Dewey*; David Nasaw, *Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schooling in the United States*; Richard David Mosier, *Making the American Mind: Social and Moral Ideas in the McGuffey Readers*; and Kaestle and Maris A. Vinovskis, *Education and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts*. For an account of the missionary efforts to indigenous cultures, which in many ways parallel the later efforts of common schools to control and assimilate the U.S. immigrant population, see William Gerald McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839*.

poem whose irresolution invites assimilation as a formal directive and thus functions as a semantic determinant" (14). Levinson's point about semantic determination is most obviously true where the poet makes clear in advance the semantic completion that he is asking for: "Sovereign Law" is one such example, though as I discuss below, that term is multivalent.

An even clearer example comes in Ridge's poem "The Atlantic Cable" (1868, recited at a public celebration of the cable's completion in 1858). In that poem, which celebrates the joining of two continents and the "truth Sublime, / That Man is Man in every age and clime!" Ridge quickly elides the difficulties posed by silence-inducing considerations of space, time, and natural wonders in order to repeatedly affirm the eternal "progress of the human race" (89, 88). With an elision breathtaking for its alacrity if not for its humility, Ridge invokes the language of sublimity and silence in order to describe the awful power of electricity—only to swiftly reintegrate that destabilizing power within the comfortable civilizational framework of human science:

> A mightier monarch is that subtler thing,
> Which gives to human thought a thought-swift wing;
> Which speaks in thunder like a God,
> Or humbly stoops to kiss the lifted rod;
> Ascends to Night's dim, solitary throne,
> And clothes it with a splendor not its own—
> A ghastly grandeur and a ghostly sheen,
> Through which the pale stars tremble as they're seen;
> Descends to fire the far horizon's rim,
> And paints Mount Etnas in the cloudland grim;

Or, proud to own fair Science' rightful sway,

Low bends along th' electric wire to play,

And, helping out the ever-wondrous plan,

Becomes, in sooth, an errand-boy for man! (89)

A trope like the "dim, solitary throne" of "Night" has the potential to be disruptive in other of Ridge's poems. (See, for example, the discussion of "Humboldt River," below.) In this poem, however, it serves only to reaffirm the incredible, unrelenting power of Man (or American Man) to overspread the entire world with his own best image in fulfillment of some divine, "ever-wondrous plan." "For Nation unto Nation soon shall be / Together brought in knitted unity": such is the poem's abiding faith in a world manifestly destined to give way to the sway of American-style "Liberty" (90). Given the perfection of the vision and its apparently incontrovertible desirability, Ridge does not dwell for long on any sort of dangerous or deviant opposition. Here, Ridge's fraught but abiding faith in the idea of "America!" (90)—his first principle—limits the extent to which his poem tests the limitations of language or the possibilities for common understanding. Sacvan Bercovitch compellingly articulates the version of American literature that unsettles only or chiefly to reify, where to investigate the wonders of the world "is not to come to terms with the new or unexpected. It is to domesticate the unknown by transferring the agency of meaning from the mystery 'out there' to a world we recognize and so to invest the familiar—ourselves, or our kind—with the powers of a higher reality" (4). For Bercovitch, American writers do not tend so much to explore the unknown as they do to colonize it and re-make it in their own image, albeit often in dramatizing fashion.

Bercovitch targets especially the Puritan and the Emersonian traditions for their falsely exploratory mode that covers for the top-down imposition of "America" as always and already

the best and final ideal. It is perhaps more surprising to find in Ridge, whose Cherokee consciousness was shaped in part by unjust policy, dishonored treaties, and forced relocation, an equally ardent champion of "America" as a winning ideal. But he was capable of articulating the nation's "manifest destiny" in terms as jingoistic as any, as when, in the Sacramento *Daily Bee* of May 6, 1857, Ridge writes of his hope "to see Uncle Sam the dominant lord of every square sod of ground, from Panama to the Arctic Pole, on the soil of North America." He continues in this vein: "Young America has a mission to accomplish, and you might as easily write and preach the whirlwind into composure as to check him in the career marked out for him by an eternal and unswerving destiny" (qtd. Whitley 124). In this nationalist vision of exploration and risk-taking, the end-point is clearly fixed, and any possible intermediate state of loss, confusion, or silence is compensated in advance by the manifest nature of the "eternal and unswerving destiny" of the great nation.

On the other hand, those familiar with Ridge's growing reputation in American studies as the author of *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854), the first published novel in the United States by a Native American, likely think of him as an early voice for anti-imperialist sentiment. Indeed the American nationalist current is not the only one running through Ridge's writing: he also makes waves as a rebel and an iconoclast.

Ridge's novel chronicles—or rather, sensationalizes—the life of "Joaquín," an outlaw who terrorized the denizens of California in the wake of the Mexican-American War. The titular hero, a disaffected Mexican gold miner victimized by Anglo-American bigots, revenges himself on his oppressors by becoming the leader of a gang of outlaw robbers and bandits. Although in Ridge's tale Joaquín himself is fairly noble, practicing violence only where necessary, his unscrupulous accomplice Three-Fingered Jack revels in the gory details of his terrorism.

Together the two men furnish a formidable myth for the explosive, reactive power of American empire's leftovers and cast-offs. Some critics of the novel have seized upon the parallels between the Mexicans' plight in California and the Cherokees' plight in Georgia to offer Ridge as a radical voice of dissent (see note, above). Surely there was a part of Ridge that shared the wish of his protagonist to undertake "a deed of daring and of power which would redeem with its refulgent light the darkness of his previous history and show him to after times, not as a mere outlaw committing petty depredations and robberies, but as a *hero,* who has revenged his country's wrongs and washed out her disgrace in the blood of her enemies" (*Murieta* 80).

In Ridge's poetry, this radical element is very clearly manifest in his earliest published poem, "An Indian's Grave" (1847). In this poem, there is a sense that "white" society has tragically impinged upon the "noble race" of the native people (70, 71). In the poem, Ridge writes of walking "far in a lonely wood" and discovering the remains of an ancient burial site. The discovery causes him to reflect upon and lament of the Native peoples of the East that, "save but a few, they all had fled, / And, fleeing, left some bones behind" (70, 71)

It is important to situate this 1847 poem within a robust American poetic tradition of elegiac poems and narratives on the "Vanishing Indian." In seminal American texts like Sarah Wentworth Morton's *Ouâbi: Or the Virtues of Nature* (1790), Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok, a Tale of Early Times* (1824), James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha* (1855), the indigenous character is romanticized and lauded before retreating, usually willingly, to the mythic West, ceding the American continent as such to Anglo-European civilization.[20] American poets often cut their teeth writing lyric elegies

[20] See Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* and Susan Scheckel, *Insistence of the Indian: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* for the ways that

on Indian burial grounds—Ridge is likely to have encountered poems like Philip Freneau's "The Dying Indian, Tomo-Chequi" (1784, II.243-5), "The Indian Burying-Ground" (1788, II.369-70), and "The Indian Student; Or, Force of Nature" (1788, II.371-4) or William Cullen Bryant's "A Walk at Sunset" (1821, *Poetical* I.43-5) during his school days. In Freneau's 1788 poem, the Indian warrior tries out civilization, finds that it isn't for him, and willingly dismisses himself back to Nature:

> Where Nature's ancient forests grow,
>
> And mingled laurel never fades,
>
> My heart is fixed;—and I must go
>
> To die among my native shades (II.373)

Bryant, for his part, reflects on a natural American landscape that bears the influence but no longer the presence of the Indian: his apostrophe to the setting sun concludes,

> Farewell! but thou shalt come again—thy light
>
> Must shine on other changes, and behold
>
> The place of the thronged city still as night—
>
> States fallen—new empires built upon the old—
>
> But never shalt thou see these realms again
>
> Darkened by boundless groves and roamed by savage men. (*Poetical* 45)

In each of these cases, a white gaze laments but finally accepts the historical necessity of the Indian's disappearance.

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this violent, appropriative relationship to Natives helped to foster and unify an Anglo/European sense of American nationalism.

However, despite these clear precedents, a young Ridge seems to have written this poem more as a Cherokee than as an American. The poem gives a plausible narrative account of the ancient warrior's death and expresses remorse that it should have been so, but it does not end on that *detached* elegiac note. Instead, it concludes on a note of defiance:

Sleep on, dark warrior,
Whoe'er thou art! My hand shall not disturb
The slightest stem that takes its nutriment
From thee. The white man's share may plough some other
Mounds where Red men sleep, round which no mourner
Stands in watch to guard the relics of a friend;
But no rude step, and no rude hand shall e'en
Despoil the beauty of this silent spot,
Or sacrilegiously disturb the rest
Of *one* lone Indian form. Sleep on!
The storms that howled around thy head long,
Long ago, and tutored thy stern heart
To agony, have ceased. A thousand cities
Stand, where once thy nation's wigwams stood,—
And num'rous palaces of giant strength
Are floating down the streams where long ago
Thy bark canoe was gliding. All is changed.
Then *sleep* thou on! Perchance that peace, denied
In life, within the lonely grave is found. (71-2)

The ending of this poem, which quietly but defiantly promises to resist the "white man's" transgressions against the indigene, situates the speaker of Ridge's poem on a lineage with his later protagonist, Joaquín: desperate at the injustice of white Americans and capable of lawless and violent acts of defiance. If there is a sort of defeatism in the speaker's allowance that "The white man's share may plough some other / Mounds where Red men sleep," there is also a violent and dangerous promise that the erasure will not be complete, that *this* grave at least will not be disturbed. This speaker presents himself as a quietly defiant bump in the path of the inexorable march of American empire. It is not difficult to imagine the poem's author, the young and displaced Cherokee, fancying himself just such a potential hitch in America's machinery.

To best understand this Ridge who sometimes wrote paeans to American progress and sometimes let his Cherokee identity manifest in defiance, it helps to look at his journalistic writings on "the Indian Problem"—on which, of course, he had an insider's perspective. Ridge's first known piece of published journalism was for the Clarksville, Texas, *Northern Standard* in January of 1849. This was during his last months of peace with his wife and daughter in Cherokee Territory in Arkansas, just before Ridge killed a political rival and fled to Missouri and finally to California. At this time of his life, Ridge was working, mostly futilely, to undermine his political rivals in the "Ross faction" and to regain influence for himself and his family (Parins 53-5).[21] The article, titled "The Cherokees: Their History—Present Conditions and Future

[21] It was the so-called "Ross faction" that, under the leadership of John Ross, staged a violent political coup following the 1835 Treaty of New Echota. The treaty, negotiated primarily by Major Ridge, John Ridge, and Elias Boudinot, set the terms for Cherokee removal to the West, a removal which the Ridges felt to be inevitable. However, because the terms of the treaty were not approved by the Cherokee legislature, the treaty was illegal under Cherokee law. It was members of the Ross faction who, in retaliation for this illegal treaty, murdered Major Ridge, John Ridge, and Elias Boudinot in 1839, when John Rollin was twelve. The differences between the two parties, however, ran deeper than politics. The Ridge party was mostly formed of the landed, wealthy, and assimilated class of mixed-bloods or mestizos, while the Rosses were largely full-blooded Cherokees who favored traditional cultural practices and resisted the notion of becoming "civilized."

Prospects," lays out Ridge's vision for a Cherokee future (and the contours of this vision would remain largely unchanged throughout Ridge's career). Importantly, this vision is largely assimilationist in nature, but even as Ridge goes on to adulate the United States, he begins on a note of recrimination:

> To behold a branch of the aborigines of this continent, quietly seated in their acknowledged territory; having abandoned their savage customs and habits for the condition of civilized life; creating for themselves a simple but wise form of government, and gathering around them all those circumstances which were favorable to their advancement in human knowledge and human happiness, was indeed a lovely and beautiful vision. But, to see them, while thus prosperous and happy, rudely thrown, by the iron arm of cold State policy, from the proud elevation which they had attained by the work of long and painful years; to see the fire-brand of discord and contention hurled in their midst, to blast and whither their energies and almost effectually to cancel all the good which they had wrought themselves, was truly a painful contrast, and a heart-rending sight. (Ah, well may the intelligent Cherokee weep over the fallen condition of his tribe, and curse, deeply, and bitterly curse, the hand which placed it there.) (*Trumpet* 49)

Ridge's castigation of "the iron arm of cold State policy," along with the threat of a "deep and bitter curse," resonates with the reader of *Joaquín* or "An Indian's Grave." But that reader, looking for an affirmation of indigenous over Western values, will find less to celebrate in Ridge's praise of the Cherokees for "having abandoned their savage customs and habits for the condition of civilized life." Ridge, a planter's son, was in many respects inclined to view the Cherokees' contact with the Europeans as an overall boon, embracing the role of the "civilized

tribe." What he objects to here is that the Cherokees have been prevented from a full demonstration of their capacity to become civilized. The reference, of course, is to the broken treaties and unjust negotiations on the part of the state of Georgia that led up to the Cherokees' final removal from their ancestral lands.

As Ridge goes on to analyze the problems faced by the present-day Cherokees, he places part of the blame on the vindictive and irrational Ross faction. But he also believes that the Rosses are an outgrowth of a larger problem: that the wrong sort of "sovereignty" prevails in Cherokee Nation, specifically insofar as Cherokee sovereignty differs from the sovereignty offered by U.S. statehood:

> I believe that confusion must reign amongst them, one faction must tyrannize over another—a furious banditti must exist, defying law and order, and all the miserable consequences, which flow from such a state of things, must surround and oppress the Cherokee people, until a strong arm is extended over them—I mean the laws of the United States, I would advocate a measure therefore, which looks to the event of making the Cherokee nation an integral part of the United States, having Senators and Representatives in Congress, and possessing all the attributes, first of a territorial government, and then of a sovereign State. . . . Let her change her nominal sovereignty for a real one. (*Trumpet* 52-3)[22]

It becomes clear in this passage that the previously-lamented "cold arm of State policy" stands in Ridge's mind as incidental rather than endemic to the American character. Somewhat paradoxically, Ridge's solution to the problem of a "cold arm" is to allow Cherokee Nation to embrace a "strong arm" more fully in its own right. In this case, submission entails liberty, the

[22] Ridge repeats this wish for Cherokee statehood in other places. See also his letters to his cousin Stand Watie and to his mother, in 1853 and 1855, respectively (rpt. in Dale and Litton 76-7, 87).

exchange of a "nominal sovereignty for a real one." The reappearance of the language of "sovereignty" gives crucial context to Ridge's later adulation of California's "Sovereign Law": to be ruled by principles of state sovereignty, here, is not necessarily to surrender freedom. "Sovereignty" for Ridge entails choice, freedom, democratic participation—albeit within the confines of "the Union." This view of sovereignty would come to define Ridge's mature politics as a California newspaper editor: he consistently promoted "state sovereignty" or "individual sovereignty" as the solution to the United States' sectarian woes, identifying as a Know-Nothing and a Douglas Democrat and opposing solutions like federal abolitionism on the ground that they impinged on the states' right to democratic self-determination.

For Ridge in this article, strife is positive when it takes place within the confines of a properly acknowledged sovereignty: "Let [the Cherokee Nation] attach herself to the Union as one of its members, and rise with the fair sisters of the Republic to a position which is truly lofty and rationally independent. Then Cherokee genius could be nobly exerted. Whenever a brilliant fight arose it would not be extinguished in blood but a large sphere would be given and it would shine like a serene star, over the fortunes of a hitherto unhappy race" (*Trumpet* 53). In this scenario, conflict leads to growth, because it is sanctified by democracy—the Western faith. What Ridge argues here is that the Cherokees be allowed a place in capital-H History, that they be allowed to contribute to the path of Horace Mann's asymptote, limning God and America and Destiny.

In this specifically American view of History, all strife and injustice is compensated by progress. Indeed, conflict is welcome as a sort of necessary play, a daring extension of mortal, contemporary limitations in the direction of eternity. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison rightly identifies a racial aspect of this American "drama of limitless power," where the White,

American imagination uses simulations of Blackness as fodder for unfettered freedom and aesthetic risk before returning safely to the comfort of a stable American identity (25-6). In making this unbounded play an aesthetic rather than a political project, American literature can explore "the terror of human freedom" from a safe space (37). Instead of *becoming* savage, the American man "is backgrounded by savagery" (44): inspired, immersed, but ultimately set apart from the unbounded power and unbounded liberty of disordered and uncivilized existences. He can mark his exceptional character without succumbing to the regressive nature implied by full-on blackness or fully uncivilized Indianness.

The poet's rhetoric of silence should be understood at least in part as just this sort of sanctioned "play," with the extent of the journey's danger mitigated by the certainty of a stable identity waiting on the other side. In "A Night Scene," the yawning "gulf" of passion is harmless to the extent that the speaker really controls his vision; in "Mount Shasta," the annihilating height of the mountaintop is turned to positive account by the benevolent guidance of "Sovereign Law." Even in "An Indian's Grave," which is in some respects more persistently dangerous than most of Ridge's other poems, an apology of sorts exists in the way that Ridge casts his elegy as an homage to the past. When his speaker sets the scene of the burial, he writes,

> All else was silent save the whispering leaves
> Strewn by autumnal winds, or here and there
> A stream which ever poured a mournful sound
> Amid those solitudes so dim, where shadows
> Vast and tall, eternal threw their flickering
> Darkness. (70-1)

The absoluteness of the "silence," the "solitude," and the "darkness" of Ridge's elegiac scene suggest that the speaker laments and protects the memory of his "dark warrior," but not necessarily that he seeks to restore the presence of the "liberty untamed" (71) that characterized that warrior's society. Although Ridge, in contrast to his generic peers in writers like Morton, Freneau, Bryant, and Longfellow, threatens violence in the name of his "Vanished Indian," he nevertheless practices a similar sort of safely removed imaginative play, a sort of play allowing the civilized man to explore the realm of silence, chaos, or savagery without resting there permanently. "A thousand cities / Stand, where once thy nation's wigwams stood"—and it is "peace," not reanimation, that Ridge's speaker finally promises to his apostrophized dead warrior.[23] What might it tell us that, even for a man who had every reason to feel the wrongs of American imperial overreach, the route to poetic subjectivity still involved a certain amount of "playing in the dark"?

Lament and recrimination, but not revolt, tend to prevail when Ridge protests injustice—even, as his Cherokee journalism shows, injustice to his own. Bercovitch describes this variety of political *dis*sent as part of the "rites of *ass*ent," where critique stops short of a renunciation of America as such. The vein of critique to which Ridge—and Whitman and Dickinson, too—ultimately belongs can, for example, more readily accommodate Frederick Douglass than Nat Turner (19). The first is (merely) revolutionary, the other dangerously rebellious. Just as Ridge's political critique does not renounce a *United* States, his poetic silence does not renounce a common language. Where he turns a critical gaze upon his American materials, it is not to annihilate those materials, but merely to redeem the best parts of them or to correct a temporary

[23] Edward Whitley describes Ridge as an intentionally "white aboriginal" and chronicles his efforts to tap into the best of "savagery" and "civilization" in his poems.

fall from grace. In that light alone is it possible to see that the same poet could author "An Indian's Grave" and "Mount Shasta" or "The Atlantic Cable."

As a California man of letters, Ridge often played the role of "occasional" poet, reciting his original verses at Fourth of July and other public celebrations. In one such long composition, simply titled "Poem" and recited for the Agricultural, Horticultural, and Mechanics Society of the Northern District of California in August of 1860, Ridge *seems* to materially reverse his earlier position on Western civilization. Whereas in "An Indian's Grave," a rancorous speaker resents "the white man's [plow] share," here the long blank verse paean begins with the exaltation, "Hail to the Plow! for naught shall take its place, / The first, great civilizer of the race!" (*Poems* 114). If in the earlier poem the recession of the wilderness was cause for lament, and the speaker's allegiances lay with the "untutored sons" against their "pale-faced foes," here the order seems reversed, as the speaker celebrates the dawning of an agricultural age:

> And near him soon new fields and cots were seen
> Where late the brooding wilderness had been;
> Then grew up mutual interests and needs,
> And all that such community succeeds.
> Against the still untamed and savage man
> The armed alliance of the few began. (*Poems* 116-7)

Has Ridge merely turned coats in his adulthood, selling out Native to Anglo interests? Perhaps—yet he is still, after all, the mythologizer of Joaquín. As a journalist in California, he was also a frequent spokesman for California's so-called "Digger Indian" population, a group much maligned in the popular imagination and frequently mistreated both in policy negotiations and by California's gold miners and other settler populations (see Parins 171-2 and Ridge's article "The

Digger Indians of California" from the January 15, 1858 *National Democrat*, rpt. *Trumpet* 55-65).[24]

A fuller picture of Ridge's actual, complex sentiments about Native and Anglo-American cultures can be gleaned from his occasional poem's historical account of the Aztecs' encounter with Cortez. Deviating from his theme of acclaim for the many accomplishments of European civilization, Ridge laments the cruel conqueror's hand that swept Montezuma unthinkingly aside:

> Was art, that built those cities vast, less art,
>
> Because of Aztec genius 't was a part?
>
> Was patient toil, that led thro' channels deep,
>
> And aqueducts, and 'long the rocky steep,
>
> The streams a thousand fertile fields supplied,

---

[24] "Digger" was a derogatory term applied to a cluster of Native groups in California and the Great Basin area, particularly the Maidu and the Paiute. They were so-called for their alleged practice of subsisting on roots and acorns that they "dug" from the earth. This is a fact that Ridge puns on at the outset of his "Poem," which he delivered as an occasional address for the 1861 commencement ceremony for Oakland College:

> The Digger, searching for his roots,
> Here roamed the region wide—
> Or, wearied with the day's pursuits,
> Slept by this restless tide.
>
> The dream of greatness never rose
> Upon his simple brain;
> The wealth on which a nation grows,
> And builds its power to reign,
>
> All darkly lay beneath his tread,
> Where many a stream did wind,
> Deep slumbering in its yellow bed,
> The charm that rules mankind. (105)

Ridge here teases the "Digger" for his fruitless search for roots, by which he has discovered only subsistence food, and not the "yellow bed" of gold that would finally attract American and other settlers to midcentury California. The implication seems to be that the Americans, and not the "Diggers," are those who truly have "roots" in the region. This is characteristic of how Ridge's various defenses of the California Natives were fierce but qualified, more rooted in notions of pity and justice than equality. There is also an element of the *bon sauvage* in Ridge's analysis, and his brief opening reflection ends with the allowance that the simple "Digger" may yet be happier with his modest labor "Than thousand paler wanderers are / Whose toil hath had no fruits" (105).

Less toil, because no white man's arm was tried?

Were peace and plenty but the Spaniard's right?

The Aztec *barbarous* because not *white*? (*Poems* 119)

This passage, though in some respects mirroring the resolute defense of the fallen warrior's tomb in "An Indian's Grave," is also a partial capitulation to Anglo norms. It is "art," "cities," and the "thousand fertile fields" that justify the Peruvian Natives' claims to elegy; it is their approximation of European-style civilization that makes their persecution the result of a regrettable prejudice on their conquerors' part.[25] It is not the prejudice against "barbarous" peoples itself that Ridge finds worthy of blame, but rather the blindness that did not permit the Europeans to see that these particular Natives had already left the age of barbarism behind. In that respect, the "asymptote" of certain groups of Natives was already aimed toward the same ideal as that of white civilization—if only it would be allowed to pursue its course.

It is this particular defense of Native rights that most often characterizes Ridge's writings. He subscribed most fervently to the notion of "America" as the pinnacle of a progressive Western history emanating from the European ideals of civilization, calling it the "grandest and the last" of civilizations (*Poems* 121). He also averred, however, that the native tribes of America ought rightfully to have a part in that grand march of civilization. This is the strand of nationalism that recent critics like Whitley and Hickey have noted in Ridge's poetry, and these readings of the poems are consistent with several more recent accounts of *Joaquín Murieta*, in which Ridge's goal is not to overturn American sovereignty but merely to check its abuses and

[25] European Enlightenment ideas about property, cultivation, and land-use were at the heart of the British and American justification for colonization of Native lands and removal of Native peoples. See Lucy Maddox, *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (15-35); Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in American Literature, 1580-1864* (97-152); and Joel Martin, *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees' Struggle for a New World* (79-99).

open its eyes to the capacity of the Mexicans (and the Cherokees) to contribute to Western civilization.[26] If this were not at all the case, then Ridge's novel could hardly praise the life of Captain Harry Love, a decorated veteran of the Mexican-American War and Joaquín's eventual conqueror, as "one of equal romance with that of Joaquín but marked only with events which redound to his honor" (33-4). And perhaps the most succinct illustration of Ridge's continued commitment to the ideal, if not the practice, of "America" comes in the opening pages of the novel, where he prepares to recount the abuses and injustices that originally set Joaquín on his path of vengeance: "The country was then full of lawless and desperate men, who bore the name of Americans but failed to support the honor and dignity of that title" (9). All of this tends to show that Ridge, in spite of his oppositional tendencies, maintained a faith in progressive, American identity, where, as Sacvan Bercovitch says, "the writer converts revolution into culture" (170). In that progressive vision of culture, silence and uncertainty are powerful but temporary necessities of expression to cover over the temporary and mortal flaws of God's chosen people.

Throughout their family history, the Ridges demonstrate a clear commitment to *becoming* American. Major Ridge, John Ridge, and John Rollin Ridge all believed fervently in the relative superiority of Euro-American civilization and the democratic ideals of the U.S. Constitution, even as each argued bitterly at times against particular injustices committed against the Cherokee and other Native peoples at the hands of U.S. citizens, armies, and officials. In the Ridge family, it stood as an article of faith that the United States represented an advanced state of civilization and that the Cherokees' best chance to survive and flourish was to imbibe and emulate this state.

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[26] For example, Shelley Streeby writes in *American Sensations* that "Ridge is championing the law and U.S. ideals but is claiming that 'prejudice of color' may lead to '*injustice to individuals*'" (266). See also the sources in f.n. 16, above.

Their commitment to the project of civilization and assimilation outweighed their commitment to Indian identities—consider that Major Ridge made his military reputation by helping the federal government to put down the Muscogee "Red Stick Rebellion" of 1813 (Parins 5).[27] On the other hand, his son John Ridge served as the Muscogees' lawyer in their negotiations, from 1825-27, during which they settled on terms with the U.S. government for the tribe's ongoing presence in the Southeast (a temporary settlement, alas) (Parins 11-2). These two episodes suggest that for the Ridges, fighting for tribal rights was a boon—so long as it did not involve wholesale rejection of U.S. sovereignty.

As a family, the Ridges belonged to what William Gerald McLoughlin describes as a Cherokee "middle class": that 8-10% of the Cherokee population, mostly mixed-race, that "rapidly accumulated wealth, slaves, and credit and then took up the best land for their expanding farms, pastures, plantations; they seized the most lucrative opportunities for trade and manufacture, inns and ferries, mills and trading posts; they assumed a prominent place in politics and in effect made policies which suited their interests" (*Cherokees and Missionaries* 126-7). This class of Cherokees stood forth in the Nation as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy about the superiority of American "civilization" to Native Cherokee "savagery": as they embraced a Euro-American way of life, they gained in wealth, prestige, and power, and they benefitted from the U.S. state and federal inducements in place encouraging them to do exactly as they were doing

[27] As Joel Martin explains, the "Creek War" (1813-14), or the Muscogees' "Red Stick" rebellion, grew from an apocalyptic religious movement that rejected American empire and American civilization (not to mention the endless Muscogee debts incurred in the American fur trade) in favor of a powerful vision of autonomous culture. As with later conflicts in Cherokee Nation, the conflict arose in part from differences in intra-national visions for a cultural future, with some Muscogee groups favoring assimilation and others favoring cultural nationalism. Thus besides drawing the ire of the U.S. military, the "Red Sticks" were also met with violence from other Muscogee parties and assimilationist contingents from other Southeastern tribes like the Cherokee. Major Ridge was not the only American figure to advance his reputation by helping to quell the Muscogee uprising: among the others who took a famous part in the conflict was Andrew Jackson.

(not least among which was a European understanding of property). Their success only encouraged a doubling-down on the assumption that the United States embodied a historically superior stage of civilization worthy of emulation.

For the Ridges and indeed for many other Cherokees, the benefits—material if not spiritual—of embracing an American way of life were self-evident. So powerful were the inducements to acculturate that even the mounting hostilities between the Cherokees and Andrew Jackson's government (not to speak of the heated factionalism within the Nation itself) could not distract them from making the effort. In 1832, in the midst of the removal crisis, as tempers flared and catastrophe seemed nigh, Rollin Ridge's future teacher Sophia Sawyer (then a teacher at the nearby Brainerd mission school) wrote back to David Greene of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions: "You will rejoice with us that the Cherokees amidst their political struggles and the uncertainty of everything respecting their future destination, have been disposed to improve the present opportunity afforded to their children for receiving instruction" (qtd. Castelow 97). This diehard commitment to education is something that middle-class Cherokees and the Ridges in particular would evince again and again: the family was influential in expanding ABCFM's mission schools in the Nation, built a schoolhouse on their property in 1834, and sent their adolescent children to private schools in the Northeast whenever possible (Parins 3-12). When the Ridge family removed to the West in 1837, they arranged to bring the children's teacher, Sophia Sawyer, along with them (Parins 25). And, following the murder of John Ridge, Sawyer accompanied mother and children in their flight to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she would ultimately open a school and seminary with the remaining Ridges' support (Parins 32-5).

