

"I See You Face to Face": The Poet-Reader Relationship in Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

Author: Christopher David Case

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/445>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2004

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

**“I See You Face to Face”:
The Poet–Reader Relationship in Walt
Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”**

**A Senior Thesis by Christopher Case
Advisor: Professor Robert Kern
Boston College 2004**

Table of Contents

Preface

3

Chapter I: Walt Whitman, the Real Kosmos

5

Chapter II: “Closer Yet I Approach You”: Whitman’s Understanding of the
Role of the Poet

16

Chapter III: “What Is It Then Between Us?”: The Poet-Reader Relationship

32

Chapter IV: “We Understand Then Do We Not?”: Conclusion

63

Bibliography

70

Preface

Encompass worlds, but never try to encompass me,
I crowd your sleekest and best by simply looking toward you.

Writing and talk do not prove me,
I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,
With the work of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic.
("Song of Myself" 25.577-81)

To show Whitman for what he is one does not need to praise or
explain or argue, one needs simply to quote. (Jarrell 99)

In choosing to write about Whitman, I have been faced not with a poet or a man, but with something greater than the world itself, something that resists description and definition. To say the least, this is joyfully and excitingly overwhelming. In reading the grandiloquent, sometimes grotesque, but ultimately gratifying lines of the globe-like Whitman, I am inclined to echo the thoughts of the above-quoted Randall Jarrell, one of Whitman's fondest admirers. Jarrell states that at certain points in the poet's work, "It is like magic: that is, something has been done to us without our knowing how it was done" (103). In Whitman's finest moments, we find lines that "make us remember that few poets have shown more of the tears of things, and the joy of things, and of the reality beneath either tears or joy" (106).

In the critical history of *Leaves of Grass*, much has been written that confounds and obscures this ability of the text, and much has been written that miraculously mirrors

the grandeur of Whitman's accomplishment. Although Jarrell may be a bit extreme in demanding that the only way to write about Whitman is to quote him, I agree with the spirit in which he writes this. Far too often, criticism attempts to encompass the work it evaluates, to enclose it in one of ever so many flimsy and fragile frames, boxes that cannot ever contain or support the overflow of emotion, feeling and expression that great artists have struggled to create. Whitman, an artist who can undoubtedly be called great, resists this encompassing urge more than any I could imagine. In the spirit of Jarrell, we need only to quote the poet to discover how true this is. In his sprawling and epic poem, "Song of Myself," Whitman states, "I resist any thing better than my own diversity" (16.349), "I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood" (20.410), and "I too am not a bit tame, I too am untranslatable" (52.1332).

If Whitman is a world, then I in no way intend to encompass that world in these pages. If anything, these pages are a record of my journey through that world, a journey not without its obstacles, and a record not without its faults. If at times I state the obvious, forgive me that error, for, as Jarrell states, "There is something essentially ridiculous about critics, anyway: what is good is good without our saying so" (111). I also ask that you forgive me one additional redundancy as I quote Jarrell a final time. If Whitman is a world, "How inexhaustibly interesting the world is in Whitman!" (110).

Chapter I

Walt Whitman, The Real Kosmos

“The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms. Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy. Did you suppose there could be only one Supreme? We affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes, and that one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another” (quoted in Moon 625).

To consider Walt Whitman, the poet of universal equality, one must be able, paradoxically, to see distinctions as both essential and mutually inclusive. A man whose biographical details are hardly epic, Whitman must be seen through the lens of his poetry, where we find a primitive “man without qualities,” a speaker who is capable of all human action, who embodies the supreme individual and the supreme democracy. Moreover, the “simple separate person” (“One’s-Self I Sing” 1) and the expansive, universal “I” must also be seen as the same speaker, or rather, different aspects of the same speaker. To begin to understand the nature of the poetic self and its relation to the reader in Whitman’s poetry, we must first begin with Whitman, the person. Although the self is a (usually) conscious creation of the poet, the autobiographical nature of the “I” in his work is impossible to ignore completely, for it necessarily forms and informs the speaker to a great extent. To gain a sense of the multifaceted nature of Whitman’s “I,” we must begin with the multifaceted nature of Whitman himself.

Whitman was born in 1819 to a family of meager means in West Hills, Long Island. Though remaining, for the most part, near his place of birth, he moved around locally a great deal during his childhood. At various points in his life as a young man he

lived in different locales in Brooklyn and Long Island. His frequent moves paralleled his change of occupations. He worked, at various times, as a printer, schoolteacher, editor, journalist, author, and carpenter. The most important aspect of all of these various occupations is the contact they offered Whitman with different facets of American society. David Reynolds comments, in his “cultural biography,” *Walt Whitman’s America*, that Whitman had a keen eye for the changes taking place within his society. Reynolds quotes Whitman as saying “ ‘Remember...the book [*Leaves of Grass*] arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people, for fifteen years with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equaled.’ Before producing what he called ‘the idiomatic book of my land,’ he listened to his land’s many idioms” (82-3). Whitman’s different occupations, especially those as editor and journalist, gave him ample opportunities to experience and digest the different styles and forms of American expression.

Before we look at Whitman’s expression of the American idiom, we must first consider the environment in which the momentous first edition (1855) of *Leaves of Grass* percolated. The mid 19th-century stands as a time of turmoil and trouble in our nation’s history. The history of the conflict between the Northern emphasis on national power and the Southern emphasis on state sovereignty is long and complicated. During the 1830s, this conflict threatened to rend the Union. In 1832, the South Carolina state convention, led by Vice President John C. Calhoun, nullified two tariffs passed by Andrew Jackson’s forces in Washington. Reynolds, pondering this matter, asks “Liberty or Union? State sovereignty or national power? The individual or the mass? These were the basic questions raised by the nullification crisis, questions that had momentous importance in a time when the central government was still relatively weak” (50). This tension, which was always teeming below the surface, occasionally flared up, and, as a result, sectional conflict began to rip the union apart more and more decisively. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska act presented a case for such a flare up, as it repealed the Missouri

Compromise and allowed slavery into the West. Sectional conflict strained the party system as well, to the point where the Whig party disintegrated. “America,” Reynolds states, “desperately needed a poet to hold together a society that was on the verge of unraveling” (113).

Whitman felt that he was that poet. His poetic project was not all too different from the American project envisioned by the founding fathers. Whitman even states in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* that the “United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (Moon 616). In an environment of sectional conflict, Whitman felt that the poetic voice was what was needed to argue both sides of the story, without negating itself in contradiction. He saw the poet as a medium through which all things could flow: “The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect of originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains” (624). Moreover, as a channel, the poet would be able to accept all things equally, democratically, and send these things back out of himself, equally, democratically, but now also filtered. Reynolds indicates that Whitman’s poetry “would be a kind of wondrous filtration system, absorbing all the disturbing, vicious aspects of American life and creatively recombining them with other, more positive ones” (83).

Above all, Whitman’s goal in the 1855 edition was to heal the nation, to handle the seeming contradiction of the individual and the mass, while at the same time affirming the divinity of mankind. Thus his creation of self in this edition is largely symbolic. The unified, multifaceted “I” of “Song of Myself” is equal to the Union itself. It is all encompassing:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuff’d with the stuff that is course and stuff’d with the stuff

that is fine,
 One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and
 the largest the same. (16.330-4)

By encompassing all, he variously becomes all, and sees the world from that perspective. As a pure subject, Whitman's "I" possesses a universal understanding of the world, while, at the same time, he remains in that world. He is not perched above his society, looking down from a great height; rather, as Reynolds states, "Whitman doesn't *write about* his culture but actually *inhabits* it and *inscribes* it from within" (325). Though the "I" is the universal citizen, it also attempts to be an individual one. As we shall see, he fully succeeds in that attempt only after the relative floundering of the first edition.

Implicitly, the 1855 edition represents Whitman's struggle to find a hearing and to find his place in society. As his various occupations show, he was without a definite calling, that is until he realized his nature as a poet. However, for himself, one who felt that poetry was so inextricably tied to its readers and their response, he placed a great deal of faith in his book as a means of making that relationship possible. He maintains at the end of his 1855 Preface that the "proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (Moon 636).

Whitman's personal life at the time of writing also contributed to his enterprise. Justin Kaplan, in his biography of Whitman, states that he "spoke of the 'perturbations' of *Leaves of Grass* and said that 'very much of it' had been written under 'great pressure, pressure from within,' that had made his book, 'launched from the fires of *myself*,' inevitable and necessary" (185). Not only did he feel it necessary to fix the union of the nation, but also the union of his personal self in relation to the world. In his poem "There Was a Child Went Forth," we find the speaker dealing with his world as it appears to him. All that he sees and feels becomes part of who he is, and so, as a result, what is negative around him has just as strong an effect as what is positive. He speaks of the "mother with mild words, clean her cap and gown, a wholesome odor falling off her

person and clothes as she walks by” (23), as well as the “father, strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, anger’d, unjust, / The blow, the quick loud word” (24-5). Arguably, Whitman here is using autobiographical elements to make his point. The speaker continues by referring to his doubts about appearances. The glitter and flash of an increasingly modernized, urban environment induces one to question appearances, as the speaker does, ending on a note of uncertainty regarding the control one has in forming one’s identity. Though Whitman successfully crafts a poetic identity, he is fully aware that his actual, personal identity is created by his surroundings, his specific place and time in the universe.

We must also examine the physical appearance of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, since it had great and revolutionary importance for Whitman. The 1855 edition is by far the fanciest of all the editions. It is the largest in dimension, and also the most unique in form. Intended as a physical symbol of the distinctly American blend of high and low culture, it appears at first as an elaborate, fancy, coffee-table book, but upon closer observation, we find on the inside a more democratic, newspaper type and form. Reynolds comments that its “exterior announced elegance, but its interior announced utter democracy and rough simplicity” (313). Ellipses abound between the two green cloth covers; Kaplan claims that the ellipses were such that they seemed “intended to indicate simultaneous and continuous acts of perception instead of omitted connections” (197). The identity of the author is hardly intelligible, aside from the line in the poem that would become “Song of Myself,” “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos” (Moon 680). The absence of the poet’s name on the cover or frontispiece indicates and emphasizes the importance of what is being said over who is saying it. The individuality Whitman would eventually realize found little expression in the form of the first edition. The poet is present only within his creation here, not outside of it.

Whitman clearly had ambitious hopes for his book, indeed much higher hopes than his public’s response was able to fulfill. Whitman’s hope for mutual absorption

remained one-sided. As much as he absorbed his world, his world would not fully absorb him. Reynolds quotes Whitman as having said of the first edition that “[n]one of them were sold - practically none - perhaps one or two, perhaps not even that many” (340). However, we must not take Whitman’s own comments on his nation’s response too literally. Statistically, the edition was a critical success. Reynolds tallies that of the “twenty-three reviews of the first edition...twelve were mainly positive, five mixed, and six mainly negative” (345), regardless of the fact that several of the reviews were written by Whitman himself. Perhaps the greatest and most encouraging review came from arguably the most influential literary thinker in America at the time, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson’s oft-quoted letter expressed the sentiment that Walt Whitman was just the poet for whom Emerson himself had been calling.