For Cherokee families like the Ridges, an American education was tied inextricably to the perceived superiority of American civilization, the desirability of assimilation, and the historical ascendancy of American "Sovereign Law." Tied in with this education, which involves a conscious choice of American "civilization" over indigenous "savagery," is rhetorical silence in a twofold sense: poets like Ridge could now evoke American destiny and American history as tropes to evince what was manifest and therefore required no words; and American discourse at all levels could violently "silence" the cultural deviance of non-Anglo, non-American, and not-Americanized cultures as either aberrant or as part of a rightly vanishing bygone era. Ridge's life, situated as it is at the crossroads of colonizer and colonized, helps to illuminate the *power* to be gained through aesthetic and political engagement with silence and the inexpressible: as educated Americans, the Ridges had access to an ascendant array of aesthetic tropes and geographical spaces. At the same time, Ridge's life also illuminates the violent process of erasure that accompanies an underlying aesthetic or political assertion of sameness and unity, wherein an extra-textual bond either consummates meaning in the orderly space of transcendent silence or relegates difference and disorder to the silent abyss of forgotten histories.

"Mount Shasta" II: Union, Silence, and the Visionary Impulse

Poetically speaking, the backdrop of "America"—or of "sovereignty"—sanctions and enables a good deal of aesthetic risk-taking. Ridge can mine the limits of intelligible expression precisely because he has been assured that his silence is also *our* silence, that there is a "we," or a "We the People," for whom a common struggle is compensated in progressive, historical time. Among his poetic stock-in-trade is the gothic, haunted California riverside, a site fascinating to Ridge as the location of so many untimely deaths for settlers, miners, and other early

Californians. These riverbanks are “weird” and unsettling, but their gloom and rot is finally justified by the project of California, as the fascinating opening passage from “Humboldt River” (1860/68) suggests:

> The River of Death, as it rolls
> With a sound like the wailing of souls!
> And guarding their dust, may be seen
> The ghosts of the dead by the green
> Billowy heaps on the shore—
> Dim shapes, as they crouch by the graves,
> And wail with the rush of the waves
> On seeking the desert before!
> Guarding their dust for the morn
> Which shall see us, new-born
> Arise from the womb of the earth—
> That, through rain or through dearth,
> Through calm or through storm,
> Through seasons and times, no part may be lost,
> By the ruthless winds tost,
> Of the mortal which shall be immortal of form. (91)

This passage is idiosyncratic in the context of American poetry for the way that it tries to foreground negation and compensation, both together at once; but it is not otherwise deviant for a tradition that so often uses silence and aesthetic danger as a way to affirm what is supposed to be common and shared between the American poet and his American reader. Ridge affirms Roy

Harvey Pearce's claim that "The American poet, in his dedication to the idea of the dignity of man, has had as his abiding task the reconciliation of the impulse to freedom with the impulse to community, as the use of language in poetry may help to bring it about" (*Continuity* 5-6). To this seminal insight, Jerome McGann and Sacvan Bercovitch only add that this "impulse to community" is capable of undermining "the event of language," in McGann's terms (*Poe* 2), of "incorporating by exclusion," in Bercovitch's (14)—or of perpetuating the "heresy of *the Didactic*," in Poe's (*Critical* 234).

Is Ridge indeed guilty of Poe's "heresy," or of reifying the "Romantic Ideology," or of otherwise betraying the dynamic uncertainties of poetic language for base ideological sureties? In one sense, certainly so. The criticism that I propose in these pages, one which is capable of uniting figures so diverse as Ridge, Whitman, and Dickinson under a common American banner of "we" or of "We the People," is certainly nearer to Coleridge's "first principles" than it is to Derridean *différance*. It assumes that we will always find, as indeed we do in Ridge, some relatively stable point of reference like "Sovereign Law" or "the mortal which shall be immortal of form" to sustain the poem's logic and guerdon its rhetorical approach. Jon Kertzer, in his article on "The Course of a Particular," nicely outlines the stakes for the approach that the American Romantic rhetoric of silence demands in my view: "If the imagined limit of the expansive critical view is a total literary universe where 'one is part of everything,' the limit of the contracting view is irreducible singularity—'the thing / Itself' apart from all else [quoting, in both cases, Wallace Stevens]. Neither extreme is attainable, but the path to the first is more inviting than the path to the second. The first promises glory, the second threatens ruin" (209). By Kertzer's logic, we might reject Ridge, Whitman, and Snow out of hand in order to embrace Dickinson and (maybe) Poe. The former group is explicitly concerned with the literary universe

where “one is part of everything,” while the latter set rails against the “heresy of *the Didactic*” and commits to “the thing / Itself.” As I argue in the introduction, this is in a sense the approach of Jerome McGann, who declares his allegiances on the British side to poets like Byron, Keats, and Southey at the expense of Coleridge and Wordsworth, and on the American side to Poe and Dickinson at the expense of Emerson and Whitman.

However, to insist on singularity flies in the face of the formal reality of these nineteenth-century American poems in the Romantic tradition, which share crucial gestures with the poems of their more overtly totalizing peers. If Ridge’s poem has both the infinity of his distant mountain-top *and* the totality of his “Sovereign Law,” is it reasonable to wonder whether other, seemingly radical, poems are also finally making a gesture toward community and shared experience? Ridge writes convincingly of death and weird solitudes in his river poems, even as he insists that all of this disruptive terror serves the greater state-building purpose. Ultimately, these poems’ “forms” do not ask for us to pursue singularity, but they also ask us to resist certain forms of unity.

The invitation for most of the American Romantics comes in the form of a reader’s gesture: an also-seeing what the poet has seen in the unstable, silencing experience that has been only partly represented in the poem. The invitation is to accept the messy leftovers of the silence-driven, disorderly poem as a part, however confused, of a human or American totality that never gets wholly pushed aside. At their (formal) center, these poems ask for more than an overhearing. They ask for recognition and response. Peter G. Christensen, in a brief reading of “Mount Shasta” in the context of *Joaquín Murieta*, argues that “This poem . . . champions isolation over community effort and emotional distance over empathy” (66). While this reading accurately characterizes the part of the poem rooted in Romantic Egocentrism, it does not make

sense of the mountain's ostensible influence on "the peaceful homes of men." As fellow lookers-on to the mountain, or as readers of Ridge's poem, we are meant to look at Shasta, unapproachable and foreign as it is, and feel the same inspiration that Ridge feels, the same underlying impulse toward "Sovereign Law." Similarly, in "A Night Scene," we are meant to agree with Ridge that his despair will eventually be mitigated through a divine reunion with his Muse. These are gestures that lie outside of words—both because of their daring, visionary pretenses *and* their all-inclusive nature, such that any renunciation or apparent negation of their premises must be viewed as an aberration to be finally overcome.

At stake in all of these discourses, aesthetic and public alike, is the question of individual deviance. How much scope should be granted to the individual interpreter of a poem, for example? What happens to the student who is not prevailed upon by the teacher's efforts at "moral suasion"? And what of the citizen who, balking at the demands of legislative single vision, turns instead toward lawless individual enterprise? In a land governed by "Sovereign Law," what becomes of the outlaw? Ridge's poem, with its affirmation of "pure administration" and "Sovereign Law" that spring from the ostensibly unreachable heights of Mount Shasta's snowy peak, is an outgrowth of the poet's thorough, lifelong engagement with Cherokee-American ideology. It is only possible to believe that a civil government could realize a Shasta-like state of "Sovereign Law" if one believes that that *particular* civil government had something of the divine about it in the first place. America, with California at its zenith, must, like the "dread Mt. Shasta" itself, be part mortal and part eternal. This is what Ridge, from every formal and informal source of education in his life, was obliged to believe. In one 1853 article, he writes (in decidedly Whitmanian fashion), "California still goes ahead, reversing the old order of things. . . . The beggar of today is the prince of tomorrow, and the aristocracy of wealth smells of every

trade and calling from a butcher to a perfumer!" (*Trumpet* 23). The United States was a unique land of destiny, tending in each messy, mortal facet of the present toward its distant but undeniable immortal future.

Ridge's particular achievement in "Mount Shasta" is to make the politics of antebellum America into aesthetics. In this poem, the inaccessible is very suddenly realized in the world as the final stanza's dispassionate "Sovereign Law" or "pure administration," springing straight from the realm of the divine and into the quotidian affairs of civil government. This is *not* to suggest that every Romantic poem has, at its base, some sort of crass reduction of aesthetic play to brute political power. It is not even to suggest that that is the case for *this* poem, as Ridge's term, "Sovereign Law," has as much to do with democratic freedom and individual growth as with autocratic coercion. Instead, it is to better historicize the *invitation* that lies at the center of many (American) Romantic poems. This invitation amounts to a hope—in some cases, a conviction—that the reader will come to see things as the poet has presented them. It is a hope that, in spite of the prevailing silence that was necessary in the making of the poem, an electrical, sub-textual current will nevertheless connect the poet to his reader in perfect understanding—in turn, that it may even connect the poet to his country in perfect understanding and so establish the poet as bardic scribe of national affairs, and not merely as chronicler of personal agony.

The critic's task is to discover, as best as possible, the logic that speaks where words refuse to, which is to say, to find the voice that speaks through the silence, and to discover the cultural or ideological assumptions that make that voice possible. Poets like John Rollin Ridge, steeped as they were in progressive American ideology, were rarely content to let meaning disintegrate altogether, which would mean abandoning the project of political unity implied by the great democratic experiment. It need not follow that that voice that speaks through silence

always has precisely the same import, but neither would it be safe to assume that the differences in tone or outlook are meant to invite nihilism in some cases while they invite blithe jingoism in others. The virtue of beginning with Ridge is that he permits us to define "ideology" in its widest, least noxious valence: as an underlying commitment to a "we." As the following chapters on Dickinson and Whitman go to show, this foundational "we" plays a crucial role in the poetry we have come to consider modern and essential, even as it also links that poetry to a tradition of aesthetics and politics that our sensibilities have long since left behind.

CHAPTER 2: FIGURES LIKE DEATH: EMILY DICKINSON'S IMPOSSIBLE TROPES

By intuition, Mightiest Things
Assert themselves - and not by terms -

—Fr429[28]

Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most, will say least.

—Emerson, *Nature* (I.37)

No poet better exemplifies the nineteenth-century poetic preoccupation with silence than Emily Dickinson—though to say that Dickinson "exemplifies" anything about her era is perhaps a misstep. Better to say that Dickinson *distills* the metapoetic anxiety of her age to a concentration that had not been matched before. Owing to the severity of her poetic denials, critics have often cast her as a poet outside of her time altogether. In "Emily Dickinson and the Theory Canon," Marjorie Perloff notices that, even at the height of poststructuralist critical furor, Dickinson's verse was rarely the target of deconstructive critique. One reason for this, Perloff suggests, and many sympathetic Dickinson critics agree, is that Dickinson simply labored under fewer illusions than her Romantic counterparts when it came to the place and power of language. She rarely left the "loose stone" by which deconstruction pulls down the shining façade of the Romantic poem. Instead, Dickinson's verse is itself a sort of deconstructive effort, probing language and life but without any firm or systematic commitments of its own.[29] Perhaps the most

[28] Except where otherwise noted, quotations and citations of Dickinson's poems follow text and poem number from R. W. Franklin's *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. For the letters, passages and letter numbers are from Thomas Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*.

[29] For other meta-theoretical accounts of Dickinson's achievement, see Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets* (2008), where Dickinson features as "an early voice for modernism's ability to do without coherent structures or meaning"

influential precedent for the complex and valuable tradition of reading Dickinson as essentially skeptical is David Porter's work, first in *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry* (1966) and later in *Dickinson: The Modern Idiom* (1981). For Porter, Dickinson's "modern idiom" can be traced to two sources: "The menacing ascendance of consciousness and the disappearance of an artistic goal" (6). The dazzling incoherence of her poems is thus the product of "the mind explosive with signifying power but disinherited from transcendent knowledge" (7). The poetry has no "semantic or linguistic center, no focal word of origin or meaning," writes Cristanne Miller, making a case for the ways that Dickinson anticipates Jacques Derrida (102). "Words," as E. Miller Budick has it, "may be incapable of conveying the essence of cosmic knowledge" (165), while Sharon Cameron moves closer yet to the heart of the problem: "words are aware of the limitations of words" (*Lyric Time* 49). More recently, Maurice S. Lee has elaborated upon Cameron's point to assert that for Dickinson, "to be human is to remain suspended between knowing and not knowing" (65).

Contemporary criticism of Dickinson's work, from accounts of the uncannily postmodern character of her language to descriptions of the radical materiality of her variant-riddled and multiform manuscripts, takes for granted the liminal, uncertain Dickinson who "chooses not to choose" what reality looks like.[30] That is the title and the central argument of Sharon Cameron's influential work on Dickinson's "fascicles": *Choosing / Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles* (1992). The bound, loose-leaf manuscripts of poems that Dickinson put together in the 1860s are full of variant word choices and other editorial difficulties, bolstering the sense that Dickinson

(172). Similarly, at the outset of *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson* (2008), Jed Deppman writes of Dickinson as a poet "especially suited to speak to postmodernity" (3-4).

[30] For a very recent example, see Natalie Adler in "Dickinson's Mastery" (2016), where she argues that Dickinson deliberately provokes and then thwarts the critical impulse to frame her works with a master narrative.

preferred to leave things indefinite. Similarly, many critics read Dickinson as a poet of the "liminal moment," to use a phrase employed by both Geoffrey Hartman (1970) and Joanne Feit Diehl (1981) in their discussions of Dickinson (350; 80). Similarly, in *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge* (1996), Daneen Wardrop reads partialness and withholding as fundamental aspects of Dickinson's "Gothic" sensibility: "The implicit stance of Dickinson's bride is that if she can only remain somehow at the dower-point in life, with wedding imminent, she can gather her most power" (59).[31] In their own ways, all of these readings situate Dickinson as somehow ahead of her time, the savvy practitioner of a "modern idiom" free from the ideological baggage of her nineteenth-century contemporaries.

Virginia Jackson skeptically footnotes this "modern interest in exaggerating Dickinson's isolation from her own historical moment, an isolation that makes it easier for us to place her in our own" ("Figure of Address" 99). The trenchancy of Jackson's reproach is mitigated partly by the accounts of Dickinson and the nineteenth century that have appeared in the two decades since her essay, including the excellent collections *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, edited by Wendy Martin (2002), *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, edited by Vivian Pollak (2004), and *Emily Dickinson in Context*, edited by Eliza Richards (2013).[32] But while the authors in these collections situate Dickinson in the context of contemporary religion, poetry, politics, cultural movements, and national events, it remains standard to discuss those contexts in

[31] Recently, ecocritically-motivated writers have begun to approach Dickinson as a poet sufficiently nuanced to speak ethically about the relationship between humans and the world they inhabit, asserting that Dickinson's respectful epistemological skepticism is suited to ecological humility (see Kern, "Birds of a Feather" [2009] and Knickerbocker, "Emily Dickinson's Ethical Artifice" [2008]).

[32] Jackson's essay initially appears in *Dickinson and Audience*, a collection of essays edited by Martin Orzeck and Robert Weisbuch in 1996. When Jackson made "Dickinson's Figure of Address" a chapter of her 2005 *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, she excised the footnote, but only because chief among her overall goals in the book was to demonstrate the insufficiency of critics' historical understanding of Dickinson's work.

relationship to "the specters of un-meaning, abjection, and death" that are supposed to be the salient and enduring features of Dickinson's poetics (the phrasing is Betsy Erkkila's in the Pollak collection, "Dickinson and the Art of Politics" 153-4).

Margaret Dickie has influentially cautioned critics against approaching Dickinson's work with a "master narrative" ("Discontinuous" 553).[33] Indeed, Dickinson herself left us a fair warning that there was little to be gained on the path of systematic explanation:

> Experiment escorts us last -
> His pungent company
> Will not allow an Axiom
> An Opportunity - (Fr1181)

Whatever else can be said of Dickinson's poems, it should not come at the expense of her anti-systematic commitments, her de-centering poetics. Dickinson's recent critics have rightly sought to spare her from what David Watson calls "dominant interpretations of the lyric, which read it as a flight from history and society toward an autonomous subjectivity realized in language" (361). Dickinson's speakers seem less than autonomous, her subjectivity far from stable, so that Cameron writes, "If there is victory in the form of the lyric—the stunning articulation of the isolated moment—despair underlies it. It is despair of the possibility of complete stories, of stories whose conclusions are known, and consequently it is despair of complete knowledge. In its glorification of the revelatory moment, the lyric makes a triumph of such despair" (*Lyric Time* 70-1). Here, experiment and experience are isolated, unable to be counted as part of a meaningful whole, and elegy is the only recourse. The implication is that, if Dickinson cannot be systematized, then her poems can only be counted as laments. Any further critical imposition

[33] For another influential articulation of this point, see Paul Crumbley, "Dickinson's Dialogic Voice."

would be an unethical affront to the singular life of the poems. Steven Monte, in an article on "Dickinson's Searching Philology" (2003), glosses this critical anxiety, noting Dickinson scholars' reservations about succumbing to the organicism or the ahistoricity of the New Criticism and their political motivations for claiming Dickinson as a "marginal," "inclusive," or "unbounded" figure and not another patriarchal, imperious, and imperial bard (24-6). Monte's corrective to these paralyzing critical fears is to read Dickinson comparatively, drawing themes and commitments from the interrelated concerns that emerge from reading her poems in conversation with one another.

To this, I add that to understand Dickinson in the context of her Romantic, Transcendentalist, and Victorian sources, it is just as necessary to discover her affirmations as her denials. As George Frisbee Whicher writes in his biography of Dickinson, "Strictly speaking, the only adequate poem on the unknowable would consist of a blank sheet of paper" (298). Dickinson left us with less than a complete system of knowledge but more than a blank sheet of paper. It should therefore be possible to discover some of her commitments such as they present themselves formally. Criticism must therefore ask, if not "axiom," what is it that centers Dickinson's poetry? Critics have often assumed that there is no ground between "terms" and indeterminacy, but Dickinson clearly holds otherwise. To find that center requires a formal-historical look at what critics have often recognized as the unique *power* of Dickinson's silences.

Suzanne Juhasz characterizes this power as a form of "tease," so that when Dickinson refuses to speak clearly, she also guides her reader, however subtly and coyly: "The words of tease, as they bring the mystery forward, into representation—into analogy, metaphor, image, and personification—leave behind a record, a track or tracking. . . .The poetry of tease offers

expression in the teeth of danger. The danger is real, but so are the words" ("Big Tease" 54).[34] Dickinson's poems signify in spite—or because—of their radical contingency and refusal. Other critics, especially feminist critics, have likewise noticed the social and aesthetic power that comes from Dickinson's refusals. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), influentially argue that "In many cases . . . the masks of defeat were transformed into the faces of victory" (606). These triumphalist feminist readings represent another important strand of Dickinson criticism, which holds that something positive and creative happens as a result of the poems—not just *in spite* of the poems' silence and multiplicity, but *because* of it.[35]

When Dickinson writes of what her poems cannot accomplish, it is often with a demonstrable if couched sense of irony. However, feminist and other readings of the poems' social subversiveness have not always properly attended to Dickinson's own reservations about what her poetry is and does—reservations best captured by theoretical accounts like Porter's and Cameron's, but also by readings which historicize Dickinson's theoretics as a problem of nineteenth-century aesthetics. Robert Weisbuch, in "Nobody's Business: Dickinson's Dissolving Audience" (1996), captures Dickinson's Transcendentalist entanglements in a way that resonates with the aims of my project:

> Most often, Dickinson's plurals of humanity refer to intense emotional states that are claims upon the nature of being. Emotional states and cognitive revelations, so often one

[34] I have also been influenced by Juhasz's characterization of Dickinson's "undiscovered continent" of consciousness, where her tenuousness and fragmentation is part of a larger, metaphysically positive project of mapping the interior landscape (*Undiscovered*).

[35] Other important readings in this vein include Jane Donahue Eberwein, in *Dickinson: Strategies of Limitation* (1985), who notes Dickinson's tendency to highlight her limitations, her littleness, and her boundaries in order to exploit them, so that poetic growth is a central thematic feature of her corpus precisely *because* she dwells so often on her stunted origins. Similarly, Joanne Dobson argues in *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence* (1989) that Dickinson invoked and exploited a cultural trope of reserved femininity and respectable womanhood in order to disclose her radical selfhood ironically and without overtly offending nineteenth-century mores.

> in Dickinson's metaphysic of the nerve endings, are both inner events that individuals experience as particularly their own, in the privacy of the self. These silences are made common property, and the common is thus intimate. The strategy provides a humbling, sometimes harrowing comfort and a huge claim for the cognitive reach and authority of the emotional life. (58)

Weisbuch's emphasis on the "plurals of humanity" and the "nature of being" may come as a surprise in the context of the notoriously self-secluding Dickinson, but her reliance on readership, which she could not or perhaps did not wish to escape, is ultimately key to understanding her silences. Gary Lee Stonum, in *The Dickinson Sublime* (1990), similarly highlights the universal, reader-encompassing impulse of Dickinson's work, albeit in a way that highlights the dangers and the pitfalls of her powerful language project: "The poet does not demand the reader's idolatry, that is, but his poems effectively do and they demand that its subject be not themselves but its author" (14). Any account of Dickinson's silent poetic longings must also account for the violence and the usurpation of autonomy that so often accompanies revelation in her poems.

If Dickinson's ironic silences lead to a form of knowledge, then it is a dangerous form of knowledge, and one with which Dickinson was never quite comfortable. Unlike John Rollin Ridge, who seems to have been able to elide the autocratic implications of "Sovereign Law" as a first principle, Dickinson obsessed over them. If, in Dickinson, language is the *vehicle* of knowledge, then the *source* of knowledge is unknown, inscrutable, and often threatening or even openly violent. Even if she longed, a bit like Whitman, for intimate contact with the "yous" and the "others" of her poems, and even if she could not resist asking her poems to provoke in her

readers the "intuition" by which "mightiest things assert themselves," she was equally preoccupied by the loss of autonomy and individuality that her project implied.

Tracing the implications of Dickinson's silence-driven irony, it becomes possible to offer a reading of Dickinson's poems that better places her within the context of her own time. To be specific, it becomes possible to offer explanations of what Dickinson was and was not willing to say in her poems, and to place those poems within the larger cultural concerns with the limits of language and the prospect for a collective national identity. This is not to say that Dickinson's writing is of a piece with the poems of her contemporaries, of course. Even so, radical as she was, from the subjects to the syntax to the forms of her poems, Dickinson nonetheless relied ultimately on an imagined readership, and this readership takes its character from her cultural and political milieu. What is important in a reading of Dickinson is not to save her from critique altogether, but to show how her own commitments are both parallel to and divergent from those of her contemporaries. Instead of making her non-ideological, this chapter situates her as an extreme case of the American Romantic Ideology—perhaps its most extreme case. What distinguishes Dickinson most of all from her contemporaries is that she never could dispel her doubts about what it meant to belong to a community of readers and writers. For her, authorship became a dangerous but finally irresistible way to create shared communal experiences. Even as she refused to say, like Whitman, that she spoke for all men, she offered to her readers the "impossible tropes" that worked well only with her readers' agreement, acceptance, or even surrender.

"Bright impossibility": Irony in Dickinson's Silences

One reason that so many skeptical theories prevail on Dickinson's poetics is that Dickinson herself, when she turned an eye to her craft, often turned it skeptically. In one particularly infamous example, "I would not paint a picture" (Fr348), she excludes herself from the realm of artists altogether:

I would not paint - a picture -
I'd rather be the One
It's bright impossibility
To dwell - delicious - on -
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare - celestial - stir
Evokes so sweet a torment -
Such sumptuous - Despair -

I would not talk, like Cornets -
I'd rather be the One
Raised softly to the Ceilings -
And out, and easy on -
Through Villages of Ether -
Myself endued Balloon
By but a lip of Metal -
The pier to my Pontoon -

Nor would I be a Poet -
It's finer - Own the Ear -
Enamored - impotent - content -
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts - of Melody!

In some respects, the message of this poem—that art is too difficult to be safely attempted—is consistent with the experience of reading the poems that Dickinson did venture to write. This is not even to speak of the poet's life, which has achieved mythical status for its characteristic withdrawal and exclusion. Dickinson's strained syntax, her halting, dash-riddled meter, and her terse abstraction convey a sense that her language is ever on the verge of collapse. And the poet herself, who became more reclusive as her life went on and dismissed "Publication" as "the auction of the mind of man" (Fr788), perhaps testifies to the truth of this poem's message that art is simply not to be ventured.

On the other hand, as the present study will hardly be the first to argue, this poem is in many respects inherently self-contradictory. Writes no fainter a luminary than Adrienne Rich, "The strange paradox of this poem—its exquisite irony—is that it is about choosing not to be a poet, a poem which is gainsaid by no fewer than one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five poems made during the writer's life, including itself" ("Vesuvius" 169). To date, Dickinson studies have not adequately accounted for the "exquisite irony" of Dickinson's poems about not writing poetry. The tendency is either to quickly surrender that irony to the one-note realm of

"indeterminacy" or to elide doubt altogether and focus exclusively on the poet's subversive power. As an explanatory rubric, "indeterminacy" rather limits the options for considering a poem's achievements. "I would not paint a picture" is one of Dickinson's most enduring poems—and not just because of its surprisingly antithetical stance toward its own existence. It is itself replete with phrases and figures that have captured its readers' imaginations: "bright impossibility," "bolts of melody," and the terrible "dower" that the artist must pay. These figures startle and endure because, in spite of her protests, Emily Dickinson is an excellent poet. What is more, she suspects this to be the case: she suspects that she has written precisely the sort of poem that can provoke "sweet torment" and "sumptuous despair" in its reader, raise her "softly to the ceilings," or even "stun" her with its startling melody. If anything, the poem's refusals seem rather designed to draw extra attention to its rare achievement, its terrible affective force. As I discuss below, the demonstrable affective force of the poems is not enough to negate altogether their pervading doubt and skepticism (as some critics might be tempted to argue). However, it *is* enough to ironize and so far gainsay those poems' most self-negating silences, their meta-poetic reflections that seem antithetical to their own existence as poems.

In fact, "I would not paint a picture" is an excellent poem with which to begin, because it naturally wards off a certain tendency in reading Dickinson's poems about her creative reservations. It is sometimes tempting, in reading Dickinson, to propose that truly great poetry is impossible—that it is always thwarted by the uncontainable infinitude of experience. "I would not paint a picture," however, allows as much that *some* great artists exist—it only pretends to doubt whether its author could rank among them.

This insight can be borne in mind with other poems, where it is art in general and not one artist in particular that comes under scrutiny. For example, in one hastily scrawled tercet from later in her life, Dickinson writes,

To see the Summer Sky
Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie -
True Poems flee - (Fr1491)

To take it at face value, this poem argues that mental experiences are singular, that the only "True Poem" is the thing or the experience itself, and that all words that "lie" in books are lies indeed. Even physically, these lines are un-poetic or anti-poetic, scrawled on a fragment of stationery and so far formally removed from the carefully bound "fascicle" collections that Dickinson created in the 1860s.[36] But to read this little aphorism as a poem for a moment immediately raises the specter of further irony. Even as the lines forswear the possibility of their own poetic legitimacy, they are also working conspicuously hard to resist becoming the "True Poem" they might otherwise be. A line break after "Poetry" would leave a quatrain with an ABAB rhyme scheme, and the curt and pointed spondee of "True Poems" is the only impediment to iambic verse.[37] Cut one foot from the awkward (potential) third line, and this becomes a regulated, 3/2/3/2, rhyming quatrain in Dickinson's preferred hymn/ballad form: if not the "True Poem" whose existence it denies, then at least a correct one. If this cheeky little verse accomplishes anything, it is to tell us that we ought to be wary any time this versifier, whose life's work has been to compose nearly two thousand instances of poetic utterance, claims that

[36] See Franklin's *Variorum Edition* of the poems (III.1309).

[37] Millicent Todd Bingham discerned the quatrain structure when she edited Dickinson for *Bolts of Melody: New Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1945) and inserted a line break after "Poetry."

language is a useless medium. Something else is likely to be going on. Dickinson knew and knew well how to deal the "bolts of melody," even as she was too savvy to suppose that the results of art could exist without corruption. Throughout that voluminous life's work, she would be committed to this corruption, committed to getting what could be gotten from "True Poems," from the lies that lie in books, on papers, in bound fascicles, or even on old envelopes, the backs of receipts, and used stationary.[38]

Education, Intimacy, Singularity: Dickinson and the Politics of Reading

To theorize the "reader" of Dickinson's poems may seem a misstep for the poet who rarely consented to have a poem published, who never had a "Book" of her own in her lifetime, and who infamously referred to "Publication" as "the Auction / Of the Mind of Man" (Fr788). Early Dickinson scholarship made much of her withdrawal from the world, and I noted in the introduction how F. O. Matthiessen and Roy Harvey Pearce, each in his own way, read Dickinson as an exemplar of the personal lyric, a stringent example of what happens when the artist's rupture with society is absolute (see above and Matthiessen 434; Pearce *Continuity* 180-92).

However, more recent scholarship has begun to recover Dickinson as part of her time. Joan Kirkby notes the poet's extensive reading in the day's prominent periodicals, especially *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, and her regional newspaper, *The Springfield Republican*, and shows that many of her poems are direct responses to articles printed by the day's leading intellectual luminaries (139-41). Furthermore, if Dickinson avoided a wider print audience, she

[38] The most ephemeral of Dickinson's productions are now collected in beautiful facsimile in *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings* (2013), edited by Marta Werner and Jen Bervin.

was not especially shy about sharing her work with her immediate circle through her many letters—letters which some critics have carefully described as a form of upper-class "publication."[39] All in all, Betsy Erkkila counts over 450 poems that Dickinson "published" in this epistolary format during her lifetime ("Art of Politics" 148).

Finally, it would be impossible to overstate the significance of Dickinson mustering the courage, in 1862, to mail a handful of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, with the modest query, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?" (L260). If publication *was* Dickinson's aim, she could hardly have chosen a better-placed emissary than Higginson, who was then the literary editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the chief benefactor of a number of other young, aspiring poets, and the recent author of the influential "Letter to a Young Contributor," which, as Ed Folsom points out, played much the same role in Dickinson's poetic self-identification as a poet as Emerson's "The Poet" played in Whitman's ("Transcendental" 266-7). As it happened, Higginson, while impressed and even overawed by Dickinson's gifts, was not inclined to publish them to the world—at least not on her own terms, without a measure of "surgery" that he would not have the opportunity to perform until after the poet's death in 1886. It is worth wondering what different picture we might have of closeted Emily Dickinson's biography had her poems chanced to meet with unqualified enthusiasm and been ushered into print by this prominent editor whose feedback she sought on her own accord.[40]

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[39] See Marietta Messmer, *A Vice for Voices* (2001), and the essays collected in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters* (2009), edited by Jane Donohue Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie.

[40] For a different take on Dickinson's attitude toward publication, see Joan Dobson, *Dickinson and the Strategies of Reticence*, where she argues that Dickinson could easily have found her way into print had she chosen to, and even imagines the table of contents for a potential book of Dickinson's poetry that, Dobson argues, would have been entirely acceptable to her contemporaries (131-4).

Through all of this, it is fair to say that Dickinson wrote with an audience in mind. She engaged main currents of thought, and she sought feedback from specific individuals both from within her own circle and from public literary life. Still, it would not be quite accurate to say that Dickinson looked to exchange ideas with the world, or to use her poems to catechize her real or imagined audience toward some specific didactic purpose. Though she often referred to Higginson as her "preceptor," she never took his advice, and unlike Whitman, whose 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* overtly positions him as the inheritor of Emerson's teachings, a new master craftsman with something to teach in his own right, Dickinson never set herself forward as an expert poet with any sort of agenda, and she rarely professed the bardic role to which other poets laid claim. If Dickinson the poet was an educator, it was in a much more indirect sense. Angela Sorby writes that for Dickinson, the process of education was primarily about relationships, and that it was not so much instruction that Dickinson craved from her various teachers, mentors, and friends but "emotional exchange" (43). Sorby observes that as a child and as an adult, Dickinson viewed educational exchange as "an ateleological emotional process: a way to encounter, but not necessarily to understand fully, the self and the world through others" (44). Sorby's observations about education can be extended to Dickinson's concept of reading and readership, so that in her poems, Dickinson takes the role of the educator in order to stage a very similar sort of "encounter" between her own consciousness, her reader's consciousness, and the explosive and unpredictable medium of language.

In a later, 1877 letter to Higginson, Dickinson writes, "It comforts an instinct if another have felt it too" (L503). This epistolary epistemology strays somewhat from the severely closeted consciousness that has often been said to characterize Dickinson's poetics. If Dickinson wrote poems not just to *express*, but to *convey*, the formal possibilities for making sense of her

notorious ambiguities widen considerably. To be sure, a shared "instinct" is a far cry from a "manifest" or a "progressive" historical or national destiny. It is nothing so definitely public as Ridge's "Sovereign Law," either. Still, if Dickinson's poems seek out a sort of consensus, mediated by the power of lyric and sanctified by shared "instinct," then she may yet be working through a more stable vision of Nature and Language than the one she tends to get credit for.

Every once in a while, Dickinson wrote a poem marginally less enigmatic than the others, a poem—if not programmatic—then at least revelatory of some of her underlying guiding lights. In these poems, she often begins with an observation about reality: "The Outer - from the Inner / Derives it's magnitude -" (Fr450); "The Soul's distinct connection / With immortality / Is best disclosed by Danger" (Fr901); or, in one complete aphorism, "To him who keeps an Orchis' heart - / The swamps are pink with June" (Fr31). In one such philosophical poem, Dickinson writes a theory of the immortal realm:

> This world is not conclusion.
> A Species stands beyond -
> Invisible, as Music -
> But positive, as Sound -
> It beckons, and it baffles -
> Philosophy, dont know -
> And through a Riddle, at the last -
> Sagacity, must go -
> To guess it, puzzles scholars -
> To gain it, Men have borne
> Contempt of Generations

And Crucifixion, shown -

Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -

Blushes, if any see -

Plucks at a twig of Evidence -

And asks a Vane, the way -

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit -

Strong Hallelujahs roll -

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

That nibbles at the soul - (Fr373)

This poem partly theorizes the "intuition" that Dickinson speaks of in her letter to Higginson. While the poem has its share of characteristic Dickinsonian confusion, its opening assertion—"This world is not conclusion"—is never gainsaid, only qualified and made into a form of "riddle" in its own right. Not immortality is called into question, here, but the extent of our access to its wonders. "Not 'Revelation' - 'tis - that waits, / But our unfurnished eyes -," as she wrote in a short philosophical poem in a letter to Higginson (Fr500/L280). Through all of the darkness and confusion of mortal life persist the implacable intimations of immortality.

To the extent that she is harried, tormented, and stimulated by intimations of immortality, Dickinson retains her ties to her Romantic and Transcendentalist forbears. It would, of course, be a mistake to take one poem alone and ask it to exemplify Dickinson's philosophy. Instead, my claim on behalf of "This world is not conclusion" is merely that it shows how Dickinson's notions of an immortal realm both stimulate and chasten her efforts as a poet. "It beckons, and it baffles -," Dickinson writes of this "Species beyond," "And through a riddle, at the last - / Sagacity must go -." While it would be tempting to categorize these observations among the

reasons that Dickinson is best read as "liminal," in so many critics' terms, or as the poet who "chooses not to choose," in Cameron's influential coinage, to place such an overweening emphasis on Dickinson's uncertainties is to lose sight of her restless acknowledgment of "the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul." Though that nibbling or that "intuition" be insatiable, and though it cannot be contained in philosophy, Dickinson is nevertheless driven most of all to put it in intelligible form. What she hopes from friends, correspondents, preceptors, and finally readers is that they share with her a longing. No matter that "Sagacity" cannot remain calmly sage and must instead subject itself to the dizzying, teasing, baffling power of "Riddle."[41] It is bolstered, all the same, by the comfort that "This world is not conclusion," an intuition communicated to "the soul" by a persistent, gnawing tooth—perhaps an intuition shared by all souls, by over-soul. In spite of all their destabilizing power, many of Dickinson's best poems have, at their formal center, a sort of unity or communion between the poet and the reader.

"The propounded word": Dickinson and the Nature of Language

If Dickinson's poems depend upon readers, how does she propose to speak to those readers through language? For Ridge, and especially for Whitman, language and poetry are explicitly national in character, and the poets welcomed and even courted the conflation between their work and their republic. Each of these writers, in his way, absorbed and reproduced a version of "history" that placed the "American" language of his poems at the forefront of a project to purify the world through a democratic embrace. For Dickinson, the infamous recluse,

[41] Webster reminds us that a "riddle" in the mid-nineteenth-century is also an agricultural instrument, a sieve for cleaning grain, allowing the grain to pass through but retaining the chaff. The gnawing "teeth" of this instrument may be another way that, inscrutably but inexorably, the riddle of poetry separates the grain from the chaff of experience and language.

the case stands somewhat more complicated. Certainly she never made the case for herself as national bard in the ways that Ridge and especially Whitman did, and when it comes to the language of the poems, hers clearly sought to muddy and disorient more often that to purify and unite.

For all that, it is possible and even necessary to situate Dickinson and her poems within the national conversation about democracy, history, and language. While there is no evidence that Dickinson read the popular books on German comparative philology by writers like Maximilian Schele de Vere and Christian Bunsen that would become so influential for Whitman, she would have stayed abreast of developments in the field via James Russell Lowell's many rambling reviews of works on language in *The Atlantic Monthly*. In an 1860 review of Josiah Wedgwood's *Dictionary of English Etymology*, for example, Lowell takes pains to distinguish the "poetic" from the "matter-of-fact" approaches to language study. The poetic approach looks for language's hidden metaphors and its divine origins, while the matter-of-fact approach takes language as just one more contingent development of social history. Significantly, Lowell refrains, here and elsewhere, from advocating strongly for one or the other approach, instead pointing to the strengths and the limitations of each (248-9). The implication is that, like Whitman and Dickinson themselves, Lowell eschewed precision in language theory, relying instead on the theory that suited his purposes at any given moment.

Dickinson would have been familiar with Emerson's glosses on language and the national character, including his famous "poetic" assertion in "The Poet" that "Language is fossil poetry" (III.13). However, much more so than Whitman or Ridge, Dickinson was influenced by the vogue for etymologies that slightly preceded but also permeated and informed the 1840s and 1850s move into comparative philology and, in many of its guises, partook more of the "matter-

of-fact" than the "poetic" approach to language's origins. The Dickinsons owned a copy of *On the Study of Words,* a popular celebration of language study by the Englishman Richard Chenevix Trench (London 1853; New York 1855). Perhaps most significantly of all, Dickinson pored over the definitions in Noah Webster's 1844 edition of the *New American Dictionary* with a devotion bordering on religious. "My lexicon," she once famously wrote to Higginson, "is my only companion" (L404).

With these influences, it is understandable how Dickinson's poetry mediates the salient philological concerns of the day with an inflection that differs slightly from other contemporaries. Webster in particular is an avowed disciple of Horne Tooke's *Diversions of Purley* (1786/1805), a "matter-of-fact" study more in line with a Lockean than a Romantic view of the origins of language and thought. For Tooke, a language's roots come from nouns and verbs that have been fixed haphazardly to sensory impressions, and so to do etymology is to uncover a history of chance and fancy rather than any ur-poetic intuition or divinely sanctioned *logos*.[42] Ostensibly reproducing this assumption, a young Noah Webster insists in *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789) that it is the business of the philologist to account for "what the English language *is,* and not, how it *might have been made*" (ix). At face value, this is an argument for a radically materialist philology, severed from the need to fit the science of words within the bounds of any political or religious framework.

[42] As Hans Aarsleff explains in *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* (1967), Tooke's philology remained the most popular in the English-speaking world from the publication of its first volume in 1785 until well into the 1830s. This was in spite of its displacement, from scientific considerations, by the work of German linguists (esp. 73-114). Tooke's etymologies were exciting, chiefly for the way he used them to undermine aristocratic power structures in the heady days of Revolutionary France. For example, he sought to eviscerate the rhetorical content of a word like "truth," frequently wielded by politicians, by tracing it to a non-universalizable origin in the Anglo-Saxon "troth": merely the past participle of "to trow," i.e. "to believe" (II.402). However, as a Lockean, Tooke brought the specter of materialism to the study of language and mind, something his more thoroughly "Romantic" admirers would struggle to accept. They often sought to retain his spirit of revolutionary etymological study, but in a more systematic and Imagination-friendly theoretical framework.

In reality, Webster's life-work with language followed an altogether different pattern. Early in his first "dissertation," he had already qualified his prefatory goal of a merely descriptive account with the claim that Americans should strive for uniformity of usage and pronunciation in the name of "political harmony" (20). And so, as it turns out, Webster's *Dissertations* are actually a series of arguments in favor of certain pronunciations over others—sometimes on the basis of preponderance, but just as often on the more dubious ground that some provincialism has a noteworthy historical precedent. Some of his losing examples include "mèrcy" (where the first syllable rhymes with "bear") and "Európean" (105, 118-9).

When it came to writing his dictionary, Webster was similarly influenced by nationalist hopes and religious prejudices. As James Turner points out, Webster, in spite of his oft-repeated aim to describe rather than prescribe the American English language, believed—on grounds that were biblical rather than empirical—that all languages originated in Aramaic, the ancestor of Hebrew (142).[43] Charles W. Kreidler argues that "Webster's stated principles were analogy and usage, but less consciously he makes use of nature and authority" (103).[44] His etymologies therefore, thorough-seeming as they were, were more speculative than factual, and they were subject to influence by Webster's own deep-seated hopes for the connection between language and national character. Richard M. Rollins' discussion of Webster's politically-inflected definitions includes many of the words relating to political authority and moral imperative that were important in the discussion of Ridge, like *law, liberty, duty, freedom, reason, submission,*

[43] This assumption influenced Webster's dictionary throughout his lifetime and afterwards, until a German scientific linguist took over the dictionary in 1864, so that, Turner argues, Dickinson's and Whitman's "lexicons" were wildly speculative, with definitions more suggestive than accurate.

[44] For a comparable claim, see George Krapp, *The English Language in America* (1925), who says that in spite of his claim to be writing a descriptive rather than a prescriptive dictionary, Webster "did not really conceive the possibility of resting contentedly on the practices of popular speech" (42).

and *education* (132-8). All of these definitions tend to emphasize the necessary limitations on unbounded liberty, as with Webster's definition of "education" that includes both "instruction" and "discipline" and the admonition that "To give children a good education in manners, arts, and science, is important; to give them a religious education is indispensable; and an immense responsibility rests on parents and guardians who neglect these duties." All of this goes to show that while Webster was invested in the minute particulars of the American English language, he was also governed by top-down, systematic concerns with unity, order, and coherence like those that preoccupied Horace Mann and other nationalist education reformers.

Dickinson's poems are similarly caught up in these tensions between descriptive particularity and ideological collectivity. Her fascination with both the history of words and their singular affective power shows through when she writes about language. In general, her *use* of language is unsettling: it dislodges the reader from a comfortable life within the familiar medium of language. There is some question whether it therefore preserves a state of alienation, or whether it rather re-forms language around newer, more daring, but still communicable meanings. To be sure, at the heart of Dickinson's poetics is the suspicion that language might disintegrate rather than unify; however, a bit like Webster's lexicon, her poems also cling to the hope that lies in whatever is shared and common.

This shared doubt and hope is clear in one poem about language, "A word made flesh is seldom" (Fr1715), where Dickinson's speaker reflects on the scarcity of well-chosen words:

A word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook

Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength -

A word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He -

"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology[45]

One striking aspect of this poem is that universal language, so far as it exists, has a furtive and private component. It is with "ecstasies of stealth" that we taste the linguistic food of our "specific strength." And yet "have I not mistook / Each one of us *has* tasted," so that the result is a *universal* human experience of being *privately* surprised to discover the Word on high presenting itself as edible Flesh.

[45] The original manuscript for this poem has been lost—it exists only as a transcription in the hand of Susan Dickinson, Emily's sister-in-law and chief recipient of her epistolary poems. The syntax and especially the punctuation are therefore suspect, but the language is clearly Emily Dickinson's. See Franklin's *Variorum Edition* (III.1489-90).

These words made flesh, bringing us "tremblingly" and but "seldom" into contact with the divine, are, according to the second stanza's logic, immortal and immutable, dying only in the metaphysically impossible event that the "Spirit" dies, too. In these rare cases where the word makes the spirit flesh, it serves an apocalyptic function, bringing the mortal reader into direct and permanent contact with the divine. These are some enormous claims on behalf of language, altogether consonant with Lowell's "poetic" version of language study, with Emerson's definition of "language" as "fossil poetry," and with Trench's hopeful assertion that all the vast universe of thought and experience would eventually have its proper name.

Leave it to Dickinson, then, to complicate a straightforward linguistic nominalism with a playful final stanza that leaves as many questions as answers. Almost as though there is a missing "On the other hand…" in between the third and the final stanza, the speaker notes "'Made flesh and dwelt among us' / Could condescension be." What, in the previous stanza, was a relationship inherent between "Word" and "Spirit" is now dependent on the condescension of the latter, so that the divine stands in a clearly superior position of rank. Webster did not yet have the connotation of "condescending" as patronizing or insulting, and so Dickinson's speaker is concerned altogether with condescension as an act of grace, as a voluntary abolition of distinction and hierarchy. She becomes conscious at the end of the poem that the experience of revelation is a favor of sorts, an act of grace that might have been withheld but was not.

The final two lines, the best and most troubling of the poem, make this heavenly condescension and divine grace into a simile for the human engagement with language in general: "Like this consent of Language / This loved Philology." "Consent of language" displays a double grammar, depending on whether "consent" is taken as a noun or a verb. The first case is nominative (language consents); the second case is genitive (language's consent). In the

nominative case, the consent of language is its condescension, and the speaker is grateful for the rare moment of pure clarity between the vessel and the godhead, between the Sign and the Message. That would be consistent with the stanza so far, where the poem is an appreciative if awestruck discovery of an instance of "the word made Flesh." In the genitive or possessive case, language's consent, "language" has "consent" as a characteristic property. Webster notes the etymology of the word "consent": the Latin *con* and *sentio*. *Sentio* is "to think, feel, or perceive," so that *con + sentio* is *to think with* or *to perceive with*. "To consent" is "to be of one mind, to agree": to think the same thing, together. Language as "consent" implies a group of language *users* coming together in agreement, deciding to speak together—condescending, even, to put aside their radical differences in order to avail themselves of a common medium of expression.

According to Don Gilliland in "Textual Scruples and Dickinson's 'Uncertain Certainty'" (2009), this poem shows Dickinson's commitment to a transcendentalism rooted not in divine grace but in the materiality of language and text: "Instead of God's 'condescension' in 'word made Flesh,' it is human 'Language' that 'consent[s]' to 'dwel[l] among us' so fully and permanently that it becomes the subject of our 'loved Philology'" (46). This reading of Dickinson as an oxymoronic, materialist transcendentalist works well with the sly tautology of the poem's final line: whatever its connotation through history as a discipline of biblical exegesis or linguistic study, "philology" transliterates to "a love of the study of words," and the last line therefore glosses the "consent of Language" as "a love for the love of the study of words." Coyly, the end of the poem has relocated its metaphysical center to the human and not the divine realm. The "word made Flesh" now has to do with how it feels to love words, and a use of language becomes divine when "we" all agree or consent to experience it as such. This is not to say that Dickinson's speaker has abandoned altogether the possibility that the word made flesh is

heaven-sent, a genuine condescension of divine grace: but it seems to matter less given this new, human inflection of the "consent of Language." Whether the consent, the accord of human minds, coincides with the will of the heavenly mind matters less so long as we all agree together to love philology, to love our love of words.

Dickinson has, in many different ways, been interpreted as a poet of seclusion and exclusion, a poet of refusal and withdrawal. In contrast to Whitman, the essentially American, self-consciously democratic poet, Dickinson is supposed to be without broader political concerns. But Dickinson's embrace of the "consent of Language" begins to cast some doubt on this reading of Dickinson the political cynic. In *Winds of Will: Emily Dickinson and the Sovereignty of Democratic Thought* (2010), Paul Crumbley points out that Dickinson's language of individual sovereignty is entirely in line with the Whig political theories of her father and her brother. For the Whigs, American or historical exceptionalism was manifest not by the masses of America, but by its rarest and most extraordinary achievements: its Washingtons and Franklins, its Natty Bumppos and Daniel Boones. For Crumbley, then, Dickinson's poetics is democratic precisely because it selects out the most extreme and seemingly unattainable experiences as the subjects of art and challenges its readers to encounter, recognize, and engage the exceptional. The goal of Dickinson's poems is not to alienate and befuddle her readers but to "stage dramas of sovereignty and consent that require her readers to think independently" (34). In a poem like "A word made flesh is seldom," the emphasis is on "consent," and the hope is that individual sovereignty and readerly choice will lead to some mutual agreements, some meeting of minds, *con-sentio*, about just exactly what constitutes an example of the "word made flesh."

Just why is this sort of maneuvering and indirection necessary? Why can Dickinson not adopt a bardic position, proclaim on behalf of her own words that *these* are the divine flesh? The

answer is found in the gap between language, or the shared medium, and experience, or the intensely private inner life of the individual. Dickinson was noncommittal on the relationship of language to the world, and she was equally noncommittal on the relationship between her own experiences and everyone else's. "There is one mind common to all individual men," Emerson had written; but Dickinson could have no proof of this beyond her own intuitions and longings—and the occasional isolated example of the "consent of Language." Even granting that "This world is not conclusion," Dickinson had no way to ascertain for certain whether and how her poems could replicate or incite the gnawing tooth of inner longing in another person. At best, she could hope that the others could consent to love the love of words as she did.

According to Melanie Hubbard, Dickinson is pulled in many different directions by her philological influences, but she must ultimately develop a theory of her own to account for the primacy she placed on private, individual experience. For evidence, Hubbard convincingly reads "Shall I take thee, the poet said" (Fr1243):

Shall I take thee, the Poet said
To the propounded word?
Be stationed with the Candidates
Till I have finer tried -

The Poet searched Philology
And was about to ring
For the suspended Candidate
There came unsummoned in -
That portion of the Vision

The Word applied to fill

Not unto nomination

The Cherubim reveal -

In very clear contrast to Horne Tooke's materialism, or Webster's supposition that all thought is a direct function of language, Dickinson's speaker here holds experience to be private, separate, and only tenuously connected to the common medium of language. If language retains its contingent nature, it is as a capricious and separate entity in its own right. Here "philology" more clearly calls up the study of words as *science*—the human presumption to "nomination," the Adamic premise. As noted above, Richard Trench rather thought it only a matter of time before man would carry out in full his Adamic task: for Dickinson the poet, the road looked much more arduous. Hubbard writes that this poem makes a virtue of language's necessity, so that "though . . . slippages exist, you might overlook them, improperly enough, and take a word to be adequate for your own furtive uses" (253). But there is also, accompanying each use of language, the painful awareness of its inadequacy. The immediacy of the revelation—"There came unsummoned in - / That portion of the Vision"—dwarfs the powers of "nomination" and makes the poet's task, dumbly thumbing through her lexicon, look rather desperate.

On the other hand is an earlier poem, in the same vein but proceeding from a point of relative poetic empowerment:

I found the words to every thought

I ever had - but One -

And that - defies Me -

As a Hand did try to chalk the Sun

To Races - nurtured in the Dark -

How would your Own - begin?

Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal -

Or Noon - in Mazarin? (Fr436)

Again, the poet tries in vain to match a word to the immediacy of experience, though here at least she admits to a measure of past success. From these three poems together—"A word made flesh is seldom," "Shall I take thee, the poet said," and "I found the words to every thought"—a fairly clear pictures emerges of Dickinson's understanding of language and its connection to life. Experience is radical, even overwhelmingly so, and comes from the land of "cherubim"—or at least it seems to, which is good enough. Language, on the other hand, is common and quotidian, taking no part in the intensely private world of experiences—except for those times when it does. When are those times? That is a question for experience, not language, to answer, a matter first of individual intuition, and then of communal consent. It will not happen often, and even when it does, only the sovereign will recognize it as such.

Dickinson's theory of language is "democratic" precisely to the extent that it counts its successes extra-linguistically, as a matter of experience. Her poems rely on "silence" because she believes that representation through language is only partial, could only *ever* be partial. If the reader is to confirm, validate, or *con-sentio*, that must happen in a space beyond the text. To that extent Dickinson needs readers as a *formal* component of the poems, as the interlocutors who alone can confirm or deny whether her intuition is shared and whether her language partakes of the "one mind common to all individual men"—that is, if such a Mind or Over-Soul even exists beyond the poet's own inexorable longing after it.

To read, then, really is to "dwell delicious on" the "bright impossibility" of intimate contact between two consciousnesses. It is an impossible situation: consciousness so thoroughly dwarfs language. But through the consent of the reader, the love of the love of words, it becomes possible to imagine that one has felt just exactly as another has felt.

Could mortal Lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered Syllable -
'Twould crumble with the weight -

The Prey of Unknown Zones -
The Pillage of the Sea
The Tabernacles of the Minds
That told the Truth to me - (Fr1456)

This poem hints at why, in those rare instances in which Dickinson glosses poetry as such, she speaks in affective rather than descriptive terms. She famously ventured this definition in a letter to Higginson: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" (L342). Bypassing the *metaphysical* confluence of signifier and signified—bypassing even the sanctified or poetic origins of language as a medium—Dickinson moves straight to the experience of reading, to the consent of language and the condescension of the poet or the reader (it may be either or both, depending on the speaker's mood). She echoes the sentiment of her letter to Higginson in another late poem:

To pile like Thunder to it's close

Then crumble grand away

While everything created hid

This - would be Poetry -

Or Love - the two coeval come -

We both and neither prove -

Experience either and consume -

For none see God and live - (Fr1353)

What is most striking about this poem is the all-consuming, affective nature of the *experience* of poetry. Metaphysical foundations and "first principles" fade to secondary concerns—or rather, the "first principle" in this poem is experience, which is all in all. "Poetry" and "Love" and "God" are "coeval" in the poem, all avenues to the apocalyptic experience of a fundamentally collapsed phenomenal world. "We both and neither prove -" is a provocative formulation, suggesting that there is no way to justify the transcendent experience beyond the transcendent experience itself. *That it is*: this is what Dickinson's speakers insist or at least hope through and beyond the silences of the poems. Poetry, as love, as avenue to experience, offers the reader the invitation to feel as the speaker feels. Dickinson may have withdrawn herself from progressive and nationalistic accounts of history and manifest destiny; but she remained quite invested in the dream of a common life, in a truth sanctified by the ready assent of all who came into contact with its manifest and sovereign nature.

Daring to Tell: "Impossible Tropes" as Method

Dickinson's rhetorics of silence circle and re-circle the tension between unity and dissolution. In one poem, "How the old mountains drip with sunset" (Fr327), the question of the artist's capability threatens to negate the scene of the poem. For this reason, the poem begins with the Tookeian radicals, or with the sensory-driven impressions of the sunset-scene over which the speaker is brooding.

How the old Mountains drip with Sunset
How the Hemlocks burn -
How the Dun Brake is draped in Cinder
By the Wizard Sun -

How the old Steeples hand the Scarlet
Till the Ball is full -

In these visions, the speaker is enraptured, overtaken by the fiery splendor of the scene. In wonder, she marks "how" it all appears, the anaphora serving apparently to situate her in a position as awestruck recipient of sensation, capable only of uttering, "O, how…" At this midpoint of the second stanza, however, a new grammatical possibility is introduced:

Have I the lip of the Flamingo
That I dare to tell?

These lines move backward, syntactically, so that the sentence now asks, "Have I the lip of the flamingo, that I dare to tell *how* the old mountains drip, *how* the hemlocks burn, and *how* the dun brake is draped?" This rhetorical question is implicitly answered in the affirmative as the speaker gathers courage to continue her enumerations:

Then, how the Fire ebbs like Billows -
Touching all the Grass
With a departing - Sapphire - feature -
As a Duchess passed -

How a small Dusk crawls on the Village
Till the Houses blot
And the odd Flambeau, no men carry
Glimmer on the Street -

How it is Night - in Nest and Kennel -
And where was the Wood -
Just a Dome of Abyss is Bowing
Into Solitude -

Each of these three stanzas begins with that same anaphoric "How." Yet this "How" may now be read as an affirming exclamation rather than a tentative reaction, because the poet herself, with her daring "lip of the Flamingo," now stands at the center of the poem. What was initially a merely descriptive poem, chronicling disjointed sense impressions, now stands forth as a creative poem, laying out the poet's unified vision of the sublime landscape. A bit like Webster with his American language, the speaker here has begun with the modest aim of transcribing but ended with a more universal project of common language. This was also the structure of Ridge's "A Night Scene." There, the speaker began with the rapture of immersion but quickly took on the

role of vatic summoner. Likewise, the speaker of Dickinson's poem now stands amidst aesthetic danger, asserting an improbable claim for control.