Though these affirmations were quite meaningful for Whitman, he could not ignore the fact that the masses, his intended audience, took little note of him. Though literacy rates were surprisingly high in America at this time (Reynolds states that by mid-century, “a full 90 percent of white American adults could read, as opposed to about 60 percent in England” [309]), the general public was far more concerned with practical matters of political fragmentation than of a utopian, poetic unification (345). Whitman clearly felt the need to radically change his poetic formula, and so he continued writing and revising, preparing what would become the 1856 edition.

Indeed, the change was radical. While the 1855 edition is the largest in dimension, the 1856 edition is the smallest, coming closest of all the editions to Whitman’s dream of a book that readers may carry in their pockets. He states that having such a book “would tend to induce people to take me along with them and read me in the open air: I am nearly always successful with the reader in the open air” (Reynolds 352). It is also drastically different in form. Instead of a free-flowing mix of unnamed poems, here we find poems numbered and named (incidentally with the word “Poem” in each title). Whitman also placed not only his name on the binding, but he also unabashedly

and without consent printed a quotation from Emerson's letter addressed to him. The hidden poet of the first edition has emerged now as *both* a historical *and* a created individual. For a society more concerned with history and practicality, Whitman was ready to recognize those aspects of his own self.

Not only was the form radically different, but the content as well underwent a transformation. The poems added to the 1856 edition show increasing despair, but also increasing hope. They display a heavier concentration on death, corruption and violence. However, they look at these issues in a radically different manner. The speaker maintains that the poet's role in relation to these apparent evils is an active one. The poet appropriates these seemingly negative aspects of life, considers them, ruminates upon them, and ultimately discovers in them a hidden level of divinity, beneath the physical surface of appearances. It is not a traditional sense of divinity; rather, it is a notion of the divine that maintains that physical reality, *as it is*, is good, even if we are not able to see it that way immediately.

A number of poems display this belief quite strongly. The poem "This Compost," originally "Poem of Wonder at The Resurrection of The Wheat," details the speaker's disgust at the earth for holding so many foul, rotting corpses, of "drunkards and gluttons of so many generations" (1.12). He is astonished by so much life coming from so much death, ultimately concluding that the earth is a filter of disease, just as his poetry is. He finishes the poem by stating that he is terrified of this capability. Here the speaker's impression of the world is extremely realistic; he does not deny his initial feelings of disgust about living in the midst of so much death and disease. Rather, he embraces that feeling, and finds that the appearance is true and should not be denied, but what is behind the appearance is even more true and permanent. The earth is the ultimate magnanimous filter that "gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last" (2.47).

In the poem “To Think of Time,” originally titled “Burial Poem,” the speaker offers an obsessively detailed description of a funeral march:

Steady the trot to the cemetery, duly rattles the death-bell,
The gate is pass'd, the new-dug grave is halted at, the living alight,
the hearse uncloses,
The coffin is pass'd out, lower'd and settled, the whip is laid on the
coffin, the earth is swiftly shovel'd in,
The mound above is flatted with spades - silence,
A minute - no one moves or speaks - it is done,
He is decently put away - is there any thing more? (4.39-44)

While the speaker ruminates upon what is left, he lists with great detail the physical surroundings, such as the “apron, cape, gloves, strap, wet-weather clothes, whip carefully chosen” (4.49). The speaker only slowly realizes that though this seems to be all that is left, in section six he discovers that “What will be will be well, for what is is well” (6.64). The speaker is not urging the reader to accept the status quo without further consideration, but is rather urging him or her to see more clearly, to reevaluate everything, to question appearances. Only by doing so would one be able to announce, as the speaker does at the end of the poem, that “I swear I think now that every thing without exception has an eternal soul!” (9.117), a sentiment reenforced by another 1856 poem, “Song of the Open Road,” originally called “Poem of the Road.” The speaker of this poem addresses the reader by stating “Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop'd, / I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell” (9.118-9).

This introduces another major theme in the 1856 poems, that of the call to the reader. Though the relationship with the reader had been an extremely important aspect of the first edition, here we find a more fully realized account of this aspect of Whitman's work. Here the speaker states with great certainty the possibility of real, actual communion with the reader. He also maintains the importance of that communion. In

his poem, “On the Beach at Night Alone,” originally “Clef Poem,” the speaker ponders the nature of existence, maintaining that a “vast similitude interlocks all” (4). Though the speaker asserts a great deal about the interconnectedness of life, we must not forget that the only way that interconnectedness can be realized in this poem is in contact with the reader, for the speaker is indeed standing alone. The importance of the reader is much greater in this poem than it is in any poem from the first edition. Similarly, in “To You,” originally “Poem of You, Whoever You Are,” the speaker indicates that his entire poetic project is tied up in the reader. He claims:

O I have been dilatory and dumb,
I should have made my way straight to you long ago,
I should have blabb'd nothing but you, I should have chanted
nothing but you. (9-11)

Realizing that he has been negligent of the reader in the past, he reaches out to that reader with some degree of despair. He also insists that the reader needs him just as much, in a relation of mutual dependency; he states that no one “has understood you, but I understand you” (13). Only the speaker is able to empower the reader, for “You have not known what you are, you have slumber'd upon yourself all your life” (23). Necessarily, however, that “You” is extremely nondescript. It is a “Whoever you are” (39), for the reader could be anyone.

Considering the drastic differences between the first two editions, we should investigate both the conscious and unconscious purposes behind those differences. If the first attempt failed in his eyes, then the purpose of the second attempt would be to reach out to the reader in a radically different way. In the first and most obvious sense, we see that the public’s response to the first edition had a massive impact on Whitman. Reynolds quotes a passage from Whitman’s notebook revealing his feelings of depression:

Everything I have done seems to me blank and suspicious. - I

doubt whether my greatest thoughts, as I supposed them, are not shallow - and people will most likely laugh at me. - My pride is impotent, my love gets no response. - the complacency of nature is hateful - I am filled with restlessness. - I am incomplete. - (349)

Interestingly, these private feelings become public in perhaps the finest addition to the second edition, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” originally known as “Sun-Down Poem,” indicating how important the circumstances of Whitman’s personal life at the time are in relation to his poetry.

Considering his relationship with his audience, we must not forget that Whitman seeks union with the reader. For a poet who originally felt that his proof would be in the response of his audience, his work has not yet been proven. This drives him to seriously reconsider that relationship. In addressing the reader throughout the new poems, he empowers not only the reader, but also himself, for he has a free hand in constituting who and what that reader will be. Conversely, one might argue that by addressing a future reader, Whitman is ultimately avoiding his relationships with his contemporaries. As we shall see, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” the finest of the second edition (1856) poems, uses this tension between the speaker’s present and future relationships as a starting point that calls for a reevaluation of the nature of human existence.

Ultimately, Whitman’s alterations to his poetry show his aim of becoming a more real and immediate presence. In the first edition, his personality is extremely large and expansive, but also in a sense disconnected from the real world. He is a character in his own work. The second edition shows how Whitman desires to be not just a constructed persona, but an actualized self. The “Whitman” speaking in the text in the second edition is connected firmly with the “Whitman” who wrote the text. By creating and affirming that link between created selves, Whitman makes the illusion of actual contact with the reader a greater possibility. By making his poetry important to readers, he attempts to make it meaningful for them.

One poem in particular stands out as representative of all the goals and aims of the 1856 edition. In his poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Whitman stretches his hand out to the reader, in a spirit that is both desperate and hopeful. He maintains that communion is possible by making that communion possible. By considering the true nature of time and space, Whitman transcends the limitation of his particular location in history. Nevertheless, he does not negate his own existence. Though his connection with the reader takes precedence over his connection with those around him in his own time, he still affirms the importance of the spatio-temporal, physical world. It is this world, with all its shows and appearances that allows him to see what lies beneath the surface of existence. All of this ties into his elaborated understanding of the role of the poet. Whitman indeed felt called, not to an occupation, but rather to a way of life, to a life of higher existence, to the life of the poet.

Chapter II

“Closer Yet I Approach You”: Whitman’s Understanding of the Role of the Poet

We must now ask ourselves the question, what kind of figure did Whitman understand the poet to be? In attempting to answer this question, we will not find a single, simple response, for Whitman’s conception of the poet was an evolving one, fluid in its focus. This conception, I would argue, underwent a significant shift in focus, even between the first and second editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In the first edition (1855), Whitman emphasizes the complete, grandiose, and somewhat impersonal nature of the poet. Far from being absent in the first edition, the qualities stressed in the second edition (1856) exist just below the surface of the first. In this edition, a more individual, direct and personal speaker emerges. Coinciding with the new emphasis on the poet’s personal life and identity is the intensified emphasis on sexuality; here the poet presents a microcosm of human sexuality. Having already discussed the relative lack of attention that Whitman experienced after he published the first edition, we see here how this experience altered his understanding of the role of the poet; now he tried to change his program to elicit a more positive and welcoming response from his intended audience, the common men and women he held in such high regard. The second edition poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” exhibits this alteration; from its first draft in Whitman’s early notebooks, to the final, published draft, we find a redirection of energy and focus from the poet to the reader.

Whitman presents the most significant explanation of his initial understanding of the poet in his 1855 preface. The keyword for this understanding seems to be “completeness.” Above all else, the poet to Whitman is a complete figure here, in a number of different ways. We first encounter the poet as a complete fulfillment of human and cultural evolution. Whitman writes in the preface, “The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races” (Moon 618). He continues to describe the poet as spanning American geography as well. The poet is to be the joiner and mediator of what has come before and what is yet to be. In section sixteen of “Song of Myself,” we recall that Whitman writes

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
 Regardless of other, ever regardful of others,
 Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
 Stuff'd with the stuff that is course and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,
 One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the
 largest the same,
 A Southerner soon as a Northerner... (16.330-5)

Though he criticizes much of the poetry that has come before him, he does so not out of disrespect, but as a way of awakening a similar kind of creative response in his own time. The poetry of the past is good in Whitman’s eyes, but only insofar as the American people understand that it represents but a part of who they are. According to Whitman, the American people are as rich as America’s vast geography, and the poet is he who can inform them that this is the case. Poets, he states, must contain both the poetry of the past, most notably the English poetry America has inherited, and the poetry to come, the lands they have seen and known and those yet to be seen and known. In the 1855 preface he writes, “Past and present and future are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is” (623).

The poet’s completeness expands to include his intellect as well. Whitman writes that the poet’s brain “is the ultimate brain. He is no arguer . . . he is judgment” (620 *sic*).

He also states that the poet is “the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land” (620). Here we find that the poet is the complete representation of the human capacity for knowledge and reason, and as such, the judge of all. Whitman tempers this with the statement that the poet “judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing” (620). That is, Whitman’s judgment is not partial or negative, but complete and uplifting, shining upon all equally. Just as he was the joiner of various times and places, Whitman’s poet is also the joiner of various forms of thought. He contains all arguments, and as such is not an arguer, for he understands all sides. Michael Moon quotes the following from Whitman’s notebooks: “Great constituent elements of my poetry - Two, viz: Materialism - Spirituality - The Intellect is what is to be the medium of these and to beautify and make serviceable there” (783). Thus the poet, as the ultimate intellect, is also the ultimate joiner and mediator of all that is earthly and tactile and all that is airy and intangible. We might ask ourselves, after such statements, and in the face of such completeness, what role the reader might still be able to play, other than that of worshipful onlooker.