In the final stanza, she makes clear the scope of her potential achievement:

These are the Visions flitted Guido -

Titian - never told -

Domenichino dropped his pencil -

Paralyzed, with Gold -

Even the radiant luminaries of Renaissance painting were overawed by such "Visions" as these. In this final stanza, the poet is either saying that these "Visions" have never been captured by *any* artist, painter or poet, or she is saying that these "Visions" have never been captured by any artist *until now,* by me, in this poem.

Not just in her syntax, but in her self-figuration, the speaker lends credence to the latter interpretation. The "lip of the Flamingo" is striking, not only for its sudden introduction of the exotic—the flamingo's pink that the reader cannot help but visualize, even against the already-fiery and brilliant sunset backdrop—but also for its anatomical impossibility, the "lip" that necessarily belongs to a person and not a bird. The "lip of the Flamingo" is a seemingly impossible trope for a seemingly impossible task: the task of taming the sublime, singular experience of the sunset using the mundane, shared medium of language. Such a trope re-centers the poet for a task that now becomes inherently creative. Her "lip"—or is it a sharp beak, a radiant pink pencil?—stands ready to break the silence, to illustrate the essential, divine character of the scene that has defied the artists who came before her.

For this task, the poet requires more than description: she requires figures, and not just for her self, but for her subject. This poem is full of striking figures, many of them centered on

the "fire" and "flame" that give the landscape its persistently brilliant visual quality.[46] The penultimate stanza, however, provides an especially vivid illustration of how Dickinson often queried the medium of language, working at the brink of nonsense in order, apparently, to enliven and elucidate.

> How it is Night - in Nest and Kennel -
>
> And where was the Wood -
>
> Just a Dome of Abyss is Bowing
>
> Into Solitude -

To reconstruct this figure at the mimetic level is a tall order. There is a fluid interchange between abstract and concrete signifiers which makes literal interpretation nearly impossible: what was once the "Wood," we gather, has become a "Dome"—which is potentially a concrete noun—of "Abyss": not only an abstract noun, but one which annihilates concrete presence. This impossible dome of abyss is "Bowing": a concrete verb, and something that a dome may do, to be sure, but not an abyss—it is possible to visualize a dome which bows, but not a dome of abyss which bows into the woods. The only real connection to the concrete is the defiant anti-pun on "Bowing" in the context of "Wood": one might hear "Bough-ing," which is nonsensical but does call back at the subliminal level to real trees in a real forest. Finally, the dome of abyss is bowing "Into Solitude"—again, an abstract noun which resists signification at the concrete level but is suggestive in the context of "Abyss," wherein surely solitude reigns if it reigns anywhere. The final impression, then, is an image which just barely retains its hold upon the literal—at some level, this stanza simply tropes the darkness that has overtaken the woods at the edge of the

[46] There is the "sunset" itself, and then the obvious signifiers of light, color, and flame, like *burn*, *Cinder*, *Sun*, *Scarlet*, *Fire*, *Billows*, *Flambeau*, *Glimmer*, and *Gold*. There are also the punning additions of the fiery Sap*phire* feature and the flaming lip of the *Flamingo*.

village—but which to a large degree undermines its own signification in the very language—"Abyss," "Solitude"—of negation and futility.

The result is a non-mimetic (albeit not wholly abstract) stanza that *suggests* the experience that it cannot quite *literalize*. This is its triumph as poetic utterance, and this is where it stakes its claim as a version of philology that rejuvenates or reimagines the English language and connects it to the most singular of phenomenal experiences. Because the connection between the word and the experience is so tenuous, however, and suggestive rather than literal, this is also the source of considerable meta-linguistic anxiety for Dickinson in her poems. Certainly, this nearly-incoherent coherence is what makes the speaker's "lip of the Flamingo" such a "daring" gesture, and certainly it is what makes the speaker of her other poem withdraw in fear from the prospect of becoming herself the painter, the cornet-player, or the poet. Her affirmation of poetic power in "How the old mountains drip with sunset" is necessarily tentative: there remains the possibility that her daring venture fails, that her reader determines that this artist, too, has remained "paralyzed" by the visions that evaded earlier painters. In short, "Abyss" and "Solitude," negation and singularity, remain in the poem as *formal* possibilities. Because the poem's tropes are impossible by their own avowed nature, the poem's speakers can only offer the hope that they have hit their lofty mark.

For a blither commentator like Webster, the task of making a description of language to fit a system of common experiences represented only a hopeful possibility and a positive national project. But for the more wary Dickinson, the dangers and the pitfalls were at least as prevalent. Granted, there is a funny sort of parallel between Webster's staunch hope that "mèrcy" and "Eurόpean" would win the day and Dickinson's "daring" but uncertain hope that her "Dome of Abyss" would resonate with the experiences of a reader: both writers are hoping to generate a

sort of consensus through a compelling use of language. But Dickinson's wished-for consensus is much further removed from convention than Webster's. Her tropes are more radical and unsettling than any of her etymologist sources could have anticipated, because for her, the reality that language is tasked with describing is vast, unsettling, and more than a little overwhelming to the limited individual subject, and language could only partially limn these gulfs of singularity and difference. Trench, for example, offers that "vast as is the world of names, the world of realities is even vaster still," and he means that everything that exists *can* have a name, even if it does not *yet* have a name (111). With Dickinson, he believes in a universe that calls upon the poet's Adamic powers. However, such a thought, which was only a hopeful one to Trench, would at turns terrify and stimulate Dickinson and supply her with the desperately strained figures, the goblins and phantoms, and the fearfully-crossed thresholds of her poetic landscape.

What this poem finally represents is an invitation *to the reader* to acquiesce in the possibility of its impossible tropes. "Dome of abyss"—"lip of the Flamingo"—these metaphors exceed the possible. If they nevertheless bear some essential relationship to the life of the poet and the reader, then they serve an expressive purpose. To call this purpose novel or maieutic would be to miss its relationship to the otherwise stable and communal arena of language from which it takes its grounding. As Crumbley says, just because Dickinson's language seems exclusive does not mean it is undemocratic. Instead, the language is designed to have a suggestive power—and suggestion raises the possibility of accord, of an extra-textual understanding between the poet and the reader. Perhaps—we are dared to believe—the visions that flitted Guido and company have been arrested, however briefly and tenuously, in the space between the poet's impossible tropes and the reader's sympathetic encounter with those tropes.

"Through a Riddle, at the last -": Enigma and Consensus

The fact that Emily Dickinson wrote a number of poems that are clearly designed as riddles is one which has been little-pondered since Anthony Hecht's 1978 article, "The Riddles of Emily Dickinson," but these riddles form a significant part of her oeuvre.[47] In his article, Hecht, besides tracing Dickinson's sources for the riddle form in nursery rhymes and fairy tales, in the Bible's *Proverbs,* and in the metaphorical definitions of her Webster's dictionary, concludes that Dickinson's riddles form a key part of the way the poet tells "all the truth," but "slant," as she famously says (Fr1263, Hecht 11-4).[48] The rhetoric of Dickinson's riddle poems, according to Hecht, suggests a poet trying to mediate the Godhead, a Revelation, like the Scripture itself, evoking *through* but not contained *within* the Word, the poems "but aspects of a Truth we could not comprehend without their mediation" (19-20). For Hecht, somewhere in a Dickinson riddle is "a complicated revealing with its mystery somehow intact" (24).

Given the association of "riddle" with enigma and uncertainty, it may seem odd to find Hecht dwelling on Truth and Revelation. However, anthropological and ethnographic studies of the riddle form tend to emphasize the community-building and consensus-generating impact of the need to agree on the riddle's answer. Elli Köngäs Maranda writes that "Riddles play with boundaries, but ultimately to affirm them" (131). Thomas R. Williams argues that the cultural purposes of riddle are to teach the rules of social conduct, to mediate potential conflicts preemptively, and to form a "conceptualizing mechanism" for a culturally proper understanding of worldly phenomena which also "allows the limits of the unknown to be expanded" (105-6).

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[47] For a notable exception, see Cindy MacKenzie, "'This Is My Letter to the World': Emily Dickinson's Epistolary Poetics" (2009), who argues that Dickinson's letters function like her riddles and are designed to "riddle" the mysteries of presence and absence.

[48] For the dictionary as a source of riddle, see also Elli Köngäs Maranda, who notes that a riddle, like a definition, contains one or more hidden metaphors (129-30).

Traditionally, riddle-making has played a prominent role in defining and safeguarding cultural unity, even as it allows a safe space for exploring and questioning that identity.

Ian Hamnet goes so far as to say that riddles are not necessarily meant to be solved or even solvable: the descriptors rarely furnish enough information for an objectively correct answer. He argues that people rarely spend much time thinking about the riddle itself; rather, they try to recall whether they have heard the riddle before and bring to mind a forgotten answer (384). This further underscores the cultural function of riddles, which help the members of society to agree on the proper distinction between categories and to assign relative importance to concepts based on their perceived affinity to other concepts. One of Hamnet's examples—"What is a tree on which all birds sit? A chief."—illustrates the joint de-stabilizing and reifying function of the riddle (385). The central metaphor—chief as tree—initially places the chief in a conspicuously terrestrial position, only to surprisingly and satisfyingly subsume him to a loftier figurative height at the second stage of meaning. The riddle's hearer is allowed to contemplate the base humanity of his chief even as he finally affirms the chief's exceptional and indispensable nature within the society.

Dickinson, of course, had scant respect for social hierarchies and little use for the machinery of culture. No experienced reader of Dickinson's verse could suppose her capable of taking on any influence, formal or otherwise, without modification. Still, Hecht's claim that Dickinson's riddles somehow mediate her own or the reader's access to the divine does suggest a certain unifying and reifying capacity. Consider the short riddle below:

Drab Habitation of Whom?

Tabernacle or Tomb -

Or Dome of Worm -

Or Porch of Gnome -

Or some Elf's Catacomb? (Fr916)

Tradition says that the answer to the riddle is "cocoon." This answer fits aurally, at least, the verse's many assonant *o*-sounds corresponding with the pair of them in *cocoon*. This answer tells us that the "Drab Habitation" houses a caterpillar en route to becoming a butterfly, something in between earth and sky. The riddle's metaphors, listed anaphorically with the repeated "Or," bolster this sense of in-betweenness, especially with the help of Dickinson's 1844 Webster's. These give the poem its essential ambiguity: "tabernacle," for instance, may refer to a temporary habitation, particularly a sacred one in the context of the wandering Israelites; in contrasting it with "tomb," then, the eternal resting place, the speaker wonders whether the cocoon will prove a conduit to the next phase of life or a permanent, annihilating grave. A "dome" may simply be a poet's synonym for "roof" or even "house" (bolstered by the unspoken rhyme between *dome* and *home*), but it may also refer to a "cathedral": this tension between profane and sacred, along with the potential of "worm" to refer to "a being debased and despised," calls to mind the disjunction between caterpillar and butterfly—the one creeping and reviled, the other soaring and glorified. A similar dichotomy results in the comparison between "gnome" and "elf": for while both are imaginary beings, the former resides stationary in the bowels of the earth, while the latter is "a wandering spirit." What this series does is to situate the cocoon—partly beautiful, partly base—in its precarious position. Should she arrive at the riddle's answer, the reader has been encouraged to ponder the beauty of life and the baseness of death along with her own frail position.

Perhaps worrying that readers would miss the answer to Dickinson's riddle, Mabel Loomis Todd unceremoniously dubbed this poem "Cocoon" when she included it in her 1896

Third Series of *Poems by Emily Dickinson* (the first series for which Higginson is not listed as a co-editor) (131). This seems an odd editorial decision—why not "Riddle," for example?—but it suggests that Todd may have shared Hamnet's conviction that the significance of the riddle lies not in the reader's ability to unravel it but in its play with and affirmation of semantic boundaries. Michael Riffaterre, for whom suppression and concealment are a key element of poetic signification, considers jokes and riddles to be lesser forms of expression precisely for their need to reveal: "In the joke subgenre there is no way for the reader to get beyond the laugh . . . any more than he can get beyond the solution once he has solved the riddle. Such forms self-destruct immediately after consumption" (*Semiotics* 16). And Dickinson herself seems to agree with Riffaterre's analysis in a later short poem:

> The Riddle we can guess
> We speedily despise -
> Not anything is stale so long
> As Yesterday's surprise - (Fr1180)

Clearly, Todd thinks otherwise. She supposed that the riddle would have some value to Dickinson's readers beyond its solution, and to her credit, her view is backed up by the scholarship on the actual use of riddles, which are supposed to situate the riddler and the riddle within a shared reality.

In Dickinson's case, this is, somewhat paradoxically, a shared reality of metaphysical uncertainty, so that the guessed riddle does not lose its power to "surprise." To note that the poem is a series of possible figurative images for a cocoon, for example, does not account for the speaker's professed inability to choose between them in this series of disjunctions. The persistence of the "Or" makes the entire poem feel tentative—a feeling bolstered by the ways

that the poem moves a step beyond the clichéd dichotomy of beauty and baseness to figure the threat of death. Why the persistent anxiety that the insect's assumed form might prove eternal, might end in effaced burial instead of perspicuous splendor? Simple ecological reality? Perhaps: Dickinson was a sufficiently competent amateur naturalist to recognize the vulnerable position of the chrysalized "worm." The riddle asks its reader to imagine herself as the cocoon's inhabitant, perhaps on her way to eternity, perhaps headed to an early and permanent grave.

Tradition notwithstanding, there is at least one other possible answer to this riddle, one other possible identity of the "drab habitation," and that is the "poem" itself. The word "poem" stakes a legitimate claim to the *o* assonance of the riddle, and it bolsters that claim with the end-word *m* consonance that is wanting in its rival. Even if it works best when monosyllabically mispronounced to rhyme with "dome," "gnome," "catacomb," and the unspoken "home the word "poem" is capable of subsuming this riddle's signifiers, both aural and semantic, as well as, if not better than, "cocoon." But if such is the case, then this poem becomes, on one level at least, a meta-poem: the speaker, who is now explicitly the poet, is wondering what sort of destiny awaits the "drab habitation," the formal "dome" into which she has attempted to cast her thoughts. Tabernacle or tomb? Elf or gnome? The immortality of flight or the abyss of death? The divine chorus of revelation or the annihilating silence of failure? The question of whether the poetic utterance itself has succeeded in expressing what it set out to express threatens to subvert or subsume the primary symbolic meaning in which it has clothed itself.

This riddle, then, does not define a term, or a shared experience of that term, in a standard or straightforward way. It cannot ultimately be said of this poem that its achievement is to describe the cocoon—nor even the speaker's experience of it—because the meditation upon the cocoon gives way to a spiraling figuration of linguistic endeavor itself. If we have a linguistic

triumph here, it must be more complex than a straightforward triumph of description. But while Emily Dickinson scholars might rush to posit this as another case of Dickinson choosing not to choose, that account falls short of the way that "we" experience the poem together when we read it. The poem invites us to ponder Eternal Life and Eternal Death as well as its own tenuous position mediating between the two. Dickinson's riddle here surprises doubly: it fails to provide a simple answer, and it shows us that when denotation fails, signification need not. "Tabernacle or Tomb?" the poet asks; and flush with the excess of her language's signifying provocation, the reader rushes to answer: "Tabernacle!"

This is far from an argument for a Dickinson who knows all—only a Dickinson who dares to hope that her words are adequate to the requirements of her readers. In fact, often enough, her need was to arrest and make meaning from an apparently senseless and knowledge-thwarting experience. In "It was not Death for I stood up" (Fr355), this is the case:

It was not Death, for I stood up,
And all the Dead, lie down -
It was not Night, for all the Bells
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.

It was not Frost, for on my Flesh
I felt Siroccos - crawl -
Nor Fire - for just my marble feet
Could keep a Chancel, cool -

And yet, it tasted, like them all,

The Figures I have seen
Set orderly, for Burial,
Reminded me, of mine -

As if my life were shaven,
And fitted to a frame,
And could not breathe without a key,
And ‘twas like Midnight, some -

When everything that ticked - has stopped -
And space stares - all around -
Or Grisly frosts - first Autumn morns,
Repeal the Beating Ground -

But, most, like Chaos - Stopless - cool -
Without a Chance, or spar -
Or even a Report of Land -
To justify - Despair.

Like “Drab habitation of whom,” this poem is a riddle of sorts, but here it becomes even more evident that the poem is certainly more confusing and potentially more satisfying than any answer to its riddle.

The speaker seems to goad the reader toward an “uncertainty approach” to interpretation with the potential responses to what the “It” might be in “It was not Death.” Joanne Feit Diehl

proposes “the after-life of the survivor . . . the numbness that precedes mourning” (117). This would be something like the “formal feeling” of “After great pain” (Fr372). The possibility cannot be ruled out—the poem permits it both grammatically and conceptually. But such a state, if it can be named—grief? pre-grief? malaise?—is so semantically similar to “despair” that, if this poem is still to function as a riddle, discovering its answer is something of an anti-climax after its final word. Perhaps the best answer to the riddle *is* its final word, “Despair,” which makes the end of the poem ironic. Though her words may have led her to the “correct” word, definitionally, they have nevertheless failed to provide the sought-after closure which knowledge-seeking covets. But this irony turns out to be a double-irony, for ultimately this poem, though like many of Dickinson’s it presents an instance of thwarted selfhood and failed expression, is actually “about” the triumph of poetic language. If what is being *described* in this poem is, as Sharon Cameron says of it in *Lyric Time,* the inability to properly name and describe—“These poems [i.e. this one and Fr901] evade metaphor and explicit naming” (49)—what actually *happens* in the poem is that its figures announce themselves as triumphs of naming and description, or at least of proper communication.

The poem begins as an anti-naming: it is asserted of the psychological state in question that “It was not Death,” “It was not Night,” and “It was not Frost” “Nor Fire,” because it carried aspects of the opposite of each of these things. “And yet, it tasted, like them all”—so they have not yet been properly ruled out as defining characteristics. But the language strains and contradicts itself to define the experience; it discovers that it has limitations, just as the experience in question limits the full motion of the speaker: “As if my life were shaven, / And fitted to a frame, / And could not breathe without a key.” This riddle-within-a-riddle figures the speaker’s existence as a locked door, or, perhaps more to the point, as a once-organic tree that

has been cruelly "shaven" and "fitted" and left at the mercy of whatever unnamed power is capable of locking it tight and forbidding its expression.

That "expression" may be the appropriate word here is suggested from the imagery of the third stanza, to which the "As if" of the fourth stanza is arguably attached: "The Figures I have seen / Set orderly, for Burial, / Reminded me, of mine -." What is the referent of "mine" in this final line of the stanza? There are two possibilities: the first is "Burial," so that this image becomes a reminder of "my burial," or the instant of the speaker's death. The fact that "Death" was previously ruled out (in the first line of the poem) is no impediment to such a reading, since, after all, the second stanza alone contains two such impossible contradictions—"It was not Frost" and the cool "marble feet"; and "Nor Fire" and the hot southern wind, "Sirocco"—and the rest of the poem is similarly pervaded with contradictions. On the other hand, the most syntactically probable interpretation is that "mine" is in reference to "Figures," so that the figures set up for burial here remind the speaker of the death of her own "Figures." Surely this would have to be "figures" in the rhetorical sense, where, according to Webster, "words are deflected from their ordinary signification." With this grammar, the poem becomes about the poet's tropes, her figures, her own representative power.

The poem is most suggestive if both of these potential syntaxes are allowed to hold sway, so that what the speaker is saying in these three lines is that the burial she witnesses reminds her of her own death, *which is to say*, the death of her "figures": the death of her ability to create the poem which would represent her experience. Under such mental duress as this, she seems to be saying, representation fails her. She is paralyzed, she cannot breathe; as a poet, she is rendered silent and ineffectual. The next two images likewise confirm the threat of negation: the stopped clock and the death-bearing frost which "Repeal[s] the Beating Ground," or arrests the beating

heart of summer. Even more so than "How the old mountains drip with sunset" or "Drab habitation of whom," this poem figures a poet stricken dumb, a "despair" caused by an inability to describe. What makes the despair so trenchant here is that failed expression is not merely avowed: it is apparently *enacted* by the anti-definitions, the refusals to say, which structure the poem.

Failed expression is indeed the purport of this poem according to Cameron, whom I quote at length here because she expresses so well what many critics take to be an essential characteristic of Dickinson's poetry:

> These experiences defeat names. They flood conception, overwhelm it, so that it gives way to tenuous, incomplete, and multiple representation. For when experience stops a speaker by striking her through, her report of it will of necessity be fragmentary. At the center of her subject and hence unable to see its totality, she is often at a loss to know what it is. Hence she can only define by negation and simile, strategies that are acutely conscious of inaccuracy in the one case and imperfection in the other. Thus in "It was not Death," words are aware of the limitations of words. (*Lyric Time* 49)

On Cameron's interpretation, this poem rather unequivocally describes the fragmented consciousness and the attendant inability to produce coherent linguistic representations from it. The problem with such an interpretation is not that it imputes to Dickinson a level of metaphysical skepticism which she certainly practiced, but that it cheapens the achievement of the poem by positing essential uncertainty where the reader has been invited to feel that something more significant—more signifying—has taken place. This poem does "figure" uncertainty, but it also "figures" on one deeper level yet: by riddling the poem with self-contradictions, obfuscating the syntax, troping paralysis and death, and, ultimately, declaring her

"figures" themselves doomed and preparing to watch their burial, Dickinson's speaker *may* convey a powerful, devastatingly effective representation of the very thing she claims to be unable to do, namely, capture in language the difficulty of representing her experience in words.

Formally speaking, defeat does not win the day, either in the poem's sense or its affect. Even here, the refusal to denote is not a refusal to signify. Each negative definition is accompanied by a figure which compellingly, if with strained and lurching difficulty, describes the experience. And if the similes of the last four stanzas are not equivalencies, yet still they do tell what the experience was *like,* in ways that are suggestive and, even when contradictory, convincing. This is the experience of being both hot and cold, dark and light, still and "stopless." It is, in short, "Chaos," which the last stanza ventures as a simile that borders on definition: "most, like Chaos." That it is most like chaos is true both of the experience being described *and* of the language in which it is described; so that at the highest level of signification, this poem is "about" its own poetic triumph. It is about achieving unity out of fragmentation; affirmation out of negation; activity out of paralysis; life out of death. The poem itself is, at the deepest level, a figure of its own success, a sort of circular irony which continually denies and affirms its own possibility as a signifying utterance. This is an "impossible trope" at its most challenging. But to make the poem a mere harbinger of essential uncertainty is to deny not only *its* most impressive aspect, but also a fundamental aspect of poetic language itself as Dickinson conceived it: the power of the trope to suggest meaning *beyond* the denotative relationship, real or imagined, which anchors it in everyday language. It may be true that, in this poem, "words are aware of the limitations of words," but if they are, they are limitations that words seek to overcome. Where signifying stops, affect begins, so that the poem is designed to have the reader experience the "Chaos" or feel the "Despair" that the poet has felt.

Paradoxically, this poem describes, in a manner bordering on knowledge, the experience of not-knowing. What is the metaphysical import of expression which *effectively characterizes* moments of despair, paralysis, surprise? Does a metaphysics which essentializes such experiences preclude genuine knowledge? Maurice S. Lee claims that for Dickinson, surprise and uncertainty remain fundamental aspects of her poetics despite any apparent revelations to the contrary: "indeterminacy survives Romantic synthesis. . . . Dickinson's resolutions are left unfinished because the proliferation of possible meanings expose seemingly superior syntheses as mere specters of absolute truth" (55). But what evades Lee in what is otherwise a formidable analysis of Dickinson's startled moments is that indeterminacy is not the only possible outcome of doubt. The transcendent, mutually binding formal center of the poems gives the poet an ongoing claim to Nature, Truth, God, or Immortality. If the reader responds sympathetically to the poet's riddling definition of "despair," then she has acknowledged a nature in common with the poet's—a shared yearning or a shared suffering. Dickinson demands an acknowledgement of the humble and tenuous role of the human subject without, however, surrendering knowledge, metaphysics, and language in one fell swoop of cosmic uncertainty.

Lee claims on Dickinson's behalf a "metaphysics of surprise": I add the important qualification that this is a *positive* metaphysics of surprise. If, for Lee, Dickinson's primary mode is to "explore how it feels to live and write under surprise and its skeptical conditions" (46), it need not follow that she gets no farther than "mere specters of absolute truth" (55). The universe, with all its acknowledged grandeur, is capable of surprising the poet—capable, even, of teasing, menacing, disheartening, and bewildering her—but never capable of silencing her. Dickinson's poems obsess over silence, true, but it is not the silence of defeatism, or the silence that Paolo Freire describes as "hopelessness": "a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it"

(91). We have often read Dickinson as someone who flees the world; yet here stand the poems, all the same, a testament to an active, constructive, lifelong engagement. To place the sympathetic reader at the formal heart of Dickinson's riddling poems is to see that her stringent, self-denying integrity as a poet was also a sort of faith in the other, in the "intuition" that another may have felt, too. Her poems reach out toward the world, toward readers, asking (formally) whether we can be surprised together, terrified together, in doubt together. And the poet's words do not persist merely to comfort her, but rather, in a constructive metaphysical sense, to show: with each new poem, a picture of the universe continues to emerge.

This account of Dickinson the riddler is well-equipped to handle the much-pondered radicalism of Dickinson the manuscript poet. It is in the context of Dickinson's fascicles, "riddled" with variant word-choices and other textual ambiguities, that Cameron argues for a Dickinson who "is choosing not to choose what the coordinates of an experience are, choosing not to choose whether internal scenes can have external coordinates" (*Choosing* 147), thus essentializing Dickinson as a poet of indeterminacy for a generation of scholars. But Cameron's account, while it rightly points to Dickinson's forbearance on all things metaphysical, does not properly account for the *cultural hopes* that her riddles imply. To get at this other, more positivist side of Dickinson's not-choosing, it is helpful to look at a poem that overtly flaunts variant word choices and indeterminacy:

> The Love a Life can show Below
> Is but a filament, I know,
> Of that diviner thing
> That faints opon the face of Noon -
> And smites the Tinder in the Sun -

And hinders Gabriel's Wing -

'Tis this - in Music - hints and sways -
And far abroad on Summer days -
Distills uncertain pain -
'Tis this enamors in the East -
And tints the Transit in the West
With harrowing Iodine -

'Tis this - invites - appalls - endows -
Flits - glimmers - proves - dissolves -
Returns - suggests - convicts - enchants
Then - flings in Paradise - (Fr285)

The most remarkable thing about this poem—another riddle, again with an uncertain answer (God's love? Poetry itself?)—is surely its final stanza. This final stanza exemplifies as well as anything else in the corpus what Dickinson hoped her poetry might do. For what does this mystery "diviner" force do, besides sustain the sun, give it its beauty in rising and setting, and provide music with its hidden power? It also accomplishes, somehow, impossibly, every one of the verbs in the final verb list, verbs which demonstrate the fluidity of Dickinson's language as well as any variant-riddled manuscript, verbs which, due to the sheer length of the list, not to mention their intra-contrariety, must surely defy perfect comprehension. The poem might almost read simply, "suggests - suggests - suggests - suggests…," and ask the dashes in between to do the work of signification. In "Emily Dickinson's Unutterable Word" (2005), Deirdre Fagan

writes of the dash as the way Dickinson "expresses herself through silence," carefully treading the ground between the intentionality of meaning and the gnomic inscrutability of silence. Like Fagan, I hold that Dickinson's silences are an invitation of sorts, an invitation to the reader to complete the process of meaning-making.

Her proliferative manuscript variants offer a similar function to her dashes, multiplying the possibilities for meaning where specificity seems impossible. Even as suggestion takes over signification in "The love a life can show below," signification retains just enough hold to keep a sympathetic reader clued in to the vision which is being conveyed. If meaning "dissolves," it also "proves." If it "appalls," it also "endows." At the end, in ways that aren't perfectly clear, the utterance "flings in Paradise." If the "suggestion" sticks, then the reader is not abandoned into incoherence or insignificance—at least, she is invited to feel that way, to feel an instinct that another has felt too about the presence of divine love on earth. The poet holds open the loop, so that what is presumed to be inexpressible finally receives its ultimate expression, even if that expression comes in a manner which cannot, to be sure, achieve the status of straightforward *logos*. The various ways that the poet expresses her need for "silence" actually function to overcome silence at the next level of signification, where the poet and the reader meet on a plane of mutual understanding, where "the love a life can show below" is confirmed as a legitimate clone of the love that radiates from above.

To theorize Emily Dickinson as a riddler is to focus not just on her oft-cited and ever-present ambiguities; it is also to think of her in an educator's role, teasing, interrogating, suggesting, and finally offering some stable answers to the reader who is invited to see the world as she sees it. Geoffrey Hartman writes thus of Dickinson at the threshold: "Emily Dickinson does not 'tell all'; there is no staring recognition in her poetry. Her fate is to stay profane, outside

the gates, though in sight of 'the promised end'" (351). Much has been made of how Dickinson stays profane, consigned to the hither side of eternity; but few readers, including Hartman himself, have offered a satisfying account of what it means to "remain in sight of the promised end." Similarly, Cameron in *Lyric Time* writes of how "Meaning . . . resists knowledge and asserts itself, if at all, only at the level of intimation" (47). Again, recent criticism has tended to focus on Dickinson's "resistance" and has had little to say for how she hoped to work through "intimation." But for Dickinson the riddler, a shared mental landscape, mediated by a shared language, gestured toward a shared promised end. Thus far does she practice a Romantic Ideology in spite of her many real and persistent uncertainties: as "Empress of Calvary," she both enjoyed special access to the promised end and was charged with the special burden of mediation through imperfect poetic language.

In some key respects, all of Dickinson's poems are riddles. In particular, her verse is characterized by the destabilization that also confirms the universal uncertainties of the subject position. Further, her verse affirms the ability of material language to reach toward psychologically and metaphysically extreme conditions and to get both herself and her reader near enough to those conditions to affirm their legitimacy. This sort of universality falls well short of "manifest destiny" or even "universal history" or "universal grammar," but it nevertheless constitutes a common language and a transcendental human character.

Impossible Tropes II: The Ties that Bind

It is half-true to say that Dickinson chooses not to choose: more properly, it might be said that Dickinson is concerned with what happens when, in spite of our underlying uncertainty, we choose *to* choose—or have a choice made for us, or choose to make a choice for another.

Dickinson's riddling poetics tackles the most unstable moments of mental life in order to arrest and make them intelligible, but this intelligibility comes in spite of pervading metaphysical uncertainty. There is a sort of ethical irresponsibility in presuming a common life in language in spite of the many psychological and experiential markers of difference and discord. "Suggestion," as an aesthetic aim, is unmoored from solid "first principles" as required by Coleridge. Where consent or intuition reign and are shared between two or more subjects, there is no necessary grounding beyond the "yes" or the "we." One of Dickinson's definition poems, "Faith is the pierless bridge" (Fr978), shows the danger, though it be inescapable, of assuming that life is linked to some larger design:

> Faith - is the Pierless Bridge
> Supporting what We see
> Unto the Scene that We do not -
> Too slender for the eye
>
> It bears the Soul as bold
> As it were rocked in Steel
> With Arms of steel at either side -
> It joins - behind the Vail
>
> To what, could We presume
> The Bridge would cease to be
> To Our far, vascillating Feet
> A first Nescessity.

This poem clearly lays out the bind of existence for Dickinson. If faith is a "first Nescessity [*sic*]," it is not so in the Coleridgean sense, who hoped to determine the character of his "first principle" and systematize its function in the universe. Instead, blindness to or silence about what is "behind the Vail" and supporting the life of "Feet," poetic or otherwise, is a constituent aspect of Dickinson's faith. The linguist Bernard Dauenhauer puts this "silence" at the center of his theory of language, so that "The very doing of silence is the acknowledgment of the agent's finitude and of the awesomeness of that of which he is not the source" (25). In this poem, the source of that "awesomeness" is the inscrutable force that justifies experience and sanctifies faith. Yet it is impossible not to also read an irony in this poem, a threat in the repercussions for "presuming" to try to lift the "Vail." As with Adam and Eve's tree of knowledge or the Veil of Isis, the implication is that knowledge cannot be gotten cleanly and without a terrible cost, and in Dickinson there is likewise a couched sense of mortal helplessness in this poem that our lives should be so cut off from final knowledge.[49]

It is language's binding, affective, community-building power, together with this final metaphysical skepticism, that gives Dickinson's impossible tropes and her riddling poetics both their exciting and their dangerous character. When an experience or a poem becomes a law, or a "Sovereign Law," bringing people together in the shared awe of existence, it does so in ways that cannot be defined, ways that transcend the limits of knowledge and thwart the finite bounds of language. This is one way to account for the fraught power dynamics of Dickinson's poetics: all of the lovers, masters, goblins, muses, bees, and other visitors represent the external, inscrutable

[49] In "'The Brain – is wider than the Sky –' or: Re-Cognizing Emily Dickinson" (2008), Sabine Sielke argues that Dickinson "employ[s] eternity as a metaphor to grasp aspects of existence that remain unspeakable or, to be more precise, that cannot literally be spoken" (70). This reading is consistent with how a triumphalist account of Dickinson's verse is appropriate, even as she remains a fundamental skeptic inclined to lament the limitations of human knowledge.

character of Truth, and they act upon the poems' speakers in ways that are sometimes welcome, sometimes threatening, but always compelling and bound by the "intuition" by which "mightiest things assert themselves." This is both an exciting and rather desperate circumstance, as in this reproachful love poem:

"Why do I love" You, Sir?
Because -
The Wind does not require the Grass
To answer - Wherefore when He pass
She cannot keep Her place.

Because He knows - and
Do not You -
And We know not -
Enough for Us
The Wisdom it be so -

The Lightning - never asked an Eye
Wherefore it shut - when He was by -
Because He knows it cannot speak -
And reasons not contained - Of Talk -
There be - preferred by Daintier Folk -

The Sunrise - Sir - compelleth Me -

Because He's Sunrise - and I see -

Therefore - Then -

I love Thee - (Fr459)

This poem adds an uncomfortable layer to the politics of Dickinson's aesthetics. Betsy Erkkila talks of Dickinson's politics as monarchical and exclusionary, a celebration of the soul's select (and undemocratic) society, or a lament for a bygone "higher order of culture" ("Art of Politics" 149). In poetical terms, this means that Dickinson is chiefly concerned with marking her difference and her disturbance. In a measure of contrast, Paul Crumbley describes "resistance to conformity as expression of individual sovereignty," so that what is most radically democratic about Dickinson's poems is the way that they give readers an "interpretive choice" (*Winds* 2, 10). Working against both of these readings are the aesthetic politics of "'Why do I love' you sir," which has an essential breach of individual sovereignty at its heart. The subject is *compelled* to love the object, a fact that has nothing to do with choice, sovereignty, or self-selection, and everything to do with *how it feels* to encounter him. There is community in this poem—love, even—but there is also violence. The eye that shuts when the lightning strikes is vulnerable to injury as well as awe. The pierless bridge of faith remains or withdraws at its own volition, not the subject's. The speaker of this poem acknowledges the "reasons not contained - Of Talk -" that operate at the ground or the center of consciousness.

If Dickinson hopes that the "suggestion" of her riddling, silence-centered poetics can access and harness these "reasons not contained - Of Talk -," these shared "intuitions" and common affective ties, this "Love a Life can show Below," then she does so with a full sense of the ethical perils of her hope. In fact, as Gary Lee Stonum points out, when Dickinson writes *about* poetry, she typically figures as reader, not writer, and her awe is often permeated with

resentment at the non-volitional nature of her own affective response (*Dickinson Sublime* 10-14). In “This was a poet” (Fr446), Dickinson’s speaker cannot help but notice the hierarchical relationship between herself and the elevated poet:

> Of Pictures, the Discloser -
>
> The Poet - it is He -
>
> Entitles Us - by Contrast -
>
> To ceaseless Poverty -

This stanza is consistent with Dickinson’s idea of poetry’s affective nature—the poet “discloses” rather than explains, shows through “pictures” rather than terms. But the speaker, while impressed and awed, is also keenly aware of her own inadequacy, her own compulsively shut eye in the face of the brilliant lightning strike of poetry. Even in the wholly admiring poem that opened this chapter, “I would not paint a picture,” the speaker fixates on the essentially passive aspect of reading: “Enamored - impotent - content - / The License to revere.”

If Dickinson did not believe that words corresponded perfectly with experience, and if she knew that her poetry had to proceed through hint, suggestion, and riddle if it hoped to provoke the inner life of the radically different reader, then she also knew that this process, if it worked, would be as violent as it was intimate, as much goblin as lover, as much disease as balm:

> A Word dropped careless on a Page
>
> May consecrate an Eye
>
> When folded in perpetual seam
>
> The Wrinkled Author lie

Infection in the sentence breeds

We may inhale Despair

At distances of Centuries

From the Malaria - (Fr1268)

Besides containing some of Dickinson's *funniest* lines, with their lingering syllables, the groans that persist for centuries after the final end rhyme of "Despair" and "Malar"—*eee*…*ahh*…—this poem also affirms unequivocally the *dangers* of Dickinson's impossible tropes. Affecting, as her lurching, half-dead "figures" presume to do, an extra-textual intimacy between poet and reader, creating a self-sufficient law unto themselves, justified by how it feels to write and read if not by the verifiable coordinates of a metaphysical grounding, the poem transcends everything. So far as it insists on this impossible communion, it brings others together into its own suggestive reality—whether they like it or not. Words in books really do "lie," as Dickinson's hasty late poem had suggested—so do their "Wrinkled Authors," for that matter, be they living or dead. Yet these are lies that Dickinson was both unwilling and unable to do without. The very possibility of poetry entails the "lie" of language, the usurpation of "sovereignty" by "consent."

Maria O'Malley, in "Dickinson's Liberatory Poetics" (2009), offers a compelling reading of this Dickinson who "relates freedom to violence, a violence all too readily elided in public discourse" (63). John Rollin Ridge is largely content to indicate "Sovereign Law" and the divine Muse through his silences, certain enough that whatever was temporally messy and violent in the silent space between the mortal and immortal realms would be purified in the course of time. This faith is bolstered by his progressive understanding of history—an understanding that Dickinson lacked. For her, to submit to the transcendental law of the poem requires a sacrifice, willing or otherwise, of individual autonomy. Language, when it flirts with immortality, may

invoke the love of sentimental discourse, the horror of gothic tropography, or the violence of gendered submission. All of these are possibilities that her poems' impossible tropes hold forth to readers.

Dickinson required a republic of readers. That is a formal observation, derived from her poems' consistent use of the *suggestee* to bridge the gap between word and vision. The poems require the suggestee's complicity or submission in order to function properly, or at least, in order to be saved from their own darkest fears, to be "tabernacle" rather than "tomb." Dickinson had commitments and she envisioned a "We"—it was simply a more radical "We" than her contemporaries', who backed away from the brink more thoroughly and staged their commitments more concretely. Therefore, while I do not want to gainsay altogether the conventional reading that holds Emily Dickinson to be more singular, more private, and more radical than her contemporaries, neither do I want to lose sight of the ways that her poems formally call for readership and shared reading.

CHAPTER 3: "I UTTER AND UTTER, / I SPEAK NOT": WALT WHITMAN IN-FORMING THE NATION

The English language befriends the grand American expression....it is brawny enough and limber and full enough. On the tough stock of a race who through all change of circumstance was never without the idea of political liberty, which is the animus of all liberty, it has attracted the terms of daintier and gayer and subtler and more elegant tongues. It is the powerful language of resistance...it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of the proud and melancholy races and of all who aspire. It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage. It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible.

— Preface to 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (*LG*55 xi-xii)[50]

On first reading Walt Whitman, most of us hear a poet of triumph, a poet of the celebrated self. Eventually, however, Whitman readers must confront a puzzling strain of reticence in the otherwise garrulous national bard. It creeps up in "Song of Myself" at times, as when an inner voice teases him for his shortcomings:

It provokes me forever,

It says sarcastically, Walt, you understand enough….why don't you let it out then?

Come now I will not be tantalized….you conceive too much of articulation. (*LG*55 31)

Elsewhere, the defects of "articulation" seem more sinister yet, threatening to overtake the poet and put an end to his poem-making. The opening poem of the 1860 "Leaves of Grass" cluster,

[50] Because the question of whether Whitman's goals changed over time is at stake in this chapter, I usually quote from the earliest printed version of a poem. Citations use *LG*, for *Leaves of Grass*, followed by the last two numbers in the publication date, so that *LG*55 indicates the 1855 edition of *Leaves*. I quote from the texts as reprinted by *The Walt Whitman Archive*, edited by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price.

later "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life," presents a speaker frustrated and stifled, and regretting entirely his participation in the making of poems:

> O baffled, balked,
>
> Bent to the very earth, here preceding what follows,
>
> Oppressed with myself that I have dared to open my mouth (*LG*60 196)

Or, in the "Calamus" cluster on male-male affection, also new to the 1860 edition, Whitman offers up another type of verbal restraint, as a speaker, alternately ashamed or engrossed by his affections and urges, threatens to withdraw from his Emersonian bardic project altogether.

One way that critics have accounted for this taciturn Whitman, who appears more prominently in 1860 than in any previous edition of *Leaves of Grass*, is by reference to the personal "crisis" that Whitman suffered during the years leading up to the Civil War, stemming, according to various readings of his biography, from the termination of a love affair, from his professional failures as a journalist and editor, or from his premonition of the impending national crisis. From this confluence of biographical and poetic instability, critics have inferred that Whitman was announcing a turn away from his early project of uniting the nation through his verse and toward the more limited and cynical goal of consoling himself in the wake of his failure.[51] Flaunting a new propensity for silence, Whitman no longer appears interested in making the sort of *contact* with his reader that many of the 1855 poems, especially the one that would eventually be called "Song of Myself," had insisted was his chief aim. Mark Bauerlein, in *Whitman and the American Idiom* (1991), uses the anxious and reticent Whitman to argue that

[51] Among the first influential readings of Whitman as a poet whose goals changed substantially throughout the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* between 1855 and 1892 is E. Fred Carlisle, *The Uncertain Self: Whitman's Drama of Identity* (1973), who argues that Whitman's "identity" across the texts evolves to account for not only his personal successes, but also his failures and even, sometimes, his despair.

the central metonymy—poet as book, the poet's body as "leaf of grass"—by which Whitman had hoped to instantiate himself in his book, has given way to a fear of misapprehension, an "anxiety of misreading" revealing the poet's growing conviction that his readers will fail to realize his hopes (91-119). Relatedly, Kerry Larson, in *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (1988), finds that in the process of preparing his third, 1860 edition of *Leaves*, Whitman, who had staked everything on his readers' consent—their "consensus" with regard to his views for the future of the republic—was now forced to abandon his goals: "Better, it appears, to resign his commission now, circa 1858, than to see it rendered meaningless in the immediate future" (169).[52] According to this prominent strand of criticism, silence, in the form of acknowledging and lamenting poetic failure, becomes Whitman's only viable option in his new lyrics.

By contrast, I pursue a train of thought prompted by Estelle Taylor's brief 1975 article, "Moments of Silence in *Leaves of Grass*," where she argues that "contrary to the opinion of all too many Whitman readers, there is a deliberateness, a carefully planned unlaboredness in the poet's use of the medium of soundlessness in conjunction with that of sound to help reinforce his philosophy of the 'wholeness' or 'ensemble' of life" (147).[53] At its essence, such an argument suggests the possibility of reconciling the reticent and the garrulous Whitmans, of reading "silence" as an essential rather than divergent aspect of Whitman's poetry.

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[52] This way of reading Whitman's "crisis" into his poetry is very influential, and it also informs such critical commonplaces as the view that his poetry declined in quality after 1856. See C. Carroll Hollis's influential *Language and Style in* Leaves of Grass (1983), Tenney Nathanson's *Whitman's Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in* Leaves of Grass (1992), and *The Essential Whitman* (1987), edited by Galway Kinnell, where Kinnell offers the view that "best" version of any Whitman poem is (almost) always its earliest appearance in *Leaves*.

[53] Also influential was C. Carroll Hollis's consideration of "negativity" in the 1855 poems, related to "silence" in the sense that both offer the reader a rhetorical refusal of some sort. Though Hollis finds 1,559 instances of negative language in the first three editions of *Leaves*, he nevertheless holds that Whitman's propensity for the negative "in no way suggests or relates to personal doubts, despair, solipsistic rejection" (128, 138).

As in the previous chapters, I use "silence" in a deliberately broad sense here in order to show that many of Whitman's key rhetorical moves can be explained through his reliance on not-saying. Silence in Whitman includes such related but non-identical tropes and rhetorical maneuvers as: his allusions to the unsayable or the inexpressible, his "faint clews and indirections," and his moments of song-stopping lyric despair. They are sometimes anxious, as in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," but just as often they are celebratory, as in "Sun-Down Poem"/"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "We understand, then, do we not? / What I promised without mentioning it, have you not accepted?" (*LG*56 219). I treat in depth two of the numerous varieties of "silence" to be found in Whitman's work, which I call "the silence of the inexpressible" and "the silence of seeming despair." The focus is on Whitman's more ostensibly skeptical "moments of silence," since these have been taken to pose the greatest threat to his aesthetics, but one important implication of my argument is that it could just as easily gloss other varieties of silence—for example, the silence of wonder, or the silence of the love that takes the place of words—to much the same effect. Even at their most skeptical, Whitman's silences do not indicate total despair, nor do they effect a retreat from the world of his other poems. Instead, Whitman's rhetorical use of "silence" informs nearly every well-known aspect of his poems, from his relationship to "you" the reader, to his aesthetics of "compost," to his progressive politics, to the ways he harnesses—and limits—the influence of his personal life upon his poetry. Informing any account of these phenomena should be a belief that Whitman used silence as consistently as he used speech in his lifelong attempt to foster, through verse, the "the institution of the dear love of comrades" (*LG*60 368), or his ideal American republic.

"I stop somewhere waiting for you": Silence and "Compost Aesthetics"

As was the case with Dickinson, it is important to begin by considering Whitman's understanding of language: his sources, how he modified them, and where that situates him in relation to American progressive ideology. More so than any other poet in this project, Whitman took his cues from the German-inflected discipline of "comparative philology," itself an outgrowth of German Romantic thought. One of the seminal texts in this movement, an aesthetic treatise that inspired later, more apparently scientific philological endeavors, is Friedrich Schiller's "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" (1795). Schiller elaborates the poetic moods corresponding to what he views as the two phases of human development: savagery and civilization. The immersive, "naïve" poetics of Nature are inaccessible to modern, acculturated, "sentimental" poets and readers. Still, this is a circumstance which Schiller cheerfully allows, investing it with a positive metaphysical valence: "the goal to which man *strives* through culture is infinitely preferable to that which he *attains* through nature" (194). The sentimental poet dwells in a fallen language, but he does not necessarily wish it were otherwise. While the key note of sentimental literature is elegiac—a lament for the lost state of Nature—the act of elegy itself becomes a culturally productive mode. For Schiller, modern poetry is meant to *approach* the state of Nature without losing the advantages of sentimental self-reflexivity. If there has been a lost state of innocence, then it has been a fortunate fall, since the modern elegist can mark his visionary status through his innovative modern art. Therefore, while sentimental poetry indicates loss and inadequacy, it also strives toward and sometimes believes in its own perfectibility.

The role of "silence" in the theory of poetry that Schiller lays out is very clear: silence must enter the poem in order to fill the gap that between "culture"—the particular, actual creations of human artists, which are inherently flawed—and "nature"—the absolutely innocent

perfection of people and ideas that is conceivable in theory if not in fact. This "silence" takes on a positive role insofar as it marks the poet's acute awareness that his reality remains imperfect, that it falls short of an ideal toward which it might, in a limited way, aspire. Such silence also marks an equivocation, however: by not-speaking, or speaking of what is unsayable, the sentimental poet may be indicating that the words of Nature *never can* be said; alternatively, he may be indicating that he possesses a clear vision of ideal Nature that he merely cannot *yet* say.

The late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century explosion of German cultural nationalism can be explained in part by reference to this positive cultural valence of silence: to a great number of Germans in the wake of the Romantic turn, it began to seem as though German language and culture were on an inexorable path toward growth and dominion.[54] Riding the wave of nationalist fervor was the budding "science" of comparative philology, which sought out empirical justification for the conviction of German language superiority. "Comparative philology" names the field that would eventually become modern linguistics, in which scholars compare and taxonomize the languages of the world. In addition to searching for evidence that particular languages were related to one another, philologists debated such questions as whether all languages shared a universal origin, whether languages evolved or degenerated over time, and whether some language families should be considered superior to others.

In Germany, these debates produced two uneasy camps of theorists: those who believed in a "synchronic" origin for languages, in which a language is born from a burst of creativity which gives it its essential character; and those who believed in a "diachronic" origin, in which a

[54] See Jens-Uwe Guettel, *German Expansionism, Imperial Liberalism, and the United States, 1776-1945* (2012), for the ways that this German nationalism parallels, sometimes precedes, and often inspires the United States cultural nationalism that gives rise to things like common school reform, progressive national ideology, and hierarchical racial theories (esp. 43-78).

language begins with simple, monosyllabic forms and evolves through its history to more complex forms like agglutination or inflection. These theories would appear to have different consequences for the modern poet. Under the "synchronic" rubric, languages are more or less perfect at their origin depending upon the particular genius of their creators—though they may since have degenerated from misuse. The "diachronic" theories, on the other hand, hold that languages are inherently weak at their birth and must be developed by the genius of subsequent generations.[55] In either case, the poet can intervene to improve the language, either to restore it to its initial perfection or to push it along toward its future improvement.

In *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment* (1990), James Perrin Warren demonstrates how the difference between synchronic and diachronic theories became more nebulous as organic language theory made its way into the English-speaking world. Though the English and American writers on language were steeped in German theory, they tended to blur certain crucial distinctions, such as whether language ought to be improved via recuperation or via evolution. Among those English-speaking theorists whom Warren highlights are Christian C. J. Bunsen, whose *Outlines of the Philosophy of Universal History* (1853) Whitman annotated extensively, and Maximilian Schele de Vere, author of *Outlines of Comparative Philology* (1853), to whose understanding of both language and biology Whitman's indebtedness is becoming increasingly apparent (Warren 7-33; see also Schöberlein). For these theorists, words either represent original perceptions or evolve to more nearly approximate essential nature, as context requires.

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[55] For an influential example of a "synchronic" theory, see Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts (On Language: The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind)* (1836), which came to the Anglophone world through the work of Bunsen and Schele de Vere. For the diachronic theory, see August Schleicher's 1850 treatise *Die Sprachen Europas in systematischer Übersicht: linguistische Untersuchungen* or his later work in English, *A Compendium of the Comparative Grammar of the Indo-European, Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin Languages* (1874-77). Noah Webster was the most influential of American diachronic language theorists, though much like the poets who read him, he often slipped into a more poetic, synchronic mood.

James Turner argues that philologists, critics, and poets in the United States and Great Britain resolutely resisted the rigor of German linguists like Franz Bopp and the Grimm brothers throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, combining instead a dim sense of the German comparative impulse with a Romantic intuition of the poetic power of individual words.[56] One plausible conclusion is that the somewhat confused state of the "science" of language in the early nineteenth century contributed to the wildly varying accounts of linguistic possibility in the era's poems and manifestos—not only between different poets, but between and within works by the same poet. The clear distinction between synchronic and diachronic language history, or between "poetic" and "matter-of-fact" approaches to studying language, to use James Russell Lowell's terms from the 1860 *Atlantic Monthly* (248-9), more or less disappear. In their place is left the conviction that language is imperfect and needs improved-upon, plus a toolkit of nebulous scope for approaching that task. Unsurprisingly, philologists in England and the U.S. frequently espoused the conviction that English, above all other languages, contained a germ that foretold the greatest future developments.

Thus, even though Dickinson was primarily influenced by a mostly diachronic theorist in Noah Webster, and even though Whitman was primarily influenced by mostly synchronic theorists in Bunsen and Schele de Vere, considerable slippage is possible between the categories in the context of United States language study. Both poets were finally invested in how to renovate language in order to improve its *affective* power: concerning the how and the why of that renovation, they could sometimes be opportunistic. While the obfuscation of the synchronic-

[56] Both Bunsen and Schele de Vere were heavily influenced by Humboldt, whom Turner describes as the last great "Romantic" language theorist, and whose *On Language* (1836) is "perhaps the greatest single monument of the Romantic conflation of language and nation" (134). In addition to his apparently scientific study of words, Humboldt was also Germany's leading commentator on Goethe and an avowed cultural nationalist. Schele de Vere and Bunsen translated that cultural nationalism and destinarianism seamlessly to an Anglophone world eager for confirmation that its projects of empire and expansionism were sanctioned by linguistic and cultural superiority.

diachronic distinction may initially seem to pose a problem for the poet's attempts to develop his language, in practice, it made relatively little difference whether a poet conceived of his project as one of *recovery* or *evolution*. In fact, the ability to play fast and loose with the potential of language—to be governed only by the endeavor to move his inadequate language toward a better form—was aesthetically productive.

Both projects, recovery and evolution, are informed by a sense of the poet's present inadequacy and a belief in his future improvement. But neither the original Adamic language nor the future hyper-evolved language is immediately realizable, and so "silence" presents itself as a logical recourse for a poet that is cognizant of his limited perspective. Whether as elegy or lament for an imperfect world, or as hint and suggestion for a more perfect world to come, the ability to not-say is crucial to a poetry that understands itself as in-process. Schiller's "sentimental" poetry, firmly synchronic in its conception of a language fallen from perfection, was clear at least in its sense that a permanent recovery of the "naïve" is impossible. Cutting-edge comparative philology in the United States is noncommittal even on this foundational point. Because of the conviction that language (English, specifically) was progressing toward greater and greater clarity, the temptation existed to suppose that certain achievements might already represent a form of perfection. Bunsen, for example, argues that "ethical effort may in any stage of development realize finitely the divine totality, and thus exhibit within that sphere the ideal of humanity" (I.36). In this respect, American sentimental poetry imagines itself as imperfect, in the now, and therefore still inclined toward expressions of loss and frustration; but more so than its German cousin, it also imagines itself as ever on the verge of approximating perfection.

When Whitman sets out to write his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, he does so with a robust sense of the exciting and constantly-evolving landscape of language studies. Many of his key aesthetic

assumptions are responses to the contemporary understanding of language as imperfect but improvable. Less ideologically blithe than thinkers like Bunsen, Whitman nevertheless shared the conviction that English was the "chosen tongue" to "well nigh express the inexpressible," as he says in the passage from his 1855 preface that furnishes this chapter with its fitting epigraph (*LG*55 xii). But, in line with the underlying uncertainty and deficiency of "sentimental" poetry, he develops a theory of poetic rhetoric which privileges the unexpressed just as much as the expression.

I call this theory Whitman's "compost aesthetics," a term meant to compass the main tenets of his lifelong project, figured in the "leaves of grass" that are himself, his poems, and his best hope for realizing an organic, physical connection with his readers. In "So Long!," the poem that concludes every edition of *Leaves of Grass* after 1860, Whitman declares, "Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man" (*LG*81 382).[57] "Silence" is crucial to this aesthetic. "I stop somewhere waiting for you": his great poem declares the impending cessation of its own speech act and, in the same breath, insists that it never *will* end, that the poem's integration with the life of "you" the reader is inevitable (*LG*55 56).

This certainty in the face of uncertainty is possible only because compost aesthetics is indifferent to the passage of time: "the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness make the only point of sane philosophy" (*LG*55 viii). The eternal renewing and exchanging process of composting, of dropping "leaves of grass," implies an afterlife for the poet, the poem, and the reader alike, and all together to boot: "Every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you"

[57] The bibliographic claim that "So Long!" concludes every edition of *Leaves* after 1860 is technically inaccurate for the 1892 "death-bed" edition of *Leaves of Grass*, where two "Annexes" actually offer the final words. Whitman annexed the clusters "Sands at Seventy" and "Good-Bye my Fancy" to the plates of his 1881-82 edition, which remained otherwise unchanged. Notably, the quoted lines from "So Long!" did not include the apostrophe "Camerado" until the 1867 edition: an example of Whitman consciously expanding his English vocabulary of love and friendship (see the discussion of "Accouchez," below, and accompanying note).

(*LG*55 13). The poem sets things in motion, but it can defer the event to the silence of the after-poem: "A great poem is no finish to a man or a woman but a beginning" (*LG*55 xi). This is a compromise with the demands of uncertainty brought about by the knowledge that language is either fallen or not-yet-evolved. Whitman therefore worked out a theory of language in which he could "celebrate" the now, such as he was able to delineate and represent it, without mitigating his vision for an (even) brighter future.