Whitman does not neglect the reader completely in his first evaluation of the poet. The next form of completeness the poet embodies is that of hidden knowledge, the role of the seer. Whitman writes that the poet “is a seer . . . he is individual . . . he is complete in himself . . . the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not” (621 *sic*). This poet is privileged over the reader, for he possesses a knowledge of the inner workings and magnificence of both himself and the reader. We read in “Song of Myself,”

Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.
...
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and
fathomless as myself,
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.) (7.131-2,137-8)

One is not greater than the other, but it is only that the poet more fully understands that greatness. Necessarily then, readers are in need of the poet, who will be able to inform them of their greatness and persuade them to act upon it. He states in the preface that

folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. (621 *sic*)

Though to a certain extent this notion of the poet will continue to appear throughout Whitman's poetry, this early understanding places almost all need upon the reader. As we shall see, Whitman would soon reevaluate this understanding and admit that he, too, is needy, and subject to human limitations.

Whitman's ideas touch upon the Emersonian notion of the poet. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Whitman's first conception of the poet closely resembles the figure for whom Emerson had been calling in his essays. In his first book entitled *Nature* (1836), Emerson writes

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition. (190)

We cannot help but hear the echo of this demand in Whitman's lines of poetry and prose. In the same essay, Emerson states, "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of Universal Being circulate through me" (193). Emerson stresses the poet's absorption of all that surrounds him so that he may express that vision to his audience, while neglecting to place his individual existence therein; although he highlights the impersonal aspects of the poet in his first edition, Whitman would increasingly embody that "eyeball," give it form, figure and personality. In section five of "Song of Myself," Whitman presents the interaction between the body and soul:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,

And you must not be abased to the other. (5.82-3)

The speaker continues with an erotic encounter between body and spirit, indicating that the two are equally important in the formation of the self.

Logically coinciding with these various forms of completeness in Whitman's first understanding of the poet is a sense of grandeur. Speaking of the "unrhymed poetry" of everything common in America at the time, he mentions also that this poetry "awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it" (617). Whitman emphatically states that the poet must be capable of the gigantic task of uplifting everything considered "common" to the heights beyond his country's "ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors" (617). The poet is capable of completing this task because the "greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe" (621). To be able to breathe a new, grand life into what was before thought small, poets must themselves be grand. Whitman writes several pages later that the "most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself" (625). Here again we find the predominantly active role of the poet, contrasted with a presumably passive reader. This grand action of the poet, however, is tempered with the solidity of practicality. Whitman intends the poet to be a useful figure in society, and as such he states that "he is greatest forever and forever who contributes the greatest original practical example" (625).

Whitman elevates the poet's grandeur to an extreme level in one theme that permeates the 1855 preface, that of the poet being the land incarnate. He writes that the poet

incarnates [America's] geography and natural life and rivers and lakes...
 When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast
 stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. He
 spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between
 them. (618, ellipses added)

Whitman did not limit his discussion to geography either, for he also remarked that the poet must be the “age transfigured,” which for Whitman included eternity (633). As “Song of Myself” shows, Whitman embodies this requirement in his poetic “I”; in section thirty-three, he states,

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
 I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
 I am afoot with my vision. (33.714-6)

He continues by cataloguing at great length all that he sees and poetically becomes. His idea of the poet is a figure who calls no particular city or state home, but rather all of America at that given moment. Although, for Whitman, this is necessary in order to overcome the regional strife that has been brewing ever since the beginning of the century, we soon discover the limiting aspect of this understanding as well.

That limitation is the result of a more realistic sense of personality. The relative lack of response to the first edition awakened in Whitman the recognition that his universal “I” lacks personality. Although we appreciate Whitman’s honesty when he states that the poet “swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome” (624), we find ourselves longing for some sense of who the speaker of the poems actually is. We find it hard to meet him anywhere when he claims to be everywhere. Whitman’s vast universality of personality oversteps its intentions; it attempts to show the infinity of individuality, but goes so far that his poetic individuality is unrecognizable, perhaps abolished. In his contemporary review of the first edition, Edward Everett Hale pins down Whitman’s elusiveness, when he states,

Claiming in this way a personal interest in every thing that has ever happened in the world, and, by the wonderful sharpness and distinctness of his imagination, making the claim effective and reasonable, Mr. "Walt. Whitman" leaves it a matter of doubt where he has been in this world, and where not. (Moon 797)

This indeed is the key aspect of his work that Whitman modifies when he moves from his first edition to his second.

It is important that Whitman ultimately modifies this focus, as the vastness of the poetic personality influences other aspects of his duties and responsibilities. Primarily this involves his relationship with his audience. In one of the infamous self-reviews of the first edition, Whitman comments that he "comes to no conclusions and does not satisfy the reader" (Moon 794). He also states in the preface that the "expression of the American Poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic" (619). Indeed Whitman should be revered for not jeopardizing the integrity of his first edition in order to be accepted; however, to accomplish the goal which he set for himself, mutual absorption between himself and his nation, he would have to meet the reader more directly with a greater recognition of his own individuality.

Although I have highlighted certain aspects of the poet of the first edition, primarily by means of its preface, I do not mean to suggest that these are the only qualities that Whitman assigns to the poet. In fact, the first edition already holds within its rebellious lines and rhythms the budding spirit of the second edition. "Song of Myself," in particular, exhibits again and again the spirit that would come to dominate the second edition. Although Whitman stresses, in an Emersonian spirit, the universal application of the poet's capabilities, he does not neglect the individual reader. He writes about his thoughts, "If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing" (17.356), thus exhibiting, albeit in an embryonic form, his growing dependence on the reader. He senses the importance of this connection with the reader and states, through direct address, "This hour I tell things in confidence, / I might not tell everybody,

but I will tell you” (19.387-8). He is conscious also of his willed vulnerability in the face of his completeness, when he states,

What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest is Me,
Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me.
(14.256-61)

He indicates that his goal is to gain something (“vast returns”) by means of offering himself to his audience. This, in a sense, is the goal he set for himself in the preface, mutual absorption between himself and his nation. The desire for union exists here, but the means for achieving it would come more fully with the second edition.

The means by which Whitman hopes to accomplish this goal entail a qualified reclaiming of individuality and personality. The poet whose name appears only in passing in the first edition emerges in the second as a more prominent figure. In a most telling note to himself, written probably in 1856, Whitman says:

To change the book - go over the whole with great care - to make it more intensely the poem of *Individuality* - addressed more *distinctly to the single personality listening to it* - ruling out, perhaps, some parts that stand in the way of this. (Moon 783)

Whitman stresses not only his own personality, which he hopes to reconsider, but also that of the intended reader, thought of now as a single personality. In his letter of reply to Emerson, he reiterates this notion. He states about the American people that they “resume Personality, too long left out of mind” (638). He criticizes “the remarkable non-personality and indistinctness of modern productions in books, art, talk” (644). He even goes so far as to say that he sees a new America stepping out of the shadows of anonymity, “to stand compact upon that vast basis of the supremacy of Individuality,” the new America that will allow both individual citizens and the states as representatives to meet “face to face” (646). Individuality, something Whitman’s first edition speaker sees as ancillary at best, compared to his infinite diversity and capability, here is heralded as

an essential aspect of the poet's identity. The poet now becomes one figure who encounters readers as one reader, making more possible a personal, intimate relationship.

The second edition provides us with innumerable examples of this modified view of the poet. To begin with, the preface to the second edition does not take the form of a preface at all, but rather of a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, in reply to his abundantly positive letter of encouragement to Whitman. Although Emerson is the addressee here, I would argue that this letter is the result of a conscious decision by Whitman to give the appearance (at least) of direct address to an individual. Instead of an abstract address we find a specific one by a specific person, the previously elusive Walt Whitman. Whitman also uses his own existence in the letter as representative; instead of trying to be everything, and as a result being nothing in particular, Whitman here uses his own existence to stand for the existences of others. He concludes the letter by asking Emerson to accept the thoughts expressed therein "through me, for all the young men" (646).

The opening of Whitman's reply to Emerson acquaints us with the modified poet. The impersonal poet of indirectness has given way to the direct and personal poet, who desires to meet the people of his nation "face to face, to confront them with an American rude tongue" (638), a sentiment echoed in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," where the speaker states, "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!" (1.1). Although in the letter he speaks of meeting the people of his time and place in history "face to face," and a large part of the tension in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" comes from the speaker's inability to do just that, we find nevertheless the desire to connect directly with someone.

In his letter, Whitman repeatedly comments on the directness with which he intends to encounter and relate to his nation. He writes,

Every day I go among the people of Manhattan Island, Brooklyn, and other cities, and among the young men, to discover the spirit of them, and to refresh myself. These are to be attended to. (639)

Here we find not only a personalized poet who claims to immerse himself in the flood-tide of his nation's people, but we also find a poet who does this out of a personal need, to "refresh" himself. This poet is more inextricably tied to his audience. He continues, stating that he intends to "be directed to men and women - also to The States in their federalness" (641). Whitman links the individuals whom he meets with the individual states of the Union; his notion of the United States as a body reenforces this politically-charged connection. He states that this "federalness" is essential, "for the union of the parts of the body is not more necessary to their life than the union of These States is to their life" (641). This introduces what we will come to see as one of the primary elements of the second edition, that of the poetic potential of the body, which Whitman intends to express with the directness of "specific words" (645).

Although the body and sexuality are important aspects of the first edition, the second places sexuality on a level of individuality and, at the same time, divinity. In the first edition, sexuality and awareness of the body are essential, formative elements of the poet's artistic sensibility. The poem "I Sing the Body Electric" and portions of "Song of Myself" make this abundantly clear. However, the manner in which they present sexuality differs significantly from its presentation in the second edition. In "I Sing the Body Electric," the speaker assumes the role of bard, announcing loudly all that is good about the body. He attains the level of universal presence similar to that of the speaker of "Song of Myself," when he states,

Such-like I love - I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's
breast with the little child,
Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with the wrestlers, march in line
with the firemen, and pause, listen, count. (2.31-2)

In "Song of Myself," we find many intensely sexual passages; perhaps the most memorable occurs in section five:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,

How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd
 over upon me,
 And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your
 tongue to my bare-stript heart,
 And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my
 feet. (5.87-90)

This descriptive account indicates the status sex holds in the first edition; however, we must not forget that this tells of the relationship between the speaker's body and his soul.

There is no significant other, no individual to whom the poet is turning.

Taking directness and personality to a logical next step, Whitman continues in a similar, though individualized vein; he writes in his letter about how sex is discussed in a completely improper manner in his society. He criticizes those who go along "with that which is ashamed of the body of a man, or with that which is ashamed of the body of a woman" (641). He makes obvious his intention in this edition by stating, "I say that the body of a man or woman, the main matter, is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is" (645). Whitman here highlights the individuals for whom sex is important. In the 1856 poem, "To You," this becomes clear. The speaker states,

Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be
 my poem,
 I whisper with my lips close to your ear,
 I have loved many women and men, but I love none better
 than you. (6-8)

This poem directly links Whitman's idea of sexuality with the reader, indicating that the relationship he intends to have with that reader is on a par with his actual physical relationships. This theme would receive its most profound expression in the "Calamus" cluster of poems, first appearing in 1860. Sex, as the origin of all, is linked necessarily both with eternity and with Whitman's understanding of God, through the "divinity of

sex” (644). Essentially Whitman is saying that all sexual individuals are divine; this is true in the first edition, but in the second, it becomes more realized and more embodied in the individual speaker and individual reader.