Whitman takes very seriously the atomic/organic connection between himself and his readers. It pushes him to develop a poetry that is democratic to its very core. A passage from the 1855 preface elaborates Whitman's universalizing tendency: "The known universe has one complete lover and that is the greatest poet. He consumes an eternal passion and is indifferent which chance happens and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune and persuades daily and hourly his delicious pay" (*LG*55 vi). Whitman's absolute faith in the essential goodness, "the perfect fitness and equanimity of things" (*LG*55 14), gives him his catalogic impulse and his universal sense of affection. Wai Chee Dimock calls this an "epistemologically democratic" poetry, where Whitman's persona is, on principle, an American Everyone (77-8). This mirrors Ed Folsom's claim that Whitman "sought in 'Song of Myself' to voice an 'I' that would for the first time articulate just what a nonhierarchical and nondiscriminating sensibility would sound like" ("Democratic" 339). Open to all and excluding none, the American poet takes care that the celebration of his self is likewise a celebration of *you*. "The earth," he writes in 1856, ". . . Makes no discriminations"—and neither must the poet (*LG*56 324).

Whitman's "compost aesthetics" is therefore defined by the following convictions: that language, while mysterious, is capable of moving in the direction of moral and expressive perfection; that all people are more or less engaged in this process of amelioration at all times;

that time itself is not of the essence to this progressive project; that the links between people are essential rather than contingent; and that a poet should therefore be democratic in essence, "assuming" his readers' identity wherever possible. Compost aesthetics takes place on an enormous scope spatially, temporally, and intellectually. It stands to reason, then, that not-knowing and not-saying become just as important as knowing and saying in the course of honest aesthetic expression. In the poem which eventually came to be called "This Compost," Whitman's speaker, full of wonder and even horror at the eternal death and renewal of his universe, concludes the poem with a gesture that is part faith, part aporia, conceding that the world "gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last" (*LG*60 205). Silence, within the framework of Whitman's compost aesthetics, functions to highlight areas that the poet's language cannot yet reach, but it also invites readers to join the poet in a conviction that the breach between themselves and perfection is immaterial. As with Ridge and Dickinson, there is once again a radical and unelidable formal use of *readership* as a necessary part of the poem. Whitman returns to a progressive version of American ideology that Dickinson had little use for, but the two poets are otherwise similar in their need to use silence to make extra-textual contact with a reader beyond the page.

"Conveying a sentiment and invitation": Silence and the Inexpressible

In his notebooks on language from the 1850s, Whitman speculates that "A perfect writer would make words sing, dance, kiss, do the male and female act, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab, steal, fire cannon, steer ships, sack cities, charge with cavalry or infantry, or do anything that man or woman or the natural powers can do" (*Daybooks and Notebooks* III.742). Words, in such a scenario, become perfect emblems of nature and experience. But Whitman is

careful not to overstate the case, his conditional "would" making clear that the task he proposes is a heavy one, maybe even unachievable.

In practice, even the "perfect writer" is consigned to circuitous rather than immediate words. In a tantalizing notebook fragment, Whitman explores what relevance poetry and language might have to a world that remains beyond their reach. On what now survives only as a torn scrap of paper, Whitman somewhat cryptically proposes to

> Make a poem, | piec[ ]
>
> the central theme of which sh[ould be]
>
> The untellable,
>
> That which cannot be put
>
> in fine words,
>
> Nor in any words or statement
>
> or essay, or poem,
>
> ~~The best~~ life &
>
> Of Heroism, Of Poetry, the b[est][58]
>
> ~~the~~ of both, Of Eloquence, O[f…][59]

There is a fine irony worth teasing out from the project that Whitman briefly lays out for himself here. He appears to propose that some things lie beyond the reach of words. But complicating this belief somewhat is his further conviction that *a poem* is called for to convey this central

[58] "The best" appears to have been an aborted initial guess for how to start the line, while "life &" seems intended to be interjected between "the" and "b[est?]"

[59] Brackets indicate where the manuscript is torn before the end of the line, with my plausible guesses for what likely followed where speculating seems reasonable. Thanks to Ed Folsom for making me aware of this fragment and for sharing with me his photograph of the manuscript, in the archive at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

truth. To "make a poem" about "the untellable" is to bear a rather fraught relationship to language itself, as the purpose of the poem then becomes the disclosure of its own shortcomings. Yet even that ironic conclusion is not quite right given the apparent implications of the final surviving line of Whitman's prospectus. Here he appears to begin exploring the character of "the untellable" and discovers that it constitutes "the life & best" not only of "Heroism" but also of the strictly *verbal* realms of "Poetry" and "Eloquence." Considered closely, then, the message of Whitman's proposed poem is not to be that words themselves are inadequate or irrelevant but rather that the essence of what they convey is to be discovered in a realm other than their own. Something "untellable" stands under or beyond the essence of any effective poem or speech act.

Were this Whitman's only hint on the subject, it would be difficult to say much about the how and why of his nuanced told-untellable. But it is tempting to speculate that Whitman went on to write his poem on "the untellable," and that that poem is the 1856 "Poem of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth" (later "A Song of the Rolling Earth"). The poem begins with a thesis-antithesis, which discounts the essential character of spoken and written language:

> Earth, round, rolling, compact—suns, moons, animals—all these are words,
> Watery, vegetable, sauroid advances—beings, premonitions, lispings of the future—these are vast words.
>
> Were you thinking that those were the words—those upright lines? those curves, angles, dots?
> No, those are not the words—the substantial words are in the ground and sea,
> They are in the air—they are in you. (*LG*56 322)

The premise is evident if not exactly sensical: *things* are the true words, and whatever stands apart from the things themselves, including the language by which we try to get at them, is a falsification of the true words. Figuratively, the poem seems to imply that the earth is a metaphor for the word, while the word itself (in language or print) is unreal, emptied of signification. Most obviously, then, the poem functions as anti-poem, dismissing the craft of poem-making in favor of the immediacy of experience.

But this disavowal of "curves, angles, dots," along with such later claims as that the earth's words are "calm, subtle, untransmissible by print," should raise eyebrows in light of the physical testament of *Leaves of Grass* the book(s). These material objects provide evidence not only that Whitman was a prolific and lifelong scribbler with some type of abiding faith in words, but also that this printer-by-trade was intimately and even compulsively concerned with the physical production of his books, right down to the type and page arrangements of the "curves, angles, dots" which formed them.[60] Adrienne Rich's point on Dickinson's ironic refusals in "I would not be a poet" holds true for Whitman as well: "The strange paradox of this poem—its exquisite irony—is that it is about choosing not to be a poet, a poem which is gainsaid" by the rest of the poet's poems, "including itself" ("Vesuvius" 169).

It is unsurprising, then, that the initially facile opposition between language and the unsayable is complicated upon further inspection, just as it was in his fragment on "the

[60] For discussions of how Whitman's training as a printer influenced the forms of his poems and his books, see Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (1990); Ed Folsom, *Whitman Making Books / Books Making Whitman* (2005); and Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (2005). For further evidence of Whitman's concern over his book as a physical testament, see his jottings on the inside cover of his personal "Blue Book" copy of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, where he is discovered tallying word counts for the Bible, the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, and others in comparison to his own *Leaves*, with the implication being that he would like to work toward a volume that is epic and religious in its proportions, its themes, and its cultural impact (*Blue Book* vol. I).

untellable." In this case, the speaker, self-conscious of his poet's role in light of these non-verbal "words of the earth," takes up a complex stance toward his reader:

> The earth does not withhold, it is generous enough,
>
> The truths of the earth continually wait, they are not so concealed either,
>
> They are calm, subtle, untransmissible by print,
>
> They are imbued through all things, conveying themselves willingly,
>
> Conveying a sentiment and invitation of the earth—I utter and utter,
>
> I speak not, yet if you hear me not, of what avail am I to you?
>
> To bear—to better—lacking these, of what avail am I? (*LG*56 324)

The affirmation and denial of "I utter and utter, / I speak not" is an odd one, as it is difficult to tell what distinction Whitman means to evoke. *Webster's* at the time lists "utter" and "speak" as synonymous in many of its definitions. It might be that "to utter" in the context of this poem means "to do," that is, to deal in "substantial words" instead of to inscribe or to vocalize. But if this were exclusively the case, there would be no need for the anxiety of "yet if you hear me not, of what avail am I to you?" The anxiety about an interlocutor suggests Whitman's sense that "utterance" entails a more complete surrender than "speech."

Webster is not forthcoming with his etymologies in this case, but Whitman seems to have had some sense of the different valences of the two words at their origins. The Old English *sprecan* still meant, straightforwardly, to pronounce or articulate words. By contrast, "utter" is more ambivalent and figurative, with both the Middle Low German *üteren* and the Middle English *outen* signifying a turning-out, often literally in the sense of "to put forth on the market" (*OED*). The double grammar of the line in question strengthens the case for such a reading, permitting "I utter and utter" to function as the independent clause in support of "conveying a

sentiment and invitation." (Whitman strengthened the case for this reading in later editions by replacing the dash between the two with a comma.) In this sense, "to utter" is merely to get words out, to let them go, or ex-press them: to give words away, and then be silent. "To speak" implies a firmer sense of audience—the expectation of an immediate listener. "Utter," like its etymological and phonic cousin "mutter," reaches an audience circuitously at best, perhaps by way of the reader, who must utter or mutter the silent words of print on the page and so bring forth the poet's words into the world (again).

The poem's equivocation, in which Whitman makes it deliberately unclear whether he means a statement to apply to the "earth's words" or to the "curves, angles, dots" of the poem itself, is explained by this valence of "to utter," which is both a saying and a not-saying. As "sentiment and invitation," an utterance reveals the presumed atomic unity between Whitman and his readers. Here, this unity manifests itself in shared experiences that can be indicated at the margins of the poem's discourse through its conspicuous silences. Utterance does not require perfect understanding, nor does it require the submission of the listener to the utterer. Instead, silence enters the poem in order to mediate between the utterance and the reader. The hope is that uttering and muttering will be sufficient to breach this silence. The silence, then, is the poem's interpretive space: the space between the poem's words and their absorption into the life of the kindred reader.

And that reader becomes an "utterer" in turn, ex-pressing the silent words from the typed page back into the world. In the poem's next stanza, Whitman turns to exhortation:

> Accouche! Accouchez!
>
> Will you rot your own fruit in yourself there?
>
> Will you squat and stifle there? (*LG*56 324)

The metaphysical and aesthetic significance of these lines, which command the listener to produce rather than to stagnate, is evident enough, but easily overlooked is the way in which, by exploring a new word usage, they practice what they preach. With his appropriation of the French "accoucher," Whitman is attempting to contribute to the evolution of language, just as his absorption of comparative philology has taught him to believe he ought to be doing—and this in a poem which purportedly discounts the role of traditional language.[61]

The word "accoucher" does better than any English alternative of getting near the effect Whitman needs. *Accoucher* means to deliver, to give birth, to produce—that is, "to bear." It excels its English alternatives, however, because in addition to conveying the necessary biological imperative (toward life-giving compost in opposition to stagnant "rot"), it also contains the threat of its opposite, which is the same threat that pervades the discussion of expression throughout the poem. *Coucher* is to lie down, even to go to sleep, and so *accoucher* is literally to take to *la couche*, to the bed. Here to lie down is also to give forth; in the same fashion, "to utter" is both to withdraw from words and to convey what is most essential. This simultaneous saying and not-saying is at the heart of what I have been calling Whitman's "silence of the inexpressible," where words are inadequate but indispensable. Inadequate, because, in their own right, they are removed from the realm of sense and affection; but indispensable, because, "of avail" to a heedful reader, they become the basis of sense, affection, and community. Whitman draws attention to the lacunae at the limits of sensible language in

[61] See also his search for new verbs of commingling and affection: in his notebooks, he explores *s'entr'admirer* and *s'entr'aimer* for potential use in later poems (*Daybooks and Notebooks* III.702-3). In his notes for "An American Primer," he laments that the "Anglo-Saxon breed" has "less ~~us~~ of the words of the various phases of friendship and love than any other race, and more friendship and love" (*Daybooks and Notebooks* III.751). This circumstance suggests an obvious language project for the poet who seeks to instantiate "friendship and love" in his poetry.

order to gesture at—without naming—something more essential to the atomic unity of poet and reader.

The poem's final turn toward the readers of his poem, figured here as the "architects" of the future, is needed to make the poem on the words of the earth consonant with the compost aesthetics that the 1855 edition works so hard to instantiate. The reason that the sayer of the words of the earth can surrender his poetry so confidently to his future readers—"I swear to you they will understand you and justify you!"—is that he knows these readers *must* eventually bridge the gap between the words on the page and the words of real life (*LG*56 331). Words are indispensable: no community can exist without them. "Yet if you heed me not, of what avail am I to you?" It is not hubris, therefore, which has Whitman so confident in the "poets to come," but organic necessity. Each time he casts forth the poem of himself into the world, as a piece of the organic compound of words, bodies, and embodied words, it must, in the fullness of time, be encountered, interpreted, and recast by its readers. Insofar as there was an alternative, it was the complete dissolution of all communion and affection—and Whitman's innermost intuitions rebelled against the bare possibility of such an outcome, an affront to "the procreant urge of the world," as he once termed his irrepressible sense of universal kinship and interpenetration (*LG*55 14). "Underneath all is the need of the expression of love for men and women," he declared in the 1856 "Poem of Many in One," the poem which absorbed and continued his articulation of a poetic project from the 1855 preface (*LG*56 197).

But the project of speaking around and through "the unutterable," in order to convey an appropriate sense of that definition-defying love that was the basis for everything else Whitman hoped his poems could accomplish, requires careful attendance to language, and not only on the

poet's part. Readers, too, must be able to evolve and adapt—"to better"—as they uncover new potential in the earth's words:

> Say on, sayers of the earth!
>
> Delve! mould! pile the substantial words of the earth!
>
> Work on, age after age! nothing is to be lost,
>
> It may have to wait long, but it will certainly come in use,
>
> When the materials are all prepared, the architects shall appear,
>
> I swear to you the architects shall appear without fail! I announce them and lead them!
>
> I swear to you they will understand you and justify you! (*LG*56 331)

Not only is the reader figured in the "architects" who will finally understand and translate into action the "substantial words of the earth," but the "you" that was the implied reader before (naïve, mistaking dots for words) has fluidly transformed to take on a poetically creative role in its own right as the addressee of "Say on, sayers of the earth!" The speaker now urges activity and production not only upon himself, but upon those reading the poem. The "silence" that separates the poet from the reader—a silence indicated by the reader's indefinite otherness, by the grand passage of time, and by the actual *silence* of the "curves, angles, dots" of a printed page—does not stand as an impediment to the poet's vision. So long as Whitman has performed his responsibility of utterance or *accouchement*, and readers have done theirs in turn—by reading and re-uttering—he need not fear that his words will be ineffectual. They will compost, not merely rot. What he is most certain of is *that* the architects will come: *how* they will "understand and justify" him may remain somewhat shrouded without posing a threat to Whitman's metapoetic faith.

So what appears initially to be Whitman's lack or loss of faith in words proves finally to be an affirmation of his supreme confidence that, while his "sentiments and invitations," his "faint clews and indirections," may not be identical to the experiences and feelings which animate a republic of comrades, they will nevertheless prove equal to the task assigned to them. That task is to bridge the gap between the poet and his readers, to suggest to those readers the justice of the poet's vision, and to inspire them with the means of bringing that vision to fruition. Words then prove to be a necessary if insufficient condition for the establishment of a republic of comrades. But in the silences which accompany or follow those words, Whitman is confident that he can reach out and touch the very life-stuff of his readers, that the architects will arrive "without fail."

"I listen to no entreaties": An Interlude on Whitman's Reader and American Romantic Ideology

Still, it is the "without fail" aspect of this project wherein lie its trickiest political entanglements. Thomas Haddox, in "Whitman's End of History" (2004), looks closely at Whitman's invitations and insistences later in his life and concludes that there is little, in the end, involving readerly choice in the Whitman worldview: "And yet even if we grant the sincerity of Whitman's radicalism and empathize with his doubts, the desire to transform conflict into mystic union that animates much of his work renders effective political engagement all but impossible" (3). On Haddox's reading, Whitman's "every atom" premise, to which he recommitted as a salvific principle in the wake of the Civil War's nearly-annihilating violence, necessarily implies that all tropes of uncertainty and exploration ring somewhat hollow. The teleological nature of the poems renders invulnerable their seeming vulnerability. How liberating is a poetry that must

finish in unity? How democratic is a poetry with sameness and expansiveness as its operating first principles?[62] And yet many readers have felt liberated by Whitman's poems, have been inspired by his grand and supple vision of a republic of comrades.

Ed Folsom dives straight to the heart of Whitman's dual nature, writing of the "unavoidable paradox" of reading Whitman politically: ". . . the poet who celebrates diversity, multiple identities, and democratic tolerance can sometimes seem awfully damned hegemonic. The democratic lover can be downright pushy" ("'Presidentiad!'" 106). In an article discussing the surprising afterlife of these two Whitmans in the U.S. presidencies of Bill Clinton and the second George Bush, Folsom further articulates this strange paradox. There is the "Clinton Whitman," passed among lovers and stashed like a well-loved book beneath the shirt-breast, the Whitman whom most of his sympathetic readers know and regard with esteem and affection, the Whitman "feeling our pain and teaching us to empathize instead of separate, to merge instead of differentiate, to love instead of hate, to understand instead of dominate" ("'Presidentiad!'" 104). Lurking in the subtext and occasionally making felt his intractable will, however, is the "Bush Whitman," enforcing the path of righteousness, lending a reluctant but unwavering hand in support of an Iraq War for democracy, a Whitman "strong enough to feel no one's pain, proud and hopeful enough to force himself on anyone who dares resist, capacious and capricious enough to make everyone at least a little bit nervous" ("'Presidentiad!'" 105).

Chief among the poems that Folsom points to for making us feel nervous is "A Woman Waits for Me," which was "Poem of Procreation" in 1856 and featured in "Enfans d'Adam"/"Children of Adam," Whitman's cluster on male-female relationships, from 1860

[62] Walter Grünzweig asks these questions very pointedly in "Noble Ethics and Loving Aggressiveness: The Imperialist Walt Whitman" (1990), where he argues that to look at Whitman's internationalist impulse is necessarily to discover a political policy of imperialist, forceful expansionism.

onwards. In the poem, Whitman celebrates women's sexuality, albeit in a distinctly heterosexual register: "A woman waits for me—she contains all, nothing is lacking, / Yet all were lacking, if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking" (*LG*56 240). This poem, with its explicitly sexual imagery, helped to get Whitman's 1881 *Leaves of Grass* banned in Boston (which banning, in turn, helped to propel its author to his late-life celebrity).[63] Its other nineteenth-century reverberation was to mark Whitman as an advocate of "Real Womahood," Frances Wright's celebratory movement of physically active, undomesticated women.[64] Whitman makes this allegiance clear in passages like this one celebrating an expanded scope for women's activities:

> They are not one jot less than I am,
> They are tanned in the face by shining suns and blowing winds,
> Their flesh has the old divine suppleness and strength,
> They know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run, strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves,
> They are ultimate in their own right—they are calm, clear, well-possessed of themselves. (*LG*56 241)

The poem is, by many considerations that would have registered among Whitman's nineteenth-century readers, among his most overtly politically radical.

However, for twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics attuned to the colonial and sexual politics of Whitman's aesthetics, the poem has rightly been very troubling. Its concluding stanzas

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[63] See P. C. Kemeny, "'Banned in Boston': Moral Reform Politics and the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice" (2009).

[64] See Vivian Pollak, "'In Loftiest Spheres': Whitman's Visionary Feminism" (105-6).

especially have read like the inflexible, deterministic, and overbearingly masculine Whitman at his worst:

> I draw you close to me, you women!
> I cannot let you go, I would do you good,
> I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake, but for others' sakes,
> Enveloped in you sleep greater heroes and bards,
> They refuse to awake at the touch of any man but me.
>
> It is I, you women—I make my way,
> I am stern, acrid, large, undissuadable—but I love you,
> I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you,
> I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for These States—I press with slow rude muscle,
> I brace myself effectually—I listen to no entreaties,
> I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me.
>
> Through you I drain the pent-up rivers of myself,
> In you I wrap a thousand onward years,
> On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and of America,
> The drops I distil upon you are drops of fierce and athletic girls, and of new artists, musicians, singers,
> The babes I beget upon you are to beget babes in their turn,
> I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-spendings,

> I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others, as I and you interpenetrate now,
> I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers of them, as I count on the fruits of the gushing showers I give now,
> I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life, death, immortality I plant so lovingly now. (*LG*56 241-3)

It is this "undissuadable" Whitman, who "insists" on the virtues of his own personal attractiveness and his own progressive American project and is willing to force himself on any potential objector, that makes Whitman's critics wary of his more radical claims to reader autonomy. As M. Jimmie Killingsworth notes, despite the liberatory intentions of Whitman's "Children of Adam" cluster, in poems like "A Woman Waits for Me," Whitman's woman "becomes something of a cog in the eugenic machine" (73).[65] Betsy Erkkila offers her own take on the "paradox of Whitman's poetic democracy," which is that, "at the very moment when he seeks to be most inclusive, universal, and democratic, his poetry becomes most powerful—and most powerfully dangerous—in silencing and denying the rights, liberties, and differences of others" ("American Empire" 57).

Given all of these skeptical statements, it is fair to conclude that critics have been reluctant to take seriously Whitman's most radical claims on behalf of his readers' autonomy. Kerry Larson has influentially described Whitman's relationship to his readers as a "drama of consensus," where the reader's autonomy is finally limited by his inevitable acceptance of the poet's "words" that "itch at your ears till you understand them" (*LG*55 53). With this reading, it is impossible to believe Whitman when he also says in "Song of Myself," in apparent self-

[65] See also Vivian Pollak, who argues that Whitman's women must always be procreative, must always be mothers ("'Spheres'" 103-4; 107-8).

contradiction, “You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself” or “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (*LG*55 14, 52). But in Whitman’s metaphysics, these statements are not at odds—at least, they do not clash with one another as immediately as it is sometimes supposed. Among the most famous of Whitman’s reflections on readership comes from later in his life, in the 1871 essay *Democratic Vistas*:

> Books are to be called for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-trained, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers. (76)

Can the essayist who writes this beautiful defense of readerly autonomy, this early articulation of modern reader-response theory, really be the same as the poet who writes the end of “A Woman Waits for Me”? Where is the space in that poem for a reader to undertake the “gymnast’s struggle”? To take these two texts together is to see that, while Whitman did indeed urge his readers to fantastic feats of development and growth, he could not always abide the notion that those developments and that growth could take place without him playing his poet’s part. “A Woman Waits for Me,” disturbing as it seems, shows the limitations of Whitman’s propensity for doubt and vulnerability, which cannot surpass his procreative exhortations from “A Poem of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth”:

Accouche! Accouchez!

Will you rot your own fruit in yourself there?

Will you squat and stifle there?

Readerly autonomy is absolute, but only within the bounds of procreation and progress established by Whitman's "every atom" principle, his "compost aesthetics."

Whitman releases "you" the reader to "your" own journey of growth and exploration, but only after the necessary submission to the intimate act of sex or reading. The last line of Whitman's poem—"I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life, death, immortality I plant so lovingly now"—actually is a gesture of silence, an acknowledgment that the precise future of his poem of the self is unknown and unknowable beyond its self-evident propensity for growth. Even in "A Woman Waits for Me," everything is possible except for the end of growth and reproduction, except for the "No." Not only *can* readers be active, furnishing themselves the poem, text, history, or argument, but they *must* be. Whitman's view of the cosmos guarantees this sort of perpetual motion and intermingling of elements. There *will* be architects to come: his doubts, such as they are, cannot overturn that conviction.

"O baffled, balked": Despair as a Mode of Consolation

Critics have not sufficiently appreciated the scope of the possible in Whitman's particular version of progressive American ideology. Tending to take their cues from hopeful poems like "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" or forceful poems like "A Woman Waits for Me," they have been surprised by a Whitman who often presents a much more vulnerable face. Whitman's 1855 and 1856 poems most often used "silence" to extend a caress toward his readers—to locate the gesture, the presence, beneath what was said. The next two sections take up another sort of

silence, which, at first blush, may seem to threaten the other: in "the silence of seeming despair," Whitman's speakers turn inward, worrying that they may not be capable of forging meaningful connections with readers. These silences take on a metapoetic implication of a new sort: they threaten the very existence of the poem itself.

Critics often use these hints of poetic despair to suggest that Whitman's political and spiritual optimism of 1855 and 1856 was no longer possible going forward, and that his poetry took an according turn.[66] Instead, I argue that Whitman's more radical silences in certain later poems should be read as an extension rather than a repudiation of his earlier aesthetic. In these poems, Whitman's speakers labor more clearly under the scope of their grand task. Nevertheless, they continue to place undaunted faith in a future consummation of "I" and "you," in a perfect union of poets, readers, citizens, "atoms." "The silence of seeming despair" seems to, but does not really, shake Whitman's faith in the ability of his words to act as compost for generations to come. This circumstance, which makes Whitman's project one of continuity rather than rupture, reveals the ways that Whitman could be vulnerable and open in his poems, even as it also shows the limitations of his uncertainty and doubt and the sense in which his faith in "America" was unflappable.

Among the most seemingly problematic sets of poems is the idiosyncratic 1860 cluster, "Debris." While each stanza in the cluster is separated by a narrow rule from the next, none has a separate title or number. In both respects this makes the cluster anomalous among 1860 clusters, rendering it somewhat unclear whether this is meant to be read as one long poem or as seventeen

[66] Mark Bauerlein, in *Whitman and the American Idiom* (1991), finds that the later Whitman could not match the overweening optimism of the early editions, wherein, "[p]residing over a sensuous, uninterpreted world and an undomesticated society, addressing a familiar gathering of confreres, the poet serves as 'the answerer,' the irrefutable 'sayer' who bears the Logos." That the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass* failed to immediately bring about this situation is Bauerlein's grounds for reading a more cynical and despondent Whitman in 1860.

single-stanza poems. Kenneth M. Price, in "'Debris,' Creative Scatter, and the Challenges of Editing Whitman," convincingly argues that Whitman intended this collection as a cluster, though he also points out that in-between organization tends to suggest a poet ill-at-ease with his own motives. No cluster or poem so-titled appears in any future edition of *Leaves*. In his "Blue Book," Whitman proposes extensive alterations to each individual poem and changes the cluster-title to "Leaves-Droppings," another iteration of his "compost" concept, before, finally, marking the entire cluster for removal.

What he would ultimately do is lift individual poems or parts of poems for inclusion in other later poems and cluster arrangements, thus preserving but altering the majority of the 1860 content. In some of these cases, the changes Whitman made indicate the ways he continued to clarify his intentions. For example, the sixth poem or poem-fragment of "Debris" read in 1860:

> I understand your anguish, but I cannot help you,
> I approach, hear, behold—the sad mouth, the look out of the eyes, your mute inquiry,
> *Whither I go from the bed I now recline on, come tell me;*
> Old age, alarmed, uncertain—A young woman's voice appealing to me, for comfort,
> A young man's voice, *Shall I not escape?* (*LG*60 422)

The poem chronicles a speaker, presumably figured as poet, bewildered by his perceived inability to comfort a series of dying supplicators. Given how crucial is Whitman's faith in life after death to his poetic project—via compost, or via the compost of poetry—this short poem, which offers no hint of such a faith, poses a significant threat to his goals as they are usually articulated.

The way to redeem "I understand your anguish" in 1860 is to read it alongside the rest of "Debris," where the poems, though elegiac in sum, vary rhythmically in tone, ranging from the

bleakness of this poem, to the optimism of the couplet following it ("A thousand perfect men and women appear, / Around each gathers a cluster of friends, and gay children and youth with offerings"), to the metapoetic determination of the penultimate poem (". . . I have charged myself, heeded or unheeded, to compose a free march for These States") (*LG*60 422-4). When Whitman decided to move on from the "Debris" half-cluster, he needed to find new contexts for most of the poems that would not undermine his project of democratic unity. "I understand your anguish" reappears in 1871 as the third of three stanzas in "Yet, Yet, Ye Downcast Hours," a poem in the "Whispers of Heavenly Death" cluster. As its title indicates, the poem is now more explicitly framed as to reflect a moment of despair rather than any sort of final anguish. "I know ye also," says the speaker. Just as successfully as its "Debris" ancestor, the poem chronicles an ebb; but as "Yet, Yet, Ye Downcast Hours," it also, without requiring a reference to the poems around it, preserves a faith in the flow.

Whitman is concerned indeed with ebb and flow, as evinced by his most convincing poem of despair, "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," initially "Leaves of Grass" 1 in 1860. It is tempting to read this poem as a flat repudiation of the metonymy informing Whitman's earlier work.[67] Its final image, a dejected speaker and his shredded poem who "lie in drifts at your feet," reprises the conclusion to "Song of Myself," where a more optimistic speaker had knowingly exhorted, "If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles" (*LG*60 199; *LG*55 56).