For Whitman, the divinity of human beings is inherent in their sexual natures. To more fully understand Whitman’s apprehension of the poet as a religious figure, we must look back into his past. In David Reynolds’ account of Whitman’s development, we find several important connections to religion. Reynolds interprets Whitman’s religious affiliation when growing up as something of a combination between deism, which praises human reason and nature as universals superior to the differences among separate religions, and Quakerism, embodied for Whitman by the extreme liberal Elias Hicks (36-7). Similar to deism, Hicks’ brand of Quakerism saw little or no distinction among religions, except that instead of human reason, Hicks valorized the “inner light,” a somewhat more mystical sense of the divine permeating all of existence. Much of Hicks’ rhetoric can be seen as a source for Whitman’s revolutionary poetry. Hicks comments that the godhead is present “in every single blade of grass” (38).

Similar to Hicks’ notion of the divine residing inside every part of existence is the oratory of Whitman’s favorite preacher, Henry Ward Beecher. Beecher, whose style closely resembles what would become Whitman’s style of oratorical poetry, urged his listeners to find the divinity that resides within them. Reynolds quotes Beecher’s saying, “Do you suppose I study old, musty books when I want to preach?...*I study you!* When I want to deliver a discourse on theology, *I study you!*” (173). Not only do we find here the kind of interaction between speaker and listener that would typify the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but also the beginnings of Whitman’s understanding of the divine.

These budding and developing ideas, when combined with Whitman’s understanding of sexuality, form one of the most important aspects of Whitman’s protean understanding of the role of the poet. Always in tune with the spiritual nature of his poetry, Whitman would elaborate on that theme shortly after completing the second

edition; in his notebook, he states that he intends to begin “The Great Construction of the New Bible” (Moon 784). In his letter to Emerson, we again find a number of statements that link the poet’s task with the divinity of sexuality. Whitman, although an avid fan of preaching as an interactive form of rhetoric, was not convinced by churches. He states that the “churches are one vast lie; the people do not believe them, and they do not believe themselves” (642). Throughout his career, Whitman felt that his book was more than words and pages, but an existence in itself, with whom he had a physical bond; he would later write in the poem, “So Long!,” “Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man” (53-4). By considering his book as a physical existence, perhaps an extension of himself, he places himself in the position of a God-figure, as the creator of this body. However, this is a God who is utterly convinced of the divinity of sex. He states that sex is “the only salvation” (644). Author and critic D.H. Lawrence, in a July, 1921 article in *Nation & Athenaeum*, picks up on this aspect of Whitman’s poetry. He states:

He seeks his consummation through one continual ecstasy: the ecstasy of *giving himself*, and of being taken. The ecstasy of his own reaping and merging with another, with others; the sword-cut of sensual death. Whitman’s motion is always the motion of *giving himself*. This is my body - take, and eat. It is the great sacrament. (Moon 827)

Although this may seem to be an extreme interpretation, there is more than enough evidence to suggest this possibility; Whitman himself states in “Song of Myself,” “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from” (24.524), thus commingling the physicality of relationships with the divinity of the individual.

What this new understanding of the role of the poet means to the reader is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the changes Whitman made. Earlier readers, those of the first edition, needed the poet, for the poet possessed a secret knowledge of the world and of themselves; we recall that in section seven of “Song of Myself,” the speaker states that

all people are “just as immortal and fathomless as myself, / (They do not know how immortal, but I know)” (7.137-8). The poet there was indirect and abstract in his relationship with the reader. Here, however, we find a more direct poet, a distinct personality, who needs the reader just as much as the reader needs him.

In *My Soul and I*, a fascinating study of Whitman’s psychological mindset, David Cavitch details the ways in which Whitman grew to become needful of his audience. The death of Whitman’s father occurred within a week of the publication of his first edition. Although his death came as no surprise, and in some ways, Cavitch argues, it liberated Whitman from an oppressive parent, it nevertheless raised certain questions. Cavitch states that “Whitman struggled with what seemed to be the indifference and possible treachery of nature” (87). Cavitch discovers this struggle in the 1856 poem eventually known as “This Compost,” a poem that expresses revulsion from nature because of its “imperturbable capacity to hide the dead” (88). Moreover, his reaction to his father’s death, compounded by his mixed feelings about the response, or lack thereof, to his first edition, led Whitman to question his relationship with his audience. In “Song of the Open Road,” another 1856 poem, the speaker concludes,

Camerado, I give you my hand!
 I give you my love more precious than money,
 I give you myself before preaching or law;
 Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
 Shall we stick by each other as long as we live? (15.220-4)

Cavitch comments that these lines “are tenderly moving because their tone is full of uncertainty over the return of the pledge” (86). The speaker has made himself vulnerable and has left the conclusion completely open to the reader.

Cavitch then moves on to the magnificent second edition poem, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” He interprets the poem, quite rightly, as a meditation on the clash between the speaker’s separateness and his need for acknowledgment; he states that the

poem “is structured according to the contrast between his isolation and the human bond that has to be formed in the poem as well as in life” (106). Throughout the poem, the speaker gives vent to some of the thoughts and feelings that were accumulating in Whitman at that time. We recall the telling excerpt from his journal entitled “Depressions,” which appears in the poem itself; he writes, “Everything I have done seems to me blank and suspicious. - I doubt whether my greatest thoughts, as I supposed them, are not shallow - and people will most likely laugh at me” (Reynolds 349). Cavitch, however, feels that these doubts and the poet’s sense of alienation are not lamented by Whitman; he feels that he “excuses and blesses the alienation he was made to feel, because he assumes that in order to remain a poet he must accept the emotional deprivation that spurred him to imaginative fulfillment” (112-3). In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” we thus find the perfect embodiment of the modified poet we have discussed.

If we compare the first draft of that poem with its final published form, we discover this modification quite clearly. In an early notebook, we find Whitman’s first draft of what would become “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” However, there are some extremely telling differences between this first draft and the published poem. Most notable are several deletions from the first draft. At the beginning of what would become section 7, we find in the notebook draft the line “Tighter yet may the bands be drawn” (Grier 231). Whitman deleted this line, possibly because of its connection to the earlier understanding of poet as the dominant figure standing outside of a relationship with the reader. The line emphasizes the poet’s impersonal status as the joiner of two entities; the goal of the deletion was perhaps to de-emphasize the dominance of the poet, and to place him into a relationship with the reader, thus allowing the reader more of a presence in the poem. In the published version, we find the line changed to “Closer yet I approach you” (7.86). Although the poet is still a dominant figure in this version, there is more of an appreciation for the existence of the reader.

Another revision highlights the shift from the vast, impersonal existence of the poet to the poet's recognition of union with the reader. Whitman continues in the draft:

There are many words and deeds that will happen that will allure *me*.
Where any one thinks of *me* or wishes *me* that will allure *me*,
Where the happy young husband and wife are, and the happy old
husband and wife are, will allure *me*. (232, italics added)

These lines significantly are taken out of the poem, possibly to reduce the sense of the poet as an overbearing figure. This “me”-centered language hints that all actions, including the reader's, only serve to impact and reflect the speaker of the poem. By placing himself in the center of this passage, the speaker forces all action to be related to him; the reader is at best an auxiliary figure. What Whitman substitutes for these deleted lines in the first draft is section 8 of the published poem, the memorable section in which the speaker makes the fantastic comment, “What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face? / Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?” (8.96-7). Although the poet himself is still the active source of meaning, his gaze here shifts significantly to his relationship with the reader.

In this chapter, we have seen that Whitman's conception of the poet was quite fluid from the first to the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Although he emphasizes the poet's completeness in the preface to the first edition, portions of “Song of Myself” evince the poet's dependent nature. In his reply to Emerson's congratulatory letter, and in such poems as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” we see that Whitman now stresses this dependence, and places it most significantly upon the reader. In the next chapter, I intend to evaluate the resulting relationship between the poet and the reader in the second edition, with significant reference to “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

Chapter III

“What Is It Then Between Us?”: The Poet-Reader Relationship

In her book *Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey defines three types of texts. Initially, she describes the “declarative text” as a work that imparts “ ‘knowledge’ to a reader whose position is thereby stabilized, by a privileged narrative which is to varying degrees invisible” (83). The second type, the “imperative text,” can briefly be summarized as propaganda. However, it is Belsey’s third textual category that is of note here; she proposes the existence of the “interrogative text,” an idea that comes to bear on “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” perhaps the greatest of the new poems in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856). In short, the “interrogative text” is a work that is intentionally incomplete, in the sense that there is no omniscient, self-sufficient narrator who elucidates a clear and indisputable text. Belsey states that it “disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation,” and moreover, that it invites “the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises” (84). Belsey continues, stating that in such a text, “the narrative does not lead to that form of closure which in classic realism is also disclosure. As Althusser says of Brecht, ‘he wanted to make the spectator into an actor who would complete the unfinished play...’” (84). This latter statement essentially summarizes what seems to me to be the heart and soul of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” we find a speaker quite different from the one we find in “Song of Myself.” Whereas before we found a speaker who could confidently assert his own completeness and independence from his readers, we find here a speaker

who intentionally leaves his poem incomplete in the manner that Belsey describes. The poem can only be completed when the reader plays his or her part, by reading the poem, by journeying with the poet from shore to shore, through miles and miles of space and years and years of time. Before we found a poet who understood his existence as “a knit of identity” (“Song of Myself” 3.47), a composite of various elements that he constructs and continues constructing every day; we now find, in addition to that, a speaker who is consciously constructing his reader along with himself. The progressive nature of the poem warrants the progressive interpretation I intend to give. Perhaps the most heated debate surrounding the poem concerns the speaker’s relationship with those around him, his fellow passengers. Many critics suppose an implied union between the speaker and those around him, and others suggest his inability to commune with his contemporaries. Although I would tend to agree with the latter group of critics, I maintain that Whitman’s goal in the poem does not concern his contemporaries, or rather, that they are merely objects or props in the poem, available for his creative use to help him reach his primary goal, communion with his future reader.

This poem is perhaps the finest of Whitman’s “other”-centered poems, a group that includes such poems as “Song of the Open Road,” “Song for Occupations,” and “To You.” In these poems, the speaker uses direct address to the future reader as his primary means of expression. His means of constructing the union between himself and the “other,” the implied reader, include a manipulation of time and space, a skillful utilization of language and verb tenses, and a drastic reevaluation of the nature of all creation. Only as we cross the river of the poem, as we go from shore to shore with Whitman, do we truly see what role we play; the poem almost ceases to be poetry and becomes a lived experience shared by the speaker and his readers.

In his book, *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus*, Kerry C. Larson proposes that Whitman’s direct address goes further than we might assume; Whitman is actually creating the reader as he is writing his poem. He states that “the relationship between

author and reader is not something Whitman works *from* but works *toward*. Precisely what most poetry takes for granted Whitman takes as his explicit subject” (8). In this sense, Whitman’s overt subject in the poem is the poem itself. This self-consciousness is reflected in the speaker’s insistent claims of shared experience between the speaker and the reader. A poem that speaks about its own completion by means of the reader’s act must lay the foundation for that act, and this is just what Whitman does by claiming again and again throughout the poem that all that he has experienced is no different from what we will experience. As Larson puts it,

we discover a poem which does not silently presuppose the existence of a listener prior to its composition. Instead the act of writing the poem has become virtually coextensive with the act of reaching that listener. It is not at all fanciful to say in this respect that “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” records nothing less than an anticipation of its own reading. (9)

As we shall see, both the construction of the poet’s self and the construction of the reader become visible at specific points throughout the poem.

Section one of the poem exhibits in its mere five lines a summary of and a brief encapsulation of all that will come to fruition throughout the rest of the work. However, before we begin with that section, I feel it is only right to begin with the title itself. Whitman initially called the work “Sun-Down Poem,” and changed it to its current title in 1860. The significant change of the title from a mere static description to an active, present part of the text reflects Whitman’s painstaking detail and self-consciousness about every aspect of the poem. James E. Miller Jr., in his wonderful work, *Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*, comments on the title of the poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

The presence of the non-finite verb “crossing” suggests neither past nor future but an eternal present. The ferry connotes not only progressive movement forward but, more importantly, cyclic movement, a going and a return, a beginning and an end, and a new beginning. Both land and water are a necessary part of the total image of the crossing ferryboat. The two form a duality symbolic of the physical and the

spiritual, body and soul. (81)

Miller's suggestion that the poem exhibits "an eternal present" is important because of Whitman's insistence later in the poem that time and distance do not hinder the union for which he is searching. Miller continues by stating that it is "Brooklyn Ferry in transit, *crossing*, that brief period in the lives of the people when their individual and separate lots are all cast together, that the poet portrays as symbolic of the spiritual unity of all mankind" (81). I wish to elaborate on this idea by proposing that the setting of the ferry is a liminal space. Miller suggests that the physical proximity of the people on the ferry is a symbol for the "spiritual unity of all mankind"; I would go even further in saying that the crossing itself is a bridging of a gap between Whitman's present, the time when he himself is present on the ferry, and our own present. (Interestingly, it is the Brooklyn Bridge that stands today in place of the ferry.) In his book, *Walt Whitman and The American Reader*, Ezra Greenspan comments,

"Sun-Down Poem" stands out as the great vehicle of communication among the new poems of 1856. In no other poem of that edition did he more skillfully integrate art and life, and in the process stand the reader by his side as a bridge between the two. One of the best glosses on the poem, appropriately even if inadvertently, came from Emerson, who had written a decade before [in "The Poet"], "all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homesteads." (173-4)

The cyclical nature of the ferry's crossing also suggests that this bridging is not accomplished once, but again and again with each successive reading.

At the beginning of the poem itself, we find in the first section a speaker who seems to have an intense and deep connection with the natural world; this is Whitman exhibiting his Emersonian roots:

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west - sun there half an hour high - I see you also
face to face. (1.1-2)

Thus we begin with a direct address to elements of the natural world. The speaker's comments give us the impression that he is somehow closer to and more connected with nature than we might be. What this passage also communicates is the fact that the speaker is setting up a very specific time and place. He is definitely on a ferryboat, at high tide, with the sun at a specific place in the sky, and with clouds advancing from a specific direction. He uses the present tense here to refer to that moment. As we shall see throughout the poem, there is a general movement from specifics to universals. In the spirit of Socrates, Whitman begins from where he is, without instantly assuming a universal existence, and without initially overstepping the threshold of his humanity or the limits of his own time and place.

The poem continues, "Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how curious you are to me!" (1.3). Here the poet turns from nature to human beings, to the men and women surrounding him on the ferry. This move from clouds to crowds sets up the first apparent contradiction. Clouds, amorphous natural objects that normally obscure light and complicate vision, are seen with "face to face" clarity, whereas the crowds seem to obscure and disrupt the speaker's vision. Moreover, these lines indicate the state of the speaker's ability to connect with his world. At this point, direct relationship is only possible for him with the natural world; he is unable to directly connect with his contemporaries. This line represents the first movement from the specific time and place mentioned earlier to a more general one. The addressee is now neither the distinct tide, nor the clouds nor the sun, but rather the amorphous crowds. The word "usual" implies that this ferry crossing is similar to many other ferry crossings, indeed ones that take place every day. In the sense that the speaker is stepping back from that individual moment to reflect on the flow of moments, his present tense opens up the universal nature of particular daily occurrences.

The phrase "usual costumes" implies a certain sense of mystery. Whereas the speaker experiences nature directly, he is only able to experience those around him

through the mediation of clothing, “costumes,” that seem to indicate something permanent and true beneath the surface of appearances, also foreshadowing his drastic reevaluation of existence that we will soon encounter. His address to the crowds is troubling, for it is difficult to literally address a crowd other than as a congregation or an audience. This crowd is merely a collection of people on their way home from work, and the speaker addresses them as if they were a single individual. From this line, we see that Whitman indeed does have trouble communicating with those around him. There is the sense that daily life is merely a public show where private encounter and communion are not possible. Whitman would seek for that communion by addressing the reader instead, as that address is both singular and private. However, that address is also troubling, for it is mediated by the text, which is necessarily devoid of the poet’s physical existence.

The remainder of the first section foreshadows the union between speaker and reader that is ultimately Whitman's imaginative goal in the poem. The speaker continues,

On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross, returning
home, are more curious to me than you might suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are
more to me, and more in my meditations than you might
suppose. (1.4-5)

The speaker continues moving from specific to general; whereas the crowds of the third line were “men and women,” the fourth line addresses “the hundreds and hundreds that cross,” without mentioning their genders. Moreover, the “you” he mentions in this line does not have a definite reference. So far, he has applied the “you” pronoun to the tides, the clouds and sun, and the crowds on the ferry. Instead of directly addressing the “hundreds and hundreds that cross,” the speaker here converses *about* them to an ambiguous “you.” The “you” could possibly be those hundreds, the crowds mentioned in line three, or even the future readers addressed in the fifth line. This final shift in the first section sets up the shift that will occur later in the poem, the fusion between speaker and

reader. Here, the speaker represents linguistically what he will have to achieve if fusion is to occur, namely a negation of the standard hindrances of time and space. The speaker is able to know and ponder in the present tense a future action (“shall cross”). By stating confidently that he has thought long and hard about the specific future reader, any need for contemporaneity is abolished.

As we continue to the second section, the sense of the poem as being “other”-centered more clearly emerges; the poet begins to focus on something outside both himself and the poem. We also find a string of seeming contradictions, the first of which hints at the poet’s understanding of the nature of physical existence. We read in the first line of the second section, “The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day” (2.6). Although he mentions that the objects surrounding him at all times provide the spiritually formative support and subsistence that he needs (an idea first presented in “There Was a Child Went Forth”), we find that that support is intangible; essentially, there must be something inherent in physical existence that is not physical, and, as we shall see, this is exactly what the speaker reveals about body and spirit. The next line continues the string of contradictions; we read, “The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme” (2.7). Although the speaker calls the scheme “simple,” we find it to be anything but that. This clash between individuality and incorporation into a larger whole presents to the reader humanity’s double existence as body and soul, a theme elaborated on at the end of section five.

The struggle between individuality and incorporation also evinces the political aspect of the poem. From the start, Whitman’s poetic program has always had a political

aim to it, namely to incorporate the contradicting aspects of his nation within himself, to show that they could peacefully reside in the same existence. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” we find the conflict between the “simple separate person” and the being, “En-Masse” (“One’s-Self I Sing” 1-2) as a conflict between the individual speaker on the boat and his absorption with his contemporaries. The hoped-for fusion between speaker and reader, then, is political as well, as it details the interconnectedness of all existence, showing again how the world, and the United States in particular, can be seen as a body, each of whose parts are essential to the whole. Moreover, the political crisis brewing in the background of this poem is the perfect setting for the interrogative text, according to Belsey, whose system emerges from a Lacanian understanding of the division between the “‘I’ who speaks and the ‘I’ who is represented in the utterance” (78). Whereas the classic realist text seeks to “suppress the contradiction in the subject” in the interests of “the reproduction of existing relations of production” (78), the interrogative text emerges in “times of crisis in the social formation, when the mode of production is radically threatened, for instance, or in transition” (78-9). Thus the twofold existence of the speaker, although an intentional construction of Whitman’s, reflects the split in subject which in turn is a reflection of the changing national identity, itself a result of 19th-century political turmoil detailed in my first chapter.

The remainder of section two focuses on both the connection between disparate times and the connection between the poet and others. The speaker mentions “The similitudes of the past and those of the future” (2.8), immediately connecting what has happened in the past with what will happen in the future. The cyclical nature of the ferry’s crossing allows the speaker to compare past crossings with crossings to come. He

continues by taking another step from the specific to the general by mentioning not only the crossing of the river, but also “the walk in the street” (2.9). The speaker, who previously was present specifically on the ferry at a given point in time, now recedes into a space that is somewhat indefinite, between the ferry and the street. He mentions the specifics of his journey across the river, such as the current, only to connect them with the specifics of future crossings. Whitman’s “other”-centeredness becomes a constitutive trope of this section. While indicating the link between himself and others, the speaker also uses others as a link between the two halves of the section. He concludes the first half with the line, “The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others” (2.12), and he begins the second half with the line, “Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore” (2.13). “Others” play the necessary role of the intermediary between the speaker’s own present time, and the present time of the future reader. Even though the speaker seems to be unable to connect with those around him “face to face,” he is not unaware of their use as a poetic link to future “others.”

The experience of the “others” in this section is perhaps no different from the speaker’s own experience. The flood-tide still runs, the shipping still ships, and the islands large and small are still islands large and small. The insistence on this similarity sets up the paradox of permanence in or despite the flow of time. The speaker states, “Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun half an hour high” (2.17). The specific time and place set up by the speaker earlier in the poem remain the same, even though fifty years will pass, and different viewers will be present. Again, the dual nature of time and space emerges from this scene. The speaker concludes the second section by entering a new dimension of his connection with the future passenger. Up to

this point, the speaker has only connected himself with that future passenger via similar experiences and sights. The speaker now enters the future passenger's psychological mindset in stating that these others "Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide" (2.19); the speaker has assumed the ability to predict the future passenger's reaction to the shared sights and experiences. The phrase "pouring-in of the flood-tide" foreshadows the eventual fusion, the pouring-in of meaning from the speaker to the reader, and it is significant that he mentions it in the first connection with the future passenger beyond the merely spatio-temporal dimension.