But what does it mean to ebb with the ocean of life? The poem's key metaphor entails something other than a flat rejection of the poet's project. An ebb-tide follows a flow-tide, and it

[67] In addition to the works cited in the introduction, above, see for examples specific to "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" Stephen Whicher, "Whitman's Awakening To Death: Toward a Biographical Reading of 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'" (1961) and Ernest Smith, "'Restless Explorations': Whitman's Evolving Spiritual Vision in *Leaves of Grass*" (2007). Each of these critics, in his way, argues that this poem overturns Whitman's earlier faith in the ability of the poet to make meaningful contact with the reader.

will be followed in turn by another. The first, 1860 iteration of one of the poem's more famously despairing passages provides evidence that Whitman's despondency is not intended as a final repudiation:

> O baffled, balked,
> Bent to the very earth, *here preceding what follows,*
> Oppressed with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
> Aware now, that, amid all the blab whose echoes recoil upon me, I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
> But that before all my insolent poems the real ME still stands untouched, untold, altogether unreached. (*LG*60 197, emphasis mine)

This is a powerfully rendered portrait of the poet struck dumb by the cognizance of his own impotence. But the interjection of "here preceding what follows" suggests that the ebb-moment "precedes" and conditions the poem's bleak mood. This interpretation indicates a poem far less nihilistic than it is often presumed to be, aiming to register a particular mood rather than to negate the poetic project as such.

While this awkwardly-placed interjection was eventually edited out of the poem, it does have a cousin—one equally overlooked in most readings of the poem despite its persistence through every version of *Leaves*. Gearing up for the final section's allegedly definitive refutation of types and emblems, the speaker nevertheless ventures an exhortative apostrophe, followed by a deceptively nonchalant parenthetical: "Ebb, ocean of life, (the flow will return,)" (*LG*60 198). This casually asserted faith in the return of the flow renders dubious any endeavor to read the poem as a rejection of Whitman's previous aesthetic project. The speaker's aim is to establish that it is only a *moment* of doubt from which he suffers in the poem.

What is it, exactly, that the poet doubts in this ebb moment? This is an important question, since it likely bears on how persuasive Whitman's speakers are in the flow moments. If nothing but a change of moods sends them back to "celebrating" and "answering," we may be just as likely to favor the versions of them who are "baffled" and "oppressed." But Whitman's doubt bears not on the metaphysics or metapoetics of his project in *general*, but on his ability to perform his grand bardic role at one moment in *particular*. As the first section of this chapter demonstrates, Whitman's project is extremely ambitious. It seeks to harness and shape language itself into a better approximation of the inner life of human beings who share a common pool of atoms. But it is one thing, in a manifesto like the 1855 preface, to imagine a universal poetic persona—one consonant with the shared humanity of every reader, sufficient to command that reader's attention and elicit a response, and faithful to a vision of eternal moral progress. It is another thing to bring such a persona to life on the page. Whitman indicates this difficulty with references to "the ocean so mysterious," "the measureless float," the "fathomless workings," and the implacable Father Paumanok and Mother Ocean. Confronted with all this expansive and inscrutable blue and tasked with turning it to account, to "gathering" from its shores and "seeking types" for translation to a reader, a poet could well fear an overwhelming task.

The ebbs in the ocean of life, then, represent the poet's occasional confrontations with his own limitations. Crucial to remember, however, is that those lyric ebbs retain, mingled with their self-doubt, an unimpeachable faith that the world is progressing toward perfection and that his poems have *some* part to play in that inexorable march. The "fathomless workings" are the problem of the poem, but they are also its saving grace. To make this point, it is not necessary that Whitman put himself into complete control of his poem or its world. Instead, he need only

show that the necessity of submission can be read as a virtue. This he begins to do as the poem crescendos toward its resolution:

> You friable shore, with trails of debris!
>
> You fish-shaped island! I take what is underfoot;
>
> What is yours is mine, my father. (*LG*60 197)

At the midpoint of the poem, Whitman's speaker is prepared to give up his search for "types" altogether. Here, however, he begins to reclaim figuration via the masses of washed-up debris on the shore. Instead of resisting and antagonizing, as he did earlier in the poem, he starts to exhort the terrible elements to carry on with their work: "Ebb, ocean of life"—"Kiss me, my father"—"Cease not your moaning, you fierce old mother" (*LG*60 198).

Several critics have made note of Whitman's reclamation effort following the near-total despair of the middle of the poem. Paul Zweig suggests that, in his final embrace of the broken-up shore, Whitman "reaches out in a brotherhood of failure" (309). Similarly, Paul R. Cappucci argues that Whitman's poem remains democratic and American insofar as it represents the despondency and disillusionment overtaking the nation on the eve of civil war (40). And R. W. French calls this poem Whitman's turn away from arrogance and toward humility: "No longer pretending to self-sufficiency, he seeks union and reconciliation" (70). All of these readings show Whitman beginning to reclaim unity at the end of this poem, and thus far they mitigate the bleakest readings which the poem has produced. And yet, they also assume that the version of "union" or "brotherhood" that prevails in this poem is somehow a departure from what came in the earlier editions of *Leaves*.

However, it is easy to understate the significance of the unity that Whitman reclaims at the end of this poem: for it rests on precisely the same aesthetic and metaphysical basis as that

which furnishes the logic of his "compost aesthetics," that is to say, the logic of his more optimistic poems. It exists in the same world as "Song of Myself," where "the smallest sprout shows there really is no death," or "This Compost," where the earth "gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last" (*LG*55 17; *LG*56 205). In reviving the trope of compost via the "measureless float," the "loose winrows," or the "trails of debris" on the sea-washed shore, Whitman makes sure that this is once again a poem in which his "leaves of grass" are cast out into the world to be absorbed into the life of his kindred readers.

Kenneth M. Price, trying to get a handle on the "debris" trope in Whitman's work, offers it as the marker of "scatter, disintegration, and chance" (in opposition to Whitman's characterization from the 1855 preface of "form and union and plan") ("Debris" 59).[68] Price's bifurcation usefully characterizes those aspects of Whitman's poetry marked by despondency and a sense of cosmic insignificance. But the present project aims to reunite "scatter" and "plan," to show how submission and order can be two commensurate parts of the same poetic project, and so to get a better sense of Whitman's aesthetic and ideological commitments. A sort of poetic community reemerges around all these drifting scraps forever going out to sea and coming back again, and the implications reach further than commiseration. Whitman's speaker remains a crucial, poem-making part of this project: "(See! from my dead lips the ooze exuding at last! / See—the prismatic colors, glistening and rolling!)" (*LG*60 199). His gruesome death functions dually as his typical metonymic gesture, the "ooze exuding" from his lips figuring the poem of himself mingled organically once more with the whole earth. As he dies, he also utters. His death is a birth, an *accouchement*, giving forth even as he lies down.

[68] Price is specifically discussing the "Debris" cluster from the 1860 edition, but his characterizations are meant to extend broadly to Whitman's disintegrating guises, and they apply neatly to the aims of "As I Ebb'd."

Both death and birth are compassed in the final couplet of "As I Ebb'd," which recall Whitman's many addresses to "you" the reader:

> We, capricious, brought hither, we know not whence, spread out before You, up there,
>
> walking or sitting,
>
> Whoever you are—we too lie in drifts at your feet. (*LG*60 199)

Bearing in mind the full weight of nineteenth-century theories of history and language, along with Whitman's take on those theories via his "compost aesthetics," these lines should be read as neither blind assertion of prophetic authority nor confounded abdication of poetic vision. Instead, such moments in Whitman's oeuvre are crucial to a project that seeks to combine moments of debris and scatter with moments of compost and union, according to the peculiar mixture of knowledge, ignorance, and expressive competence prompted by his metaphysics. In that light, the real offense to Whitman's metaphysics would be to leave the ebb-poems unwritten: that would be to declare the poet's wisdom partial and the reader's agency complete, in theory, but to enact a universally authoritative persona in practice.

In Whitman's metaphysics, it is possible to be uncertain in spite of one's self-evident unity with readers or the "republic of comrades." "Every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you": this means that Whitman's words—his utterances, his leaves, his little shreds—are organically bound up in the life-stuff of his readers, past and present. He is as much a part of these readers, then, as they are of him. Still, they remain separate from him, each with a "Me myself" to be grappled with and defined. This is a paradox that Whitman himself acknowledged at the heart of his work in the 1855 preface:

> The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own. But it has sympathy as measureless as its pride and the one balances the other

> and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other. The inmost secrets of art sleep with the twain. (LG55 vi)

The truth is that Whitman pushed for an aesthetics that was as individually liberating as possible *without* giving up the necessity of "sympathy," which we can read not only as good-natured fellow-feeling but as the presumption that it is possible to *feel with*, to feel in common with any other person in the atomically-bound universe. Vincent Bertolini, in "'Hinting' and 'Reminding': The Rhetoric of Performative Embodiment in *Leaves of Grass*" (2002), offers a reading of Whitman's politics of readership that is nuanced compared to the skeptical treatment he often meets with elsewhere. For Bertolini, Whitman refuses "the fantasy of prophetic totalization" in favor of the knowledge that there will need to be readers to supplant him. Therefore, he (formally) refuses to know exactly what sorts of events his poems will set in motion outside of the text (1054). On this reading, Whitman is not just an imperialist or just a liberator:

> The politics of *Leaves of Grass*, which cannot be adequately described according to typical consensualist or contestatory models, situates the reader's active embodied subjectivity as the locus of transformations intended ultimately to reverberate throughout American society, as new waves of Whitmanian subjective agents create the conditions for an expansion of democratic collectivism that would realize the utopian promises of "America" in the practical material life of the nation. (1057)

For Bertolini, Whitman's politics is neither altogether coercive nor altogether liberating, and he acts instead as a catalytic agent in the American democratic republic that he hopes (or rather, expects) will come to fruition in the fullness of time.

Many of Whitman's greatest lyrics, then, go halfway toward "silence": they admit limitations to their visions, but they do not surrender the implications of organic continuity. Such

continuity is bound by linguistic community and consummated in the exchanges between poets and readers. One reason that it is difficult for Whitman's readers to perceive the sense of community implied in "As I Ebb'd" is that they are reading the poem through the lens of biography. Whitman biography prepares us to expect a floundering, crisis-driven poet. Such a poet is compelling to us as modern psychobiographical readers because it gives a picture of a particular soul in a particular moment of despair. But in the larger context of *Leaves of Grass*—and speaking from a strict formalist standpoint—we *are not at liberty* to be interested in Whitman's psychobiography beyond its resonance with historically viable modes of expression. More precisely, the intrusion of inconsistent psychobiographical detail becomes formally problematic for the oft-avowed community-building and nation-building project of Whitman's democratic poetics.

Biography is not the same as history, and it is more fruitful to read Whitman's despair as taking part in a national conversation about political unity and political freedom than it is to pin that despair to a particular personal crisis or pervading doubt from his personal life. As Whitman's readers, we owe him at least this much: that we take seriously his claims about his project, searching for ways to redeem the "silences" that might otherwise appear to frustrate his intentions. This methodology is not arbitrary, but formally stringent: it is a good-faith effort to discover in any given Whitman poem the *sort* of poem that Whitman so often declares himself to be writing, and that his engagement with contemporary understandings of language, nation, and culture suggest he ought to be writing. Taking up that mantle, it is not difficult to discover that, as was the case with "Song of the Rolling Earth," the "silences" that structure "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" serve rhetorically to defer the fullness of meaning to the future moment of consummation.

This is not to suggest that Whitman rejected lyricism in favor of didacticism. To do so would be to forget that Whitman really did subordinate himself to his readers in certain key respects. Instead, it is useful to consider the possibility that Whitman was *redefining* rather than *rejecting* the purpose of lyric: he was evolving a *democratic* version of lyric which intimately involves its readers. Lyrics evoke the timeless as the true—and where this cannot be done, they come up silent. But while Whitman certainly had his visions of eternity, he was ill content to settle for the transcendent, atemporal moment. For Whitman, poems *work* in the world, which means they cannot stand outside of history in silent contemplation of personal angst or ecstasy. Whitman's lyrics, then, turn experiences to account under the presumption that they can be made sufficiently intelligible to readers to contribute to the collective amelioration of actions and affections. "Silence" still has its role to play, since lyric and experience are not one and the same, but it is not the sort of silence which, for example, despairs and goes dumb in the face of impossible tasks. Such despair may well indicate the existence of a worthy poetic subject, but that subject needs to be reworked for the collective if it is to remain consistent with Whitman's stated formal intention of writing "the evangel-poem of comrades and of love" (*LG*60 11).

"I can be your singer of songs no longer": Despair as a Problem of Biography

The goal of the previous section was to show that Whitman's personae, even where they seem despondent, are still writing the poetry of America that he defines in the early editions. Such readings require a particular methodology: one which searches through Whitman's meta-linguistic indications of "silence" for hints that they continue to function as invitations to his readers rather than what they might otherwise appear to be, that is, markers of withdrawal and

despair. This reading assumes, in other words, that Whitman was able to see the forest through the trees at any given point in his career.

If there is one set of poems which, above all, puts this formal commitment to the test, it is the cluster of poems about male-male affection that Whitman came to call "Calamus." While critics might speculate in vain about a biographical impulse for poems like "Song of the Rolling Earth" or "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," "Calamus" appears to leave a much clearer paper trail. In 1953, Fredson Bowers, working with a collection of manuscripts that Whitman was using to compose the first "Calamus" cluster in 1860, reconstructed an earlier twelve-poem sequence initially titled "Live Oak, with Moss." His discovery went largely unappreciated until Alan Helms revived "Live Oak, with Moss" by printing a version of it in 1992. In his commentary, Helms points out that the twelve-poem sequence can be read narratively—autobiographically?—in a way that the printed versions of "Calamus" cannot. It appears to chronicle a tale of love, rejection, suffering, and (perhaps) final consolation. The door was opened to readings of "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus" that made the poems a specific response to a (failed) homosexual or homosocial relationship in Whitman's actual life, and a firestorm of critical controversy has engulfed them ever since.

Because of their extremely personal, culturally taboo origin, critics have often taken certain of Whitman's poems on male-male affection as something categorically different from his other poetry. M. Jimmie Killingsworth, in a prominent example, chronicles two separate voices in Whitman's love poetry: the public, oratorical, "seminal" voice, and the private, secretive, "invaginating" voice (45-8).[69] And even in a reading which purports to find Whitman,

[69] See also Joseph Cady's early pioneering work on Whitman's homosexuality, "Not Happy in the Capitol: Homosexuality and the 'Calamus' Poems" (1978), where he suggests that to discover Whitman the persecuted homosexual of "Calamus" is necessarily to step away from Whitman the Emersonian national bard.

in 1860, working to "combine a personal, private source of inspiration with a more structured, public expression," James Perrin Warren continues to use C. Carroll Hollis's distinction between "lyric" and "programmatic" poems. He does little to reconcile the two, other than to describe the lyrics as necessary, cathartic responses to the relentless optimism of the programmatic poems ("Cluster" 52). In other words, even readers who are sympathetic to the idea that Whitman developed a consistent program in his 1860 edition have been reluctant to describe a significant minority of his poems—those lyrics which chronicle intense private experiences—as taking part in that program in any clear way.

The criticism on "Live Oak" and "Calamus" is remarkable not only for its bifurcation of Whitman's poems, however, but also for the equivocal and diverging manner that it accomplishes the split. In some cases, Whitman is alleged to give up his national poetry because, as his book sales flounder—or the union begins to fracture, or his lovers desert him—he despairs that it can serve the unifying role that he envisioned for it. In other cases, however, it is from sheer glee, the desire to revel in a union with his male lover(s), that he leaves off writing the poetry of universality and democracy. These divergent motives are said to serve roughly the same purpose: abdication, or the refusal to continue to write (a certain sort of) poem. Such an abdication would entail a truly despairing silence, that is, the one sort of "silence" that would thwart rather than advance Whitman's project. But the manifold poetic moods and biographical impulses that are supposed to inspire this silence of despair should give pause. Could it not rather be the case that these moods can be reconciled by a proper framework for reading Whitman's "silence"?

A small number of critics have already begun the work of constructing readings of "Live Oak" and "Calamus" that would make it consistent with Whitman's compost aesthetics. In *Re-*

Scripting Walt Whitman (2005), Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price argue that "A comparison of the 'Live Oak' sequence with the various published 'Calamus' sequences . . . reveals how he turned a sequence of poems mainly about a personal affair into a longer sequence that maintains his concern with male-male affection, while also widening that concern to the national crisis of Union that the U.S. faced at this time" (66). Likewise Betsy Erkkila, in "Whitman and the Homosexual Republic" (1994), proposes that the accomplishment of "Calamus" is to place homosexual and homosocial love into the same nation-building and reproductive conversation as heterosexual love.[70] In this light, the decision Whitman had to make was not whether to write or conceal his romantic affection for men (or for a particular man), but how to remain true to his own experience without compromising his ability to stand in as the universal lover.

Reading the development of "Calamus" as a translation of private concerns to public good provides a satisfying explanation of the many aspects of the "Live Oak" sequence which are not explicitly focused on the speaker's particular lover. It is also to get a better handle on the substantive and much-debated revisions he made from the 1858-9 "Live Oak, with Moss" manuscripts, to the first 45-poem "Calamus" sequence in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, and on to the cluster's final, 39-poem form in the 1881 edition. These changes can be read as elaborations and clarifications of Whitman's initial aims rather than as the renunciations and "greywashings" they might otherwise seem to be. To read them so is to discover that, far from competing with one another and splitting Whitman from the inside out, the love poems are consistently aimed at consolation and unity. This holds as true for "Live Oak, with Moss" as it does for "Calamus": the

[70] However, Erkkila's claim here must be qualified by her earlier assertion, in *Whitman the Political Poet* (1989), that the pre-Civil War Whitman was withdrawing from the republic: "At a time when the South was threatening to secede from the Union and when the country's political administration seemed determined to save the Union by making slavery rather than freedom the law of the land, Whitman enacts a kind of private secession by severing himself from the political sphere"; Whitman had "seceded from the democratic en masse" (154).

difference arises, apparently, from Whitman's desire to ensure that his personal narrative did not obscure his public aims.

Even "Live Oak, with Moss," which critics have taken to show Whitman at his most raw and doleful, does not finally sustain an interpretation of the bard's abdication. It may be that critics read backwards in time in order to achieve such an interpretation, for while all of the "Live Oak, with Moss" poems survive in some form in the 1860 "Calamus," two of the most provocative are subsequently dropped, not only from "Calamus" but from *Leaves of Grass* entirely. These are "Live Oak" V and VIII (beginning "Long I thought" and "Hours continuing long"). These are the hallmark poems for reading Whitman as given over either to ecstasy or despair in "Live Oak, with Moss," and neither survives to the final 1881 "Calamus." To read from the biography to the poetry in this manner, however, is to risk overlooking the roles of the poems in their actual context in the "Live Oak" cluster.

In "Long I Thought," Whitman's speaker takes stock of his earlier goals as a poet, including his desire to "strike up the songs of the New World." But now, in the presence of his lover, he finds those goals unsatisfactory. "But now take notice," he tells the nation,

> For I can be your singer of songs no longer— ~~I have passed ahead~~ I have ceased to enjoy them.
>
> I have found him who loves me, as I him in perfect love,
>
> […]
>
> I am indifferent to my own songs—I am to go with him I love, and he is to go with me,
>
> It is to be enough for each of us that we are together—We never separate again. –[71]

[71] Quotations of the "Live Oak, with Moss" manuscripts are from the *Walt Whitman Archive* transcriptions.

This poem, which explicitly pits the roles of poet and lover against one another, and comes out clearly in favor of the latter, is potentially devastating to the project Whitman articulates elsewhere in his canon, where "a bard is to be commensurate with a people." Considered on its own, the poem offers nothing to furnish a counter-reading. But "Live Oak, with Moss" is different from other Whitman clusters in that it begs to be read as a narrative. And within the narrative, the poem chronicles Whitman's speaker at his most ecstatic in love. Its sentiment is directly controverted earlier in the sequence, at a more sober moment, by the poem which gave the cluster its first title. In "Live Oak" II, later "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," a lover, far from hindering the bard's verse, is his necessary muse: "For all that, and though the ~~tree~~[live oak] glistens there in Louisiana, solitary in a wide flat space, uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend, a lover, near – I know very well I could not." The live oak tree tells Whitman's speaker what he would *not* like to be, namely, a poet without a lover. Therefore it makes little sense for him to later swear off poetry for the opposite reason: that he *has* found such a lover. And indeed, in several of the sequence's concluding poems, after the initial love affair has failed and the speaker has returned to a more reflective state of mind, it is once again clear that the search for love and the search for the muse are of a piece.

"Hours Continuing Long" threatens to silence the poet and his poems in the opposite manner: does the speaker's capacity to write the poetry of democracy diminish when his particular lover abandons him? "Hours continuing long, sore and heavy-hearted, / . . . Hours discouraged, distracted, —For he, the one I cannot content myself without—soon I saw him content myself without me." Is it possible that this rejection, this unrequited love, could threaten the bard's project as such? Considering that of the twelve "Live Oak" poems, this one, the eighth, is the only to dwell at length on the lover's infidelity, such an outcome seems unlikely.

And even here, only the first half of the poem wallows in misery before the speaker turns his thoughts outward again.

Unexpectedly, in the middle of the seventh of twelve lines, the speaker begins to forge a union with a hypothetical fellow sufferer-in-love: “Hours of my torment—I wonder if other men ever have the like out of the like feelings? / Is there even one other like me—distracted—his friend, his lover, lost to him?” Tacitly, he answers his own question in the affirmative, doubling himself upon this new friend: “Does he see himself reflected in me? In these hours does he see the face of his hours reflected?” Love-sickness, initially the poem’s problem, becomes by the end another “atom” of a universal experience, as Whitman permits himself to suppose, even at his most melancholic, that another will assume what he assumes. Nils Clausson helpfully extends the sense of community ultimately achieved in “Hours Continuing Long” by pointing out the poem’s affinity with Shakespeare’s 29th sonnet (“When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes”). “Haply I think on thee,” says Shakespeare to console himself in his despair, and Whitman does the same here. The ensuing poem, which later becomes “I Dream’d in a Dream,” builds upon this idea of a community of lovers, imagining a city bound and energized by the practice of “manly love”: “O I saw them tenderly love each other—I often saw them, in numbers, walking hand in hand.” And in the final three poems, the speaker has turned lover again himself, even, in the concluding poem, offering to teach his powerful message to any “élève” with the capacity to find and be found by lovers. All this is to say that if there is a moment of despairing silence in this sequence, it is more than compensated by Whitman’s efforts to redeem and disperse the idea of love in the wake of his own failed relationship.

The circumstance of these two poems having been dropped from later versions of *Leaves* has led some readers to assume that there was something more incriminating in them than is

actually found upon closer inspection. Still, if the poems could be redeemed, why remove them at all? Betsy Erkkila suggests that Whitman revised after 1860 not to conceal his homoerotic affections but to suppress their more "negative dimensions" ("Homosexual" 166). This may be so; but then, what of a poem like "Calamus" 2 ("Scented Herbage of My Breast"), which survives all of Whitman's revisions? This is a poem as revealing of the speaker's pains as any other, where he chastises his calamus-leaves: "O I do not know what you mean, there underneath yourselves—you are not happiness, / You are often more bitter than I can bear—you burn and sting me" (*LG*60 342). What of "Calamus" 44 ("Here the Frailest Leaves of Me"), where Whitman admits that his love-poems, even in their silences, have incriminated him?

> Here the frailest leaves of me, and yet my strongest-lasting,
>
> Here I shade down and hide my thoughts—I do not expose them,
>
> And yet they expose me more than all my other poems. (*LG*60 377)

The presence or absence of shame and grief do not seem to be strong enough inducements to move Whitman's excising hand. But if none of the most incriminating sentiments disappear from "Live Oak, with Moss," then we must seek elsewhere for an explanation of Whitman's decisions to expand, revise, and excise.

The one great difference between "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus" is the presence, in the former, of a narrative. This may help to explain why "Long I thought" and "Hours continuing long" eventually failed to serve Whitman's purposes: bereft of the context of a clear personal narrative, the poems obfuscate their own potential to redeem the exclusionary sentiment or the despair they respectively threaten. Nils Clausson, who offers the most redemptive extant reading of "Hours Continuing Long," nevertheless wonders whether Whitman might not have ultimately dropped the poem for the fact that it dwells on the "impotence" of its speaker's grief

and does not, in that sense, sufficiently redeem itself toward Whitman's political project (140). The stakes are too high to trifle with misunderstanding: Whitman, as the essentially democratic bard, cannot allow his *particular* love for a *particular* man to become *exclusive* of others. Whether it were from ecstasy or grief, he cannot allow himself to practice discriminatory love. His investment in particular individuals may be intense, exciting, terrible, shameful, jubilant—all of these possibilities and more are within the scope of his democratic lyric expression. But at the point where his love of one man can no longer stand in synecdochally for his love of the nation—where he refuses his utterance to some number of his potential readers—he has abdicated his bardic throne and entered into a realm of "silence" from which, in the context of Whitman's oeuvre, there is no return.

The eventual loss of "Long I thought" and "Hours continuing long," two of the "Live Oak" sequence's most revealing poems, is more than compensated by the addition of other poems focused on passion or shame that do not rely so heavily on narrative context for their redemptive readings. Instead, Whitman moves back to the now-familiar juxtaposition of speech and silence in order to structure the positivist nation-building dynamic of the "Calamus" poems. That is to say that while "programmatic" aims move to the fore of "Calamus," Whitman does not give way to a blithe or stripped-down version of his compost aesthetics, instead continuing to focus just as much energy upon the difficulties and mysteries of his project as upon its eventual achievement.

Only the theory of silence that this chapter elaborates can adequately explain the juxtaposition of two poems as divergent in tone and apparently contradictory in sentiment as "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" and "These I Singing in Spring," which stand as the third and fourth poems of "Calamus" between 1860 and 1871 and are separated only by the

new “For You O Democracy” in 1881. “Whoever You Are” is a problem poem for the poet of democracy in that it ends with a speaker’s refusal of himself, a command that he be let alone by “you” the reader. “For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times and not hit—that which I hinted at, / Therefore release me, and depart on your way” (*LG*60 346). Is this a preferential poet, hierarchizing his readership into the chosen and the reprobate, and refusing his utterance to the latter? Without a thorough grounding in Whitman’s metaphysics, it may indeed seem so.

But everything from his philology to his politics allows Whitman to believe that he can speak for all in *due* time even if he is misunderstood in his *own* time (or even, to push the point to its most extreme “ebb,” if he from time to time misunderstands *himself*). He can affect impatience with his reader in this poem only because he knows the breach between them will not overcome their incontrovertible atomic unity. The rejected reader will return in the fullness of time with a mind better prepared to commune with the poet’s. After all, it takes an energetic and sympathetic reader or “architect” to receive the poet’s utterances and to bear fruit (*accoucher*) from their influence. That is why, earlier in the poem, Whitman could indulge in another “words of the earth” moment: “For it is not for what I have put into it that I have written this book, / Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it” (*LG*60 346). Neither this silence nor the speaker’s claim elsewhere that “merely touching you is enough, is best,” stands in contradiction to the poem’s final refusal. Some readers will understand the poet, and some will not: these are the same readers. What is more, sometimes the poet will understand himself, and sometimes he will not: this is the same poet.

Ebb and flow continually succeed one another, with the only rule being “the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness” (*LG*55 viii). This is likewise why, despite the ostensible

refusal of "Whoever You Are," the next poem, "These I Singing in Spring," is not inconsistent to have a troop of admirers silently gathering around the poet. The speaker appears to anticipate solitude as he begins his poetic labors, collecting and dropping leaves in the forest, perhaps unaware that others now share with him that "one thing" of the previous poem. But to his pleasant surprise, he is soon joined:

> Far, far in the forest, before I think where I get,
> Solitary, smelling the earthy smell, stopping now and then in silence,
> Alone I had thought—yet soon a silent troop gathers around me,
> Some walk by my side, and some behind, and some embrace my arms or neck,
> They, the spirits of friends, dead or alive—thicker they come, a great crowd, and I in the middle (*LG*60 347)

The speaker proceeds to distribute various "leaves" to these new friends, including the calamus-root that signifies manly affection. It is fitting that the speaker's comrades gather around him in "silence," for it allows the poem to illustrate the aesthetics of the utterance or the *accouchement*, silently passing leaves of grass from one to another. It is also noteworthy that the troop includes lovers "dead or alive," indicating again the way that Whitman's democratic republic exists on a longer, deeper-time scale than that which compasses a particular mortal life. On this scale, the silence of refusal is always temporary, and the silence of mutual understanding eventually prevails.

This prevailing sense of mutuality transcends all the particulars of love and loss or of joy and despair that might characterize the career of a particular lover. In the 1860 "Calamus" 39, later "Sometimes with One I Love," Whitman gives as clear an instance as could be desired of his wish to make "Calamus" essentially, not just incidentally, about his love for an entire nation.