Section three elaborates on the relation to time and space for the speaker and the reader, primarily by means of the artful manipulation of verb tenses. The section begins:

It avails not, time nor place - distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many
generations hence... (3.20-1)

These lines significantly shift the present tense into a future time. In section two the present tense referred primarily to the speaker's own time and space, literally his own journey across the river in the ferry. He refers to the future passenger, logically enough, in the future tense (those that "will see" and "will enjoy"). However, he now addresses these future passengers and readers in the present tense, by affirming, "I am with you," thereby projecting his existence forward, and in a sense transcending the limitations of time and space. The parallel structure of the first part of section three reinforces the speaker's ability to transcend space and time. The next five lines follow the pattern of "Just as you [reader's present action], so I [speaker's past action]." We read,

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright
flow, I was refresh'd
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current,
I stood yet was hurried,

Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-
stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd. (3.22-6)

Here the speaker also affirms his ability to peer into the reader's mind. In stating, "Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt," the speaker does not merely state what the reader's feelings are; he goes even further to confidently assert that those feelings are the same as his own. This is an important next step towards the fusion with the reader that the speaker hopes to eventually accomplish. In the line, "Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried," the paradox of permanence in the flow of time emerges as something shared between the speaker and reader. Perhaps this indicates that both speaker and reader possess the kind of double existence that allows for a stable, permanent self, and a flowing, mutable self.

The second part of section three presents the speaker's account of his own crossing, in the form of one of Whitman's finest catalog visions. Lawrence Buell defines the catalog as the "reiteration of analogous images or statements in paratactic form, in prose or verse" (166). Many critics have claimed that section three stands as one of the most impressive examples of Whitman's use of catalog rhetoric. However, if we consider it from Buell's perspective, this catalog is distinctly unorthodox. Buell tells us that in the catalog, "everything moves parallel, nothing moves forward" (166). This listing of images, however, does indeed move and progress forward, not only in the motion across the river, but also throughout time. Moreover, whereas Buell defines the three separate types of catalogs as expository, illustrative, and symbolic, section three transcends that stratification to include elements of all three. For Buell, the expository catalog marks "the development of a proposition by the use of overlapping statements in parallel form" (175); the illustrative catalog shows the "successive expressions of a general principle in the form of analogous exempla or images" (176); and the symbolic catalog displays "a series of meditations or guesses as to the meaning of a particular image" (177).

In section three, we find that all of these descriptions can partially describe the catalog we encounter there. It is expository in the sense that it posits and develops the idea of crossing the river. The first half of the catalog takes the form of a progression of different parallel statements. We read the repetition of “Saw” at the beginning of lines 29-31, the repetition of “Look’d” in lines 33-36, and again the repetition of “Saw” in lines 37-8. The catalog is illustrative in that it presents the succession of images that the passenger encounters in the journey across the river. The general principle evinced is that of crossing as symbolic of the nature of human existence. This brings us to the third catalogic category, the symbolic. This catalog is symbolic in a broad sense, as it induces the reader to ponder the meaning of the river and the ferryboat as symbols. As of yet there is no thorough explanation of the symbols, but rather an accumulation of different views of them.

The details of the catalog present more examples of the speaker’s expanding understanding of time and space as well as the fading away of his physical existence from the scene. The catalog begins with another emphatic statement that the speaker too has crossed the river many times and seen the sights offered therein:

I too many and many a time cross’d the river of old,
 Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the air
 floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies... (3.27-8)

Beyond that repeated assertion, we find another paradox of stability and permanence contrasted with motion, reenforcing the notion that in the moving and changing there is something universally stable; the birds are “floating” and “oscillating,” despite the fact that their wings are “motionless.” The catalog continues with the reevaluation of physical appearances. We read that the speaker “Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow” (3.29). He presents the physical existence of the birds by contrasting the visible with the invisible, suggesting again the interdependence of the physical and the spiritual. He claims that the sun allows us to see

parts of their bodies, which allows us to recognize their existence; however, he does not feel that what is not seen is not important. Rather, he claims that the rest is left in “strong shadow,” suggesting that the invisible is just as powerful and important as the visible. This recalls section three of “Song of Myself,” which could stand as a preface to this poem as a whole. We read there,

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my
soul.

Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn. (3.52-4)

Thus the physical world proves the existence of the intangible world, which we can reasonably connect with the soul.

The speaker continues his explication of appearances with his comments on the reflections in the water. He states that he

Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering tracks of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of
my head in the sunlit water... (3.31-3)

Whereas he begins the poem with his confident statement about his “face to face” encounter with the clouds in the sky, he now sees the sky mediated through the water. What was initially thought to be the fullness of existence is now seen as merely an appearance on the surface of a flowing yet more permanent existence. Moreover, the river reflects not only the sky, but also the speaker’s own image, surrounding it with a halo of light. We recall from the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman’s assertion of the divinity of humanity; there he claims that the old breed of priests and churches shall give way to new churches proclaiming the divinity of all humanity:

A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and
every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their
umbrage shall be the churches of men and women. Through the

divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets
 be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things.
 (Moon 634-5)

We recall also his assertion in “Song of Myself” that “I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least” (48.1281). Whitman’s brand of pantheism becomes more elaborate in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” thanks to the schematic understanding of the relationship between body and soul. The body, which is individual and gives identity, and which is symbolized by the firmness of land, is a necessary appearance that is connected with the universal soul, which is symbolized by the river. All individuals may peer into the river, and in doing so, they perceive their own divinity, which is connected to all others thanks to the universal soul.

After these assertions, the speaker now seems to see the world in a new light. What was before clear has now become somewhat vague, due perhaps to the kind of double-vision that the aforementioned assertion has induced. He now states that he

Look’d on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
 Look’d on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet... (3.34-5)

Within this new landscape, the speaker discovers a new connection with those around him. As the vessels arrive in the lower bay, the speaker states that he “saw aboard those that were near to me” (3.37). One could argue that this statement refers not only to the physical proximity of the speaker and passengers, but also to their shared existence in the universal soul. However, we cannot deny the trouble the speaker still has relating to those around him. He merely sees them, and he does not talk with them. They are more like a part of the landscape than unique and individual personalities.

The poet’s own identity seems to be in jeopardy throughout the course of this catalog. As previously mentioned, we find a progression of the speaker’s actions from lines 27-38, such as “Saw” and “Look’d.” However, after line 38, the speaker’s actions are no longer mentioned, and for all intents and purposes, his physical existence has

faded away. We no longer find his action in relation to the images, but rather just the images themselves. As the speaker fades into the background and eventually disappears, the scene itself takes on new life in its various motions. Everything presented is in constant motion, such as

The sailors *at work* in the rigging or out astride the spars,
The round masts, the *swinging motion* of the hulls, the slender
serpentine pennants,
The large and small steamers *in motion*, the pilots in their pilot-houses,
The white wake left by *the passage*, the *quick tremulous whirl* of the
wheels... (3.39-42, italics added for emphasis)

The life of the scene has ceased to be the speaker's memory and becomes a lived, present experience itself. The motion is inclusive as well; we find that both the "large and small steamers" are "in motion" and we see "The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset" (3.43). The scene slowly becomes more universal, and the experience is presented as available to anyone, not just to the speaker.

The catalog is inclusive of time as well; the experience of crossing the river spans the day to include the "glistening yellow" of the high sun (3.29), the falling of the flags at "sunset" (3.43), as well as the vision growing "dimmer and dimmer" with the fading of light (3.45). The speaker concludes the section with the lines,

On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely flank'd on
each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the belated lighter,
On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys burning
high and glaringly into the night,
Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and yellow light
over the tops of houses, and down into the clefts of streets.
(3.46-8)

As the day wanes and falls into night, the shadowy vagueness gives way to flashes of fire and life against the black background of night. The speaker presents pulsating life even in the dark of night, from the smallest cracks in the street to far above the tops of houses. Wild life lurks throughout both the expected and unexpected locations, indeed throughout

the entire scene. The speaker beautifully concludes his catalog with the flame-like attributes of the universal soul, regardless of whether or not his individual, physical existence is present to observe them.

Section four stands as the hinge of the poem, balancing the initial presentation of sensual experience with the forthcoming evaluation of emotions and eventual fusion between the speaker and reader. This short section indicates, among other things, the possibility of union between the speaker and reader, as well as, significantly, the physical death of the speaker. The section begins with the epitaph-like lines,

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
The men and women I saw were all near to me... (4.49-51)

Looking back on the previous section's catalog of sights seen while crossing, the speaker maintains again his ability to peer into the psychology of the reader, stating that the particulars of the crossing "were to me the same as they are to you." His continued past tense reaffirms his projection of himself forward in time. Previously he encountered his fellow passengers and claimed that those aboard "were near me," possibly both physically and spiritually; here we find that idea emphasized again, only this time, physical proximity need not exist. Those whom he saw were "all near to me," and in the next line we find that vision itself is not even necessary for spiritual proximity to occur. He concludes,

Others the same - others who look back on me because I look'd
forward to them,
(The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.) (4.52-3)

The "others" of the future are also near to the speaker, not because they are in physical or even visual contact, but perhaps because of their shared, universal soul.

Moreover, these concluding lines indicate largely that the speaker has actually created his own reader, or rather, he has at least asserted that the reader will exist. He

maintains that there will be others who will “look back on me because I look’d forward to them,” thereby assuring the reader that he or she does exist, and in the process assuring himself that he will survive his texts. Ironically, we only become aware of this by reading the poem. He claims that his action of looking forward to the future reader must be reciprocated by the future reader looking back to him, a prediction confirmed with each successive reading of the poem. This personal, private contact thus cannot depend on his own physical existence. He asserts that the reciprocity of his exchange with the future reader will happen, even though “I stop here to-day and to-night.” Interestingly, this final line is parenthetical, indicating that the speaker’s physical stopping has made that physical existence a thing of the past, a ghost now relegated to parenthetical existence. However, the fact that he is able to express this indicates that some part of himself has survived the stopping.

Section five begins, logically enough, with the first questions posed to the reader about whether or not there is actually anything standing in the way of the speaker’s hoped-for fusion. He asks,

What is it then between us?
 What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? (5.54-5)

These questions are significant for a number of reasons. First of all, we find another important step towards fusion, as the speaker for the first time uses the first person plural pronoun, indicating that linguistically they are already one. Moreover, as James E. Miller Jr. states, “Already in these questions lurks the assumption that there is no insurmountable barrier between poet and reader, that complete identification is imminent” (84). If the speaker’s physical existence has faded, as time demands, and his spiritual existence remains to make these questions and statements, then indeed, what is it that stands in the way of communion between speaker and reader? Although fusion is imminent, the speaker does not yet present it, as he feels he must still explore certain

regions of both himself, and by implication, the reader. These questions are filled half with certainty and half with doubt, and the answer he posits here demands another evaluation of his connection with the reader. He states that “Whatever it is, it avails not - distance avails not, and place avails not” (5.56). He still speaks of what separates him and the reader as something, “Whatever it is,” that exists, even if it does not stand in the way.

Section five continues with the speaker’s actions, thoughts and feelings, and the affirmation that the reader shares in them. He continues,

I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk’d the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters
around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon
me... (5.57-61)

He has now progressed beyond the confines of the ferry to go amid the streets and waters of the cities. Moreover, he begins to evaluate his own shames and failings, which he projects upon the reader, and which are to play a major role in section six. His claim that “*I too* felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me” (italics added) indicates that the reader must have admitted that about him or herself first. The speaker enhances the intimacy that such admissions allow for by continuing the progression from the public street to his own bed at night. The conclusion of section five brings this closeness to the forefront and finally explains the speaker’s understanding of the nature of human existence.

His conclusion has a significant link to the brand of progressive science to which Whitman was an adherent. He concludes the section:

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
 I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
 That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I
 should be of my body. (5.62-4)

The “simple, compact, well-join'd scheme” has been elaborated and explicated as the scientific understanding of both individuality and monism. The solution is in essence the universal soul that all existence shares and that remains part of all existence even after birth. The birth of individuality is signaled by a strike, the emergence of physical being in the form of the body. The body allows for individuality and identity, but does not negate the shared existence of the soul. David Reynolds observes the connection of this passage with the progressive science of Whitman's day:

According to the progressive view, the earth and other astronomical bodies were originally formed from huge floating gaseous clouds, called nebulae, that rotated and condensed into matter. In [biologist Robert] Chambers's version of the theory in *Vestiges of Creation*, the universe was formed of gases that developed constantly toward man. (By a poetic metonymy, Whitman enacted this idea when he wrote in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution.”) (242)

As we all share the common origin of the nebulae, symbolizing for Whitman the soul, we are all connected as part of the same existence, regardless of the eventual physical emergence of individuality. If time and space are negated, as the poem proposes, then we can freely venture back to our primal existence in the spiritual nebula.

Whereas section five introduces the confessional aspect of the poem, section six brings this aspect to its emotional pinnacle. Again, the speaker utilizes the form of statement in which he implies that the reader has made his or her admission first, and he is responding to it. He states,

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
 The dark threw its patches down upon me also,
 The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,

My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality
meagre? (6.65-8)

This passage is perhaps the most intriguing and interesting in the context of Whitman's own life. We recall the portion of Whitman's notebook quoted in our first chapter regarding Whitman's depression due to what he perceived to be the failure of his first edition. He writes,

Everything I have done seems to me blank and suspicious. - I doubt whether my greatest thoughts, as I supposed them, are not shallow - and people will most likely laugh at me. - My pride is impotent, my love gets no response. - the complacency of nature is hateful - I am filled with restlessness. - I am incomplete. - (Reynolds 349)

This extremely personal admission of his own feelings of inadequacy has become part of his poem. While he privately feels "incomplete," he attempts to find that completion in the communion with his reader, partially by means of the shared sensations of personal failure. To join himself wholly with his reader, he must first present himself wholly, including his own self-doubts.

The speaker continues by describing himself in a manner reminiscent of Hamlet in the memorable first scene of Act III. In this scene, Hamlet states to Ophelia,

...I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. (III.i.132-8)

These admissions are not necessarily confessions of sins, but rather bold statements indicating the true depth and vastness of human possibility. They are essential to Hamlet's character. Similarly, the speaker's admissions, though they may take the form of a confession, are rather necessary attributes of all humanity. The speaker offers,

Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,

I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
 Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
 Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak... (6.69-73)

To offer himself to the reader without mentioning these attributes would be to leave half his portrait unpainted. Thus he offers them to the reader in joyful, though imagined, response to the reader's own implied offerings. The absence of guilt indicates, as Miller comments, that the seeming sins are an "inevitable, universal, perhaps immediately painful but nevertheless ultimately enjoyable, part of assuming a physical identity" (86). Thus, his flaws confirm his full humanity.

The absence of guilt becomes noticeable as the section moves from the speaker's seeming sins to the more apparently positive interactions with his contemporaries. He continues,

Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
 Was called by my nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as
 they saw me approaching or passing,
 Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning of their
 flesh against me as I sat,
 Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly, yet
 never told them a word... (6.78-81)

Despite the confessional atmosphere of the previous lines, the physicality of this passage emerges as, if anything, a positive aspect of the speaker's character. The speaker details how close he has come in the past with his contemporaries to the kind of direct connection he is seeking with the reader. If there is any guilt at all in this passage, it is certainly in the fact that he saw many whom he loved, "yet never told them a word." Perhaps the poem represents the speaker's penance; by announcing to the reader what he withheld from his contemporaries, he is atoning for that withholding.

He concludes section six with a passage that sees life as a play of actors and actresses. He ends the section with the statement that he

Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing, gnawing,
 sleeping,
 Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
 The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as we
 like,
 Or as small as we like, or both great and small. (6.82-5)

Physical existence, understood as a being that is “struck from the float forever held in solution” can be seen as a form, an appearance, a “usual costume” that we all don to both receive and express our individuality. When thinking of the body as an actor or actress, there is the tendency to assume that the spiritual existence is privileged over the false appearances of physicality; this would be a grave mistake. To understand more fully what the speaker intends in this statement, we must peer into Whitman’s own feelings about the theater.

David Reynolds gives a wonderful account of Whitman’s impressions of the theater. He writes that Whitman “said he spent his young manhood ‘absorbing theatres at every pore’ and seeing ‘everything, high, low, middling’” (156). Theater for Whitman was far more than mere entertainment; it became an inspiration, and perhaps one of the greatest influences on his early poetry. Reynolds presents Whitman “spouting Shakespeare atop omnibuses, declaiming Homer and Ossian at the seashore, and humming arias on the street” (156). Clearly, theatricality extended for Whitman beyond the walls of the theater itself. In Whitman’s time, the theater drew crowds from all social classes; the democratic aspect of the crowd became increasingly important to Whitman’s sensibility. Reynolds comments that by far, “the most important aspect of the theater experience for Whitman was the interaction between audience and performer” (157). The audience of his day would loudly and passionately applaud performances they enjoyed, and riot at performances they did not. This emphasis on action and reaction, this “interest in audience-performer intimacy,” Reynolds states, “explains his attraction to performers who crossed the boundary between themselves and their listeners” (158).

Whitman's favorite actor, Junius Brutus Booth, displayed that ability again and again with his intensely passionate performances, especially of Shakespearian villains.

Whitman did not take theater lightly; Reynolds quotes him as saying, "I demand that my whole emotional nature be powerfully stirred" (158-9). Booth's dramatic stylings accomplished that feat for Whitman. His varied technique spanned the theatrical spectrum from "valleys of restraint to peaks of near frenzy" (159). Reynolds quotes Whitman's interpretation of Booth's style, stating that when Booth "was in a passion...face, neck, hands, would be suffused, his eye would be frightful - his whole mien enough to scare audience, actors; often the actors *were* afraid of him" (159). This most certainly is not a form of acting that falsifies life, not a mask that merely imitates humanity. This form of acting becomes life itself. In Booth's portrayal of Richard III, Reynolds comments that so "utter was his absorption in a role that he challenged the boundaries between life and art" (160). This boundary is the same boundary Whitman brings into question with "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"; the line between his artistic presentation and the actual connection between himself and the future reader diminishes throughout the poem as the speaker accomplishes the fusion that he set out to achieve.

Thus Whitman's view of acting is far from a mere mimicking of life. Actors are those who assume identities and live those identities to their fullest while they are still able to assume them. The roles themselves need not be large to be great; the speaker includes roles "as great as we like, / Or as small as we like, or both great and small." Spanning the modern distinction between high culture, like Shakespeare, and lower culture, like minstrel shows, Whitman was an avid fan of both. Just as he includes both the heights of communion with others and the depths of self-doubt, the speaker does not deny any aspect of the role we play in our lives, even if that role is only temporary.

As we progress into the final third of the poem, the specifics of time and place have been abandoned, and the speaker focuses on the personal connection between himself and the reader most intensely. Section seven begins with the statements,

Closer yet I approach you,
 What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you - I laid
 my stores in advance,
 I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born. (7.86-8)

Despite the negation of his physical existence, the poet expresses in very physical terms the proximity between himself and the reader. He approaches “Closer yet,” indicating a measurable distance between them that is gradually decreasing. He also constructs the reader more substantially in these lines. Up to this point, the reader has been primarily an abstract mirroring of the speaker’s own thoughts and feelings. Here, however, the reader acquires his or her own historical position, established at the moment when, as the speaker mentions, “you were born.” The reader’s birth, while granting a greater sense of his or her own physicality, also grants him or her a more intense personality; the reader is more aware of his or her own existence, not merely as a reflection of the speaker, but as an “other” to which the speaker may journey.

That journey, however, is not a journey either forward or backward in time or space. These limitations have been shown to be null and void, and, as the concluding questions in the section prove, the speaker does not situate himself within their bounds. The speaker asks,

Who was to know what should come home to me?
 Who knows but I am enjoying this?
 Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you
 now, for all you cannot see me? (7.89-91)

Although his mention of “what should come home to me” hints that the reader has journeyed back to the speaker’s time and place by means of imaginative memory, and his mention of being present, “looking at you now” hints that the speaker has journeyed forward to greet the reader, we get the sense that these motions (at least as physical motions) are not necessary, for there is nothing separating the speaker and reader, except for the text itself, which paradoxically both separates and brings together. The speaker,

who has lost his physical existence, speaks from his spiritual one, and, as we have seen, this is an existence that permeates all reality. Essentially, the speaker is everywhere, even “under your boot-soles” as the conclusion to “Song of Myself” asserts (52.1340).

The form of these questions reminds us of the questions in section five; however, there are some notable differences. In section five, we recall that the questions are posed as open questions about what stands between the speaker and reader. The answer is that “Whatever it is, it avails not” (5.56), suggesting that it is something that actually exists, and that despite the fact that it does not hinder communication, “Whatever it is” is still there. In section seven’s questions, however, the speaker now feels that there is nothing between himself and the reader. Instead of asking what stands between himself and the reader, he inquires “Who knows...”; his questions are more like declarative statements of fact than sincere requests for answers. Apparently, the answer to his question is that no one knows, and so therefore there is no separation, because there is nothing to be known.

Section eight clarifies this web of questions, oddly enough by posing nothing but more questions. The speaker asks a new, rhetorical question in each of the nine lines of the section. He begins the section with the artful recapitulation of the crossing, only this time without the motion across the river; in its place we find his emotional response to the individual sights:

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-
hemmed Manhattan?
River and sunset and scallop-edged waves of flood-tide?
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the twilight,
and the belated lighter? (8.92-4)

Significantly, he lists the selective sights out of the order in which they are initially presented; the “River and sunset and scallop-edged waves” recall the “scallop-edged waves in the twilight” of line 44, the “sea-gulls oscillating their bodies” first appeared in line 28, and the “hay-boat” and “belated lighter” emerged first in line 46. The back and

forth motion of recollection disrupts the original flow of the crossing throughout time. Since the speaker has effectively done away with time and space, he needs no longer to adhere to that original flow. Moreover, the questions asked by the speaker are themselves not ordinary questions. They do not seek new information, but rather confirmation of the bold statements they make. When we read that first question, we imagine the answer to be that nothing “can ever be more stately and admirable” to the speaker than the sights he presents, and our agreement with the poet confirms our unity with him.

The buildup of the poem as a whole and of this section in particular reaches its pinnacle in the following questions. Here the hoped-for and long-prepared-for fusion finally occurs. The speaker asks,

What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices
 I love call me promptly and loudly by my highest name as I
 approach?
 What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that
 looks in my face?
 Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you? (8.95-7)

He continues with more questions intended to emphasize their own statements. We assume that no “gods can exceed” those that are connected with the speaker by physical or vocal contact. From this divine contact emerges the face to face contact, albeit more imagined than real, with humanity, the contact of which the speaker was not initially capable. Just as we have learned about the nature of humanity by reading the poem, the speaker too has learned and gained the ability to connect with “the woman or man that looks in my face” by writing it, and in so doing, has come to the point where complete and total contact with the reader, at least within the text, is possible. The power of spirit that finally allows him to have intimate contact with his contemporaries also allows him to fuse his existence with the reader’s, to literally pour his “meaning” into that reader.