Though the subject of the poem is "rage, for fear I effuse unreturned love," it resists a nihilistic interpretation of romantic loss. Instead, the speaker manages to convince himself that "there is no unreturned love—the pay is certain, one way or another." He concludes: "Doubtless I could not have perceived the universe, or written one of my poems, if I had not freely given myself to comrades, to love" (*LG*60 375). This is a fairly clear affirmation of the way Whitman hierarchizes universal over particular love.

But in the final, 1881 version of the poem, the motivation driving the "Calamus" cluster becomes clearer yet, on account of a slight but telling revision to its conclusion. In 1881, the final line is dropped, and in its place is an autobiographical parenthetical: "(I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return'd, / Yet out of that I have written these songs)" (*LG*81 110). Here, the critic might reasonably speculate, Whitman's actual unrequiting lover of 1858-59, the presumed autobiographical inspiration for "Live Oak," makes an unexpected return. Whitman's message could hardly be clearer: personal failure is redeemed by the democratic poetic vision. He refuses the many temptations to write a silence of true despair into his poems, always crafting, instead, a mixture of speech and silence through which his readers can, and perhaps must, continue to benefit from his utterance in all its variety.

"Never even for one brief hour": Ambiguity as Purpose

In the final two years of his life, Whitman used the plates from his 1881-82 Boston edition of *Leaves of Grass* to print one final "death-bed" edition of his book, to which he "annexed" two collections of short, meditative poems: "Sands at Seventy" and "Good-Bye my Fancy." Among the latter set is a brief poem, called "L. of G.'s Purport," in which the aging poet reflects on his life's work:

Not to exclude or demarcate, or pick out evils from their formidable masses (even to expose them,)
But add, fuse, complete, extend—and celebrate the immortal and the good.

Haughty this song, its words and scope,
To span vast realms of space and time,
Evolution—the cumulative—growths and generations.

Begun in ripen'd youth and steadily pursued,
Wandering, peering, dallying with all—war, peace, day and night absorbing,
Never even for one brief hour abandoning my task,
I end it here in sickness, poverty, and old age.

I sing of life, yet mind me well of death:
To-day shadowy Death dogs my steps, my seated shape, and has for years—
Draws sometimes close to me, as face to face. (*LG*91 420)

I don't know that many critics have taken a close look at this late poem. Many, certainly, would dismiss as false or at least hyperbolic Whitman's implication that he had pursued, unwaveringly, the same "song" throughout his long poetic career, "Never even for one brief hour abandoning" his poems of America. Conventional opinion now holds that he wavered significantly from that song during the years leading up to the Civil War and that he changed his tune entirely in the years after.

Yet this short poem from "Good-Bye My Fancy," apparently one of the last that Whitman ever wrote, is remarkable for its rearticulation of the goals that Whitman had been repeating since 1855. Though short, it touches on virtually every element of the "compost aesthetics" that can be reconstructed from the first two editions of *Leaves*: it is ambitious in spatial and temporal scope; it tracks the evolution of a people; it is democratic and refuses to "exclude or demarcate"; and it finishes in the silence of death. The poem, in other words, celebrates a project that remarkably few of Whitman's many admirers are willing to admit exists: one which, through the vicissitudes of flow and ebb, love and loss, form and scatter, union and insurrection, and speech and silence which compass an individual American's life, works without fail to gather and gather and gather into an ever-larger community of readers and lovers.

To read Whitman's entire oeuvre as part of one large and contiguous outpouring of a democratic, American poetic project is necessarily to re-conceive the bounds of such a project. Whitman's silences encompass the least self-critical aspects of American manifest destiny, where the self-evident greatness of democracy implies a natural sort of dominion over all nations and individuals, past or present; but they also encompass moments of severe doubt, self-abnegation, and despair, so that to be one with the universe is, at times, a humbling and profoundly discomfiting experience. These seemingly contradictory modes are reconciled in Whitman's "every atom" principle, where unity and universalism is at once an exhilarating and an overwhelming prospect.

What Whitman's project implies most of all is that readers are bound to engage him, even as they are likewise bound to leave him behind, to "destroy the teacher." In "Good-Bye My Fancy," Whitman follows up "L. of G.'s Purport" with one more short poem on "The Unexpress'd":

After the countless songs, or long or short, all tongues, all lands,
Still something not yet told in poesy's voice or print—something lacking,
(Who knows? the best yet unexpress'd and lacking.)

This poem suggests that even as Whitman approached his death-bed, with his *Leaves* now swelling to the tome-like biblical and epic proportions that he had once only imagined for them, and with his national and international celebrity growing steadily grander, the poet knew that his work must find its completion beyond and not within the pages of his book. With one last gesture of silence, Whitman invites—or perhaps he even compels—the reader of his democratic verse to set to work supplying the "something lacking," the something forever lacking, in poetry's interminable and interminably inadequate engagement with the curves, angles, and dots of printed language.

CONCLUSION: "DESCRIPTION'S ABLEST POWERS GROW LAME"…OR DO THEY? ELIZA R. SNOW'S ABANDONED RHETORIC OF SILENCE

In a parallel literary universe, to include the poetry of Eliza Roxcy Snow in a project like this one would require no special justification. Snow's life, spanning from 1804 to 1887, makes her a near-contemporary of Dickinson and Whitman. Though Snow's life was longer, all three of them spanned the better part of the nineteenth century, and the deaths of Dickinson and Whitman, in 1886 and 1892, bracket Snow's in 1887. Her early poetic style reflects an apprenticeship in both neoclassical and Romantic predecessors, and on the American side, the verse that she began to publish beginning in 1825 evinces a lineage from Philip Freneau to the early William Cullen Bryant. She wrote poetry consistently throughout her long life, and unlike Ridge, she wrote the bulk of her poems in her maturity. Also unlike Ridge and, to a lesser degree, Poe, she was a poet first of all, and her total output, which her most recent editors chronicle at better than five hundred poems, represents a monumental and substantive engagement with poetic craft.[72]

However, this is not that literary universe. Snow, an Ohio maiden turned polygamous wife to Joseph Smith and then to Brigham Young, who spent the latter half of her life in Mormon Utah and was designated "Zion's Poetess" by the early Latter Day Saints, is considered too singular and insular to have a serious claim as a foundational American poet.[73] Hymns of

[72] I refer to the thorough and informative *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* (2009), edited by Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, from which texts and citations are taken for the present chapter.

[73] For a recent attempt to reverse this trend, see Edward Whitley in *American Bards: Walt Whitman and Other Unlikely Candidates for National Poet* (2010), who compares Snow to Whitman and makes the case that Snow's

worship like "O my father" and "How great the wisdom and the love," for which Snow remains well-known even today in LDS circles, bear little semblance to the vulnerable and confessional lyrics of Whitman or Dickinson. Yet these and other of her later-life lyrics are very clearly developed from the Romantic and pre-Romantic soil of her youthful compositions, and as a concluding gesture, I dwell for a time on the differences, real and perceived, between American poetic rhetorics of silence in recognizably "renaissance" American poetry and this contemporaneous, idiosyncratic poet-laureate of Utah's religious enclave.

Snow might well have had a career arc more recognizable to contemporary tastes. In 1825, she began to publish verse under various pseudonyms in her local newspaper, the Ravenna, Ohio *Western Courier*.[74] Her first *nom de plume*, which she repeated three times after, was "Angerona"—the Roman goddess of silence. That first poem was published with a headnote from Snow to the editor: "Mr. Editor,—It is not my wish to appear in print, yet, as the only medium by which I can address the unknown 'Susan' I have the presumption to solicit your permission" (*Poetry* 5).[75] Already, these maneuvers suggest a young poet with an instinct for the aesthetic power of reticence.

Her early subjects ranged from witty repartees with other local poets, to sentimental appeals in favor of Grecian independence, to meditations on personified qualities. In

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poetry aims to salvage American virtue in a new revolutionary project amongst "Columbia's noblest children," the Utah Mormons (esp. 67-95).

[74] Biographical details for Snow's life are drawn primarily from the textual apparatus, by Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, to *Eliza R. Snow: The Complete Poetry* (see "Introduction" xxiii-xxxvii, the headnote for each poem, and the introductions to the different "chapters" of Snow's writing life).

[75] "Susan" was the pen name of another author published in the *Western Courier*, whom Snow wished to chastise for her overly harsh treatment of the opposite sex.

"Imagination," published in February of 1829 under the "Angerona" pseudonym, Snow offers a young poet's take on the artist's key faculty:

> This pow'r of omnipotent kind,
> No prowess can fathom or trace;
> Borne on by contingence it moves unconfin'd,
> Thro' regions of matter and space. (22)

This celebration of Imagination unbounded presages a career of following the hints and whims of the Muse to new realms of aesthetic exploration and discovery—a career that was not to be Snow's. The "contingence" of the imaginative faculty might well cause years of musing, celebration, and anxiety for another poet—as it did for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ultimately leading to his lengthy rebuttal of "fancy," "associationism," and "contingency" in the *Biographia Literaria*. Again, not so for Snow, as will become abundantly clear in the following pages. And the poem's final stanza is a stereotypical deployment of rhetorical silence:

> Its smiles, are the blossoms of May—
> Its frown, like the slanderer's tongue—
> E'en silence is vocal and solitude gay,
> When it utters its voice in the song. (23)

Imagination, according to a young Snow, has the power to make possible the impossible and to bring meaning from apparently stultifying conditions. By implication, this poem sets out a project of pursuing Imagination to its outer reaches and thereby "uttering" poems that make the unfathomable realm of "silence" speak and the lone regions of "solitude" habitable.

In 1831, a family friend introduced Snow and her family to Joseph Smith, who was then living and preaching the gospel of latter-day sainthood in Ohio. While her mother and sister

converted almost immediately, it would take Eliza until 1835, during which interval she continued to publish poems in another Ravenna newspaper, the Whig *Ohio Star*. However, following her conversion in 1835, and with the exception of a few hymns, Snow's lyre was largely silenced for several years by the vicissitudes of life in the Mormon community, which was continually met with intolerance and violence, first in Ohio, then in Missouri, and finally, after a longer period of stability, in Illinois. In 1838, Joseph Smith himself apparently exhorted Snow to take up poetry once more, and her poems from that time onward turn repeatedly to elucidating Smith's teachings and other scriptural principles and to chronicling the history of the Saints' struggle.

However, for several years following her conversion, she also maintained aspirations as a popular poet, publishing some two dozen poems between 1839 and 1842 in the Illinois *Quincy Whig*, a habit she continued even after the establishment of specifically Mormon newspapers in Nauvoo, Illinois (the Saints' home between their 1839 exile from Missouri and the 1844 murder of Joseph Smith). In some of these poems, Snow acts as the emissary between the newly-settled Saints and the more established Illinois settlers; in others, however, she clearly tries her hand (for what would end up being the last time in her life) at conventionally popular forms of verse.

One of the poems that Snow published in the *Quincy Whig* is called "My First View of a Western Prairie" (June 1839), and it is the poem that, given a line-up of Snow's oeuvre, I hazard most contemporarily-trained literary critics would choose as her most successful. In flowing blank verse clearly reminiscent of Wordsworth and Bryant, Snow's speaker recounts her past experiences in nature, her previous skepticism regarding the vaunted beauties of the "far-off West," and an initial revelry in which she imagines herself transported back to the pastoral scenes of antiquity (92-3).

The poem concludes with a lengthy display of rhetorical silence, in which the speaker, finding herself not in the "Ionian fields" of classic lore but on "Columbian soil" in Illinois, is overwhelmed by the sublimity of the scene and chastised by the effort to put her feelings in poetic terms:

> Amaz'd, I view'd until my optic nerve
> Grew dull and giddy with the phrenzy of
> The innocent delight; and I exclaim'd
> With Sheba's queen, *'one half had not been told.'*
>
> But then my thoughts—can I describe them now?
> No: for description's ablest pow'rs grow lame,
> Whenever put upon the chase of things
> Of non-existence; and my thoughts had all,
> Like liquid matter, melted down; and had
> Become, as with a secret touch absorb'd,
> In the one all-engrossing feeling of
> Deep admiration, vivid and intense.
> And my imagination too, for once,
> Acknowledged its own imbecility,
> And cower'd down, as if to hide away:
> For all its pow'rs had been too cold and dull,
> Too tame, and too domestic far, to draw
> A parallel, with the bold grandeur, and

The native beauty of this *"Western World."* (93-4)

In this poem, Snow is clearly a capable practitioner of Romantic and early Transcendentalist rhetoric, wherein "the one all-engrossing feeling of / Deep admiration, vivid and intense" displaces the need for terms, definitions, or specificity. Snow defers here to the "silence" of absorption and, in spite of her claim that "Description's ablest pow'rs grow lame," she clearly intends that her reader should feel a sympathetic twinge for nature's sublimity across the otherwise silent space of her inadequate language. When John E. Hallwas writes of Snow as one of the few Midwestern poets of the nineteenth century to write verse of enduring quality, he has in mind primarily her poems in the style of "My First View of a Western Prairie"—poems that evince Snow's lyrical talents in relation to themes like Nature and the poetic power (see 136).

However, this poem would be among Snow's last in this mode, for, as "Zion's Poetess," she increasingly found that she had little use for the contingencies of Imagination or the ambiguous terrain of a limited human consciousness. As a professor of the true faith, Snow distanced herself from ambiguity of any sort, and passages like this one from an 1873 poem are common:

By undisputed tokens,
    His favor'd people know
That God again has spoken
    From heav'n, to man below:

And that the glorious Gospel
    Meets every mortal need;
While Truth Eternal triumphs

O’er every human Creed. (878)

Increasingly, Snow lived with the Saints and wrote for the Saints, so that her foundational premises were no longer at stake. Her editors, Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, suggest that “[i]n the monolithic society of which she was a part, the gospel message sometimes emerges as stale phrases and repeated harangues” (xviii). This is so, if only because the exploratory mode of silence and sublimity had become something of a non-starter given Snow’s basic assumptions in her religious maturity.

In 1843, while still in Illinois, Snow wrote the beginning of a blank-verse epic, “Two Chapters of the Life of President Joseph Smith” (she wrote the first part of the first chapter in 1843 and finished the rest, after Smith’s death, for her 1856 *Poems Religious and Historical*). The poem is an ecclesiastical history of the prophet, who was also Snow’s husband from June of 1842 until his death in June of 1844. She begins by chronicling the fall of human religion between the New Testament days and the nineteenth century (before Smith’s prophetic revelations in 1820). Pointedly, one of the results of this fall from grace is that humans are left in precisely the epistemological condition that Romantic poets, and Snow herself in earlier poems like “Imagination” and “My First View of a Western Prairie,” had been inclined to embrace and celebrate. Without a righteous “Priesthood,” writes Snow’s speaker,

The human mind was left to wander through
The mazy fields of erring reason, and
To float at large upon aerial forms;
Borne onward by contingence’ fickle breeze.
Hence mental aberrations oftentimes
Assum’d a threat’ning aspect, and appear’d

Impervious as the darksome catacombs
Of ancient structure; sometimes swelling to
Gigantic size; on which was sacrific'd
A sum of happiness of more amount
Than could be purchas'd with the price of all
The hecatombs that have been offer'd yet
In sacrifice to heathen deities. (251)

This passage has much more of Milton than it has of Coleridge, more "heresy of *the Didactic*" than "event of language," to recall terms from the introduction via Poe and McGann. The condition of unknowing, which in other Romantic and American Romantic poems is taken as the aesthetically productive starting point, is here cast unambiguously as the source of error, aberration, and spiritual descent. Knowledge is not limited as an inherent condition of human consciousness but as a local result of failed faith. To profess the true faith would be at once to dispel all doubt, for "The God of Abra'm has a purpose, which / From all eternity he has decreed / To execute upon the earth," as Snow writes elsewhere in the poem (252). This purpose being manifest, in the Old Testament style of dictate and decree, it naturally subordinates any perceived earthly confusion to its divine ends.

Perhaps the most telling passage from Snow's epic is that which pertains to "contingence' fickle breeze." In 1829's "Imagination," the seemingly chance happenings of mental life were exciting and provocative, a marker of Imagination's supreme seat among the faculties:

This pow'r of omnipotent kind,
No prowess can fathom or trace;

Borne on by contingence it moves unconfin'd,

Thro' regions of matter and space.

Boundless and omnipotent, contingent Imagination is a god in its own right, a fit subject of admiration and worship. By the 1843 poem, "contingency" is a dangerous and despicable condition of enthrallment to sin and error, rendered abhorrent by the manifest divine light of true belief.

However, before dismissing Snow back to obscurity, as a promising young poet who was doomed instead to a life of zealotry, it might be well to consider just exactly how far her unwavering and zealous conviction actually sets her apart from her contemporaries. Coleridge, of course, though he wrote his best poems on disorienting encounters with the supernatural, insisted on the final orderliness, even the divine origins, of human perception, scornfully rebutting the notion of a passive consciousness, where "our whole life would be divided between the despotism of outward impressions, and that of senseless and passive memory," where, in other words, humanity would be "the slave of chances," enthralled to contingency (VII.111, 116). And Poe himself, in spite of his railing against "the heresy of *the Didactic*," avowedly oriented his verse toward brief glimpses of eternity, toward indicating whatever might be authentic in relation to "the desire of the moth for the star" (*Critical* 236).

The different chapters of this dissertation take great pains to establish that despair never really prevails through an American Romantic rhetoric of silence, that forms of hope and consolation prevail in the face of what seem like the most nihilistic gestures of lyric abandon, that "Sovereign Law" and other "first principles" are queried and tested but never abandoned. What is it that separates these "first principles" from the religious conviction of Snow's later poetry? In some cases, very little. In the most complacent of silence-driven poems, uncertainty is

a mere temporal illusion. Sometimes this is most apparently the case with Transcendentalist standard-bearers like Emerson and Thoreau, who, as Ed Folsom notes in "Transcendental Poetics" (2010), are better remembered today for their essays than their poetry, though they wrote both, and who, when they *did* write poetry, tended to value aphorism over stylistic innovation (264-6). Emerson gives a prime example of this in his poem "Merops," which was included in his 1847 *Poems* and, like Poe's much more enigmatic "Sonnet—Silence," takes the unspoken or the unspeakable as its theme:

What care I, so they stand the same,—
    Things of the heavenly mind,—
How long the power to give them name
    Tarries yet behind?

Thus far today your favors reach,
    O fair, appeasing presences!
Ye taught my lips a single speech,
    And a thousand silences.

Space grants beyond his fated road
    No inch to the god of day;
And copious language still bestowed
    One word, no more, to say. (IX.239)

Emerson's poem is, at one and the same time, an affirmation and a denial of human uncertainty. "Silence" will be necessary for poets and visionaries, because the "things of the heavenly mind"

remain outside the reach of present, earthly language; but "silence" is also a temporary condition, since the stable and eternal "things of the heavenly mind" give sanction to Truth and Progress. There being exactly one direction in which all knowledge tends, individual struggle is necessarily redeemed in the fullness of prophetic time. Folsom puts this Transcendentalist dialectic of *logos* and *aporia* very succinctly: "Transcendentalism valued self-reliance and independent action, but it valued these qualities, paradoxically, as existing under a kind of amorphous central control, the Over-Soul" ("Transcendental" 266). Because of Emerson's supreme, religious-like faith in Over-Soul, the "one mind common to all individual men" (II.3), he glosses the mortal need for silence with complacency rather than anxiety. Whatever strife results from the limited mortal condition of uncertainty is sure to be compensated within an eternal framework.

More obviously than Ridge, Dickinson, or Whitman, Emerson in a poem like "Merops" has clear parallels with Snow's later verse. The explicit certainty of redemption, combined with a relative lack of stylistic obscurity, make "Merops" as much a liturgical poem as a poem of searching, laying out Emerson's apocalyptic vision for future perfection in unambiguous and reassuring terms. In Snow's "We Are, We Were and Are to Be" (1871), she similarly foretells, without anxiety, of a future heavenly consummation:

> We're here to fill a noble destiny.
> This present life is but a middle state,
> A short connecting link between the two
> Eternities, the past and future of
> Our own identical existences.
> […]

Of man's progression, an attainable
Attractive point, to which the present, past
And future all converge—where mem'ry, long
Dethroned, resuscitated with full pow'rs,
Resumes its sway, and the dark curtain of
Forgetfulness is rent asunder, and,
As if with ken of Deity, we'll gaze
On all the scenes and all the sceneries
Connected with our former being (834-5)

After reading Emerson's poem, with its complacent faith in a world to come, it is hard not to hear comparable notes of self-assuredness in Snow's more explicitly religious poem, which is expressly designed to elucidate the Mormon doctrine of a premortal past that parallels an eternal future. Like Emerson, Snow-as-prophet *knows* that a certain heavenly destiny awaits her and her fellow believers, and so she spends little time worrying over the interim stage and more time exhorting herself and other Saints toward an appreciation of what is to come.

According to Leon Chai, the driving force of Romantic poetics in both Great Britain and the United States is the conviction that Sign and Nature can no longer collapse into one another unproblematically. Instead, writers seek out symbols capable of bypassing the linguistic bind. In each instance, the Romantic writer explores the case for transcendent truth in the absence of metaphysical or metalinguistic stability. In a measure of contrast, Snow recovers *logos* in a straightforward way. She can therefore abandon the symbolism of Romantic poetry. This is not to say, however, that there is no *logos* in the American Romantic poem—only that, because of ideological commitments, the American Romantic finds ways to hide *logos* behind a more or less

effective veneer of silence. In Emerson's "Merops," that veneer is not concealed whatsoever, nor is it meant to be. The end of Ridge's "Mount Shasta" is somewhat disconcerting because, in a poem that otherwise uses the sublimity of the mountain-top to indicate the need for silence, and, to that extent, conceals the grounding for its transcendental impulses, the civically-minded gesture of asserting the ascendency of "Sovereign Law" in California casts real and unavoidable doubts on the extent of the poem's aesthetic vulnerability. In Snow's poems, scripture serves the purpose of a sovereign law, and it is such a manifest and powerful guiding principle that the guise of aesthetic exploration becomes superfluous.

By contrast, in other lyrics by Ridge, and in the most enduring poems of Dickinson and Whitman, certainty and "transcendence" persist at a more tenuous remove from the present. Though the poets retain their commitments—to the "laws" that govern sovereign choice, in Ridge's case; to the kindred intuitions of readers, in Dickinson's; or to the fundamental sameness of atomic unity, in Whitman's—they are considerably less complacent about their present situations, more genuinely vulnerable as a result of their mortal limitations. Perhaps the greatest distinction between these poets' rhetorics of silence and Snow's is that Snow's has done away with the anxiety that accompanies Romantic efforts at representation—efforts which the poets know will be successful, if at all, circuitously and only through the mediation of sympathetic readership. Romantic silence therefore, while it indicates a religious-like faith in immortal or transcendent human essentiality, also fractures that faith at its precise rhetorical center-point, leaving unresolved the fear that the hoped-for communion in the after-space of the poem will scatter into the meaninglessness of words that really say nothing, or words that stop saying altogether. The later Snow, on the other hand, has a genuinely religious faith that she refuses to worry with the specter of error and disintegration. She very much resembles the mystical

Emerson of "Merops," but even if Whitman and Dickinson shared Emerson's faith in the permanence of the "things of the heavenly mind," they were not content to lay an unproblematic claim to those things in language. Where their poetic language strains, fractures, plods, and goes silent, it diverges to a limited but meaningful degree from the complacent, religiously-backed, stylistically stable silence of Emerson and Snow.

It is true that the American Romantic poets of this project, when they doubt, are limited in that doubting vein by their progressive or transcendent ideologies that border on religious conviction. Their silences are never final, and their refusals are never abdications. Still, were this all one could say about the developments in American Romantic poetry by those whom Transcendentalists like Emerson inspired but could not contain, it would not be enough to explain why some poets continue to provoke modern readers while others have faded to the obscurity of a "fireside" past. Writing a persuasive if somewhat reductive account of "exegesis" within the framework of an American ideology, Sacvan Bercovitch lists three principles of aesthetic exploration:

> [1] To interpret is not to make sense of the mystery "out there." It is to discover otherness as mystery (something "overwhelming," "incomprehensible"), and then to explain the mystery as the wonders of an invisible world, a realm of meaningful "silence," resonant with universals. [2] To investigate those wonders is not to come to terms with the new or unexpected. It is to domesticate the unknown by transferring the agency of meaning from the mystery "out there" to a world we recognize and so to invest the familiar—ourselves, or our kind—with the powers of a higher reality: "universal laws," the view of eternity […] [3] To establish the laws and rules of that higher reality is not to break through the

> limitations we experience. It is to deny our conditions of dependency by translating those limitations into meta-structures of history, culture, and the mind. (*Rites* 4)

So far as Bercovitch's assessment rings true of these foundational American poets, it is because of their inescapable "first principles." However, the poets' pain, suffering, and experience of violence belie any simple claims to resolution. If Whitman believes in America and progress, it is not to say that his poetic exploration can be reduced to the blithe certainties of the political manifesto. "I stop somewhere waiting for you": so Whitman promises, and so he guarantees. In between, however, are disappointments, rejections, and ebb-tides, the inevitable failings of one who can only know that there *shall* be growth, but not exactly how and when. If "Merops" has similar premises, it is less committed to their sometimes frustrating, disturbing, or even downright harrowing results for the poet trapped within the limitations of the mortal but desperate to indicate the immortal.

In his poem "The Stolen White Girl" (1868, though probably written earlier), John Rollin Ridge chronicles a welcome usurpation of autonomy, in which a white woman becomes the willing captive of her "half-breed" kidnapper:

> Though he stole her away from the land of the whites,
> Pursuit is in vain, for her bosom delights
> In the love that she bears for the dark-eyed, the proud,
> Whose glance is like starlight beneath a night-cloud. (104)

Here the results are innocuous enough: luckily for both the poet and his subject, the "stolen" girl embraces, as a form of bliss and rapture, the communion that has been forced upon her. This sort of willing elision of one subjectivity for another is necessarily a commonplace of Romantic poetics, undergirded as they are by visionary experiences, the Over-Soul, and "Sovereign Law,"

and bound as they are to manifest first principles that must be demonstrated, if at all, by their own self-evident light. Given such conditions, there is a complacent, incontrovertible, religious element to any rhetoric of silence, where vulnerability is limited by a transcendental exegesis that "invests the familiar with the powers of a higher reality," as Bercovitch says—that, in other words, expects to be confirmed in the hope for a persistent communion between the poet and the reader, and, despite any aesthetic or political struggles, refuses to relinquish altogether that underlying expectation of communion and community.

But in spite of their inevitable commitments, the most accomplished practitioners of rhetorical silence are equally defined by how they stretch sameness to its most extreme and troubling implications. Ridge, Dickinson, and Whitman all take pains to leave readers to themselves as much as possible by relying on suggestion and intimation rather than command or demand, deferring the fullness of meaning to the extra-textual space of silence. Still, that this silence, for all three poets, sometimes seems to entail violence, even sexual violence, as with Ridge's "Stolen White Girl," Dickinson's terrible masculine figures, and Whitman's "A Woman Waits for Me," indicates that the consequences of transcendence can just as often be terrible as they are exhilarating. In taming the sublime, silence also tames individuality and singularity. The "best" poets do not seem so to us because they *escape* these violent implications of political and aesthetic unity, but because they dwell upon them more compellingly than their less daring peers. By that consideration, Ridge, Dickinson, and Whitman very much exceed Snow, who is interested in violence and disruption only as earthly conditions inflicted upon the Saints by non-believers. On the other hand, for Ridge, Dickinson, and Whitman, violence and disruption are the natural conditions of poetic faith, the natural result of believing in a project for poetry and

community that is divine when considered abstractly but that is tenuous, difficult to make out, and in constant jeopardy in the actual practice of human poetic and political life.

Ultimately, a rhetoric of silence insists upon a measure of universal communion: this much is inescapable, and it links Snow and Emerson to Poe, Dickinson, and Whitman in a limited but very real sense. For that matter, it links the Ridge of "Mount Shasta" to the Ridge of "A Night Scene," or better yet, the Ridge of the end of "Mount Shasta" to the Ridge of the beginning of "Mount Shasta." However, within the delimited boundaries of universal community, the contribution of poets like Dickinson, Whitman, and sometimes Ridge is that they work hard to recognize the full implications of what the universal communion that they insist upon. Contemporary critics, eager to salvage the nineteenth century for twentieth- and twenty-first-century purposes, have sometimes read too far from their efforts, supposing that the poets came to reject Transcendentalist ways and transcendent truths in favor of a more nihilistic metaphysics. In reality, these poets must be read as the finest mediators of an ideological condition: in spite of an unwillingness to let go of hope and faith, or to reject an apocalyptic reading of human or American history, they are nevertheless capable of great vulnerability, doubt, sympathy, and silence.

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