That power, the knowledge of humanity's shared, single, universal soul, is indeed subtle; the knowledge learned is that "nothing" stands in the way of communion. Thus the speaker finds that the only way to speak of it is by posing questions whose answers are "nothing."

The speaker completes the section with questions directly addressed to the reader concerning the fusion, the intent being, as Belsey would argue, that the reader would complete the text by asserting what those questions imply. The speaker asks,

We understand then do we not?
 What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
 What the study could not teach - what the preaching could not
 accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not? (8.98-100)

The speaker's questions abound in negatives, indicating even more strongly that what he is speaking about is something just beyond the grasp of language. The fusion cannot be adequately represented in language, for in language there must always be two parties, the speaker/writer and the listener/reader. The accomplishment of the speaker, the fusion of these two entities, abolishes the need for language, although, paradoxically, our primary way of discovering this fusion is by reading the poem. Again, the speaker's assertion that there is nothing between us and him is true in the sense of spiritual existence; however, the text itself necessarily remains as the intermediary informing us as such. This opens up the use of language, and more broadly, the usefulness of the physical world, the main subject of the final section of the poem.

Ezra Greenspan comments extensively on the final section of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"; he states that beyond the fusion of speaker and reader and "with larger philosophic scope he goes one step further, closing the poem with one last direct address...to the material objects which form man's natural setting" (173). This direct address indicates just how useful and powerful physical existence is; Greenspan continues by stating that there is "scarcely a more dignified articulation of the availability

of the material world to poetry in all of nineteenth century writing” (173). The form of this great enunciation is a continuation of the recapitulation of the images presented throughout the poem. The speaker importantly returns to the specifics of his world, after having reached the broadest sense of universality, giving the poem itself a circular feel. However, we find that the images have taken on new and wondrous intensities, and much broader scopes. It now seems that the speaker’s expression has its roots in the statement made in “To Think of Time,” another poem new to the second edition. We read in that poem, “What will be will be well, for what is is well” (6.64). The juxtapositions and contradictions throughout the poem presented in opposition to each other, such as permanence and the flow of time, the individual and universal existence of humanity, and even the simple rise and fall of the tides are now presented as different aspects of a single grand scene. Reading this closing, we get the sense that everything is able to perform a unique role in the play of existence, that the physical is just as valuable and just as important as the spiritual.

He begins the final section by urging on the flow of the river, signifying now both the flow of time and the atemporal spiritual existence of humanity. Rather than arguing against the flow of time and the specificity of space, the speaker glowingly praises them in words far richer than their previous evaluation. We read,

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
 Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg’d waves!
 Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me, or the
 men and women generations after me! (9.101-3)

With such laudatory words as “Gorgeous” and such intensely physical verbs as “drench,” the speaker joyously reclaims the physical world and all its grandeur. Again, in homage to the cyclical nature of the poem he urges, “Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!” (9.104). All that has occurred within the framework of time in the poem is urged to continue to occur, again and again. He begs the “loving and thirsting eyes” to

“Gaze...in the house or street or public assembly!” (9.108), truly to find sustenance from all around, thus also bringing the poem back to its beginning. Moreover, he does not disavow the theatricality of life with his newly discovered sense of spiritual unity.

Rather, he boldly states,

Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or actress!
Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one
makes it! (9.110-1)

The notion of the role being either great or small (or both) extends now beyond that role in itself to include the greatness and smallness of every part of the scene, including everything from the tides to the motions of the birds in the sky.

The speaker confidently asserts the importance of appearances. Recalling the scene when he peered into the water and received the image of both the sky and his own face, the speaker states,

Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all
downcast eyes have time to take it from you!
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any
one's head, in the sunlit water! (9.115-6)

What he previously merely implied, the speaker now states with directness and clarity. Earlier he mentioned seeing his own face reflected in the water, and we assumed that everyone would also be able to see their own reflection; here the speaker states this overtly, including within this image the idea of universal divinity. Just as we all share in the universal soul, we are all able to peer into that soul and see our own divinity.

Moreover, he continues,

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our
divinest aromas... (9.120-2)

Physicality allows us to identify the individuality of each and every part of the scene; it is a “necessary film,” something that is absolutely essential, but not something that obscures nature itself. The film, most certainly, is transparent. These lines echo in another 1856 poem, “Song of the Open Road.” We read there,

Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop'd,
I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words
can tell. (9.118-9)

Obviously this emphasis on the relationship between body and soul is one of the major themes of the second edition.

The speaker continues with an exaltation of urban life, the most spiritual of entities, for it allows for the largest groupings of individuals and a vast array of different objects, all partly sharing in a common existence. We read,

Thrive, cities - bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and
sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting. (9.123-5)

The physical has now attained the same heights as the spiritual, for they are on the same plane of existence now. The physical has its own grandeur that is only enhanced by its dependence on the spiritual. The individual objects are immortal because of that spirituality.

If in presenting the final section, I quote it at length, I do so only so as not to disrupt the majestic flow of these awe-inspiring final words:

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves
from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside - we plant you permanently
within us,
We fathom you not - we love you - there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,

Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul. (9.126-132)

The speaker has not made these claims without a long and elaborate progression. The proof is in the poem, and the physical world is the stuff of poetry. Objects, previously thought to be simply physical aspects of a vision, play their own roles. They are “dumb, beautiful ministers,” true links to the divinity of every part and particle of the universe. No longer do the normal limitations of time and space hinder the speaker/reader’s sensual experience; they receive the objects with “free sense at last.” There are no more obstacles to direct intuition. If anything, the physical world now helps the speaker/reader in their endeavor. Moreover, the speaker and reader, who have now fused into one communal “we,” are now able to fuse with each and every object in the grand scene. The speaker addresses the objects, “We use you, and do not cast you aside - we plant you permanently within us.” They now devour the scene with passionate love.

However, this final passage does not fall into the trap the poem necessarily sets for itself. If every part and particle of the world is connected by a universal soul, then it would seem that there would be nothing in the way of encompassing the whole of individual personalities. The speaker skillfully skirts this by stating that “We fathom you not - we love you.” Despite the fact that every bit of the world shares in the same existence, that does not mean that one can understand every bit of the world. Knowledge is not an omnivorous beast; affection dominates over intellectual apprehension. Just as humanity is an actor, whose role is great or small according as one wills, so too does the physical world play its part. “Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.” Thus the grand bard of balance between democracy and individuality has accomplished the greatest high-wire act possible; next we will see just what that accomplishment entails.

Chapter IV

“We Understand Then Do We Not?": Conclusion

“Whatever may have been the case in years gone by, the true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives, endowing them with the glows and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing, and to real things only. Without the ultimate vivification - which the poet or other artist alone can give - reality would seem incomplete, and science, democracy, and life itself, finally in vain” (quoted in Moon 474).

Written in 1888 as part of “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” the sentences above have the advantage of retrospection. Whitman, having just reached the ripe age of 69, reviews in this essay the journey that he has taken throughout his life, accompanied by *Leaves of Grass*, the book that he so insistently claims to be his truest expression. Although these words were penned more than thirty years after the publication of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856), they seem to express quite well one of the primary intentions of that edition, and more specifically, of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” the intention to express the life and purpose of what Whitman calls “every real thing.”

In Whitman’s own words from “Song of Myself,” “It is time to explain myself – let us stand up” (44.1134). As we look back on this central poem, we should take note of several intentions and goals that Whitman attempts to accomplish. We should also take note of the success of each of Whitman’s various aims. In this conclusion, I hope to express the accomplishment that Whitman achieved in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,”

despite both his own impressions of failure and the negative response of his contemporary audience.

The first and most important intention of the poem is to create both a speaker and a reader who represent two individual beings who are able to connect with each other in various ways. Secondly, Whitman intends to create a situation in which their communion becomes possible, a situation in which their imaginative fusion can occur. In doing so, he also intends to reevaluate the role that physical existence plays in our world. Finally, Whitman, as any artist would, desires the acceptance of the audience outside of the text. To mention this desire, however, is to realize that not all of these goals are ultimately achieved. As we shall see, Whitman's experiment in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is not a complete and total success by Whitman's own reckoning; the mutual absorption between his nation and himself has not yet come to fruition. Nevertheless, he has still succeeded in writing one of the finest poems of the 19th century.

Whitman's initial intent, and the first step towards his ultimate goal, is the creation of both self and reader. Since much of Whitman's project is tied up with the circumstances of his own life, it is not surprising that he introduces elements of his own thoughts and feelings into the poem, attributing them to his speaker. The passages from his notebooks that deal with the depression he felt during the composition of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and that emerge in section six of the poem, are perhaps the most significant example of this attribution. Although the "I" of the poem is indeed fictional, the blending of the real Whitman of history and the Whitman of the text that the second edition accomplishes, and that I discuss in my first chapter, grounds that created self in the actual existence of Walt Whitman. Moreover, as Howard J. Waskow has proposed, and as Kerry C. Larson also believes, Whitman creates the reader of the poem as well. Waskow states that Whitman "would cultivate our sense of individual identity, our sense of specialness, so that we might more willingly enter the world of his poem, all of whose inhabitants are 'curious'" (216) to his speaker. He continues by stating that "only by

asserting self, using the special quality that is imagination, will we be able to join his harmonious community” (216). In a sense, we must read the poem by assuming the identity of the “reader” that Whitman creates, just as an actor portrays a role with great passion and life. Whitman successfully juxtaposes actual identities with created identities, a juxtaposition that constitutes a major element of the design and structure of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

Next Whitman creates a link between the created speaker and reader in the poem, realizing this goal through an act of imaginative fusion. Kerry Larson elaborates on this point, when he states about “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” that

Its immediate ambition is not to insinuate a paraphrasable “theme” or elaborate an archetypal “mythology”; it wants to imagine itself antecedent to such formulations. As we are made to recognize from the first line - “flood tide below me! I see you face to face!” - to the last - “we plant you permanently within us” - the goal is not so much communication as communion. (10)

Indeed, communion is the ultimate goal of the poem; it also reflects the aim of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* as a whole to emphasize more strongly the individuality and personality of the speaker, who is now, for the first time, able to commune intimately with the reader. Throughout the poem, we are aware of the speaker’s insistence that the particularities of time and space are both mutable and permanent. The same scene he has experienced, we experience, or at least so he claims. Section three of the poem, in portraying the crossing so vividly and in such great detail, bears out this claim with imaginative force. We experience the crossing concurrently with the speaker; the poem indeed becomes a lived experience. Thus the ultimate fusion we undergo with the speaker is not necessarily shocking, because the speaker prepares us for it, both by creating our shared experience, and by elaborating on his notion of the nature of existence.

The reality that underlies the speaker's argument stands as his primary means of bringing about our eventual fusion with him. The foundational symbols of the poem, the land and the water, represent for the speaker the two states of human existence, the physical and the spiritual. We recall the memorable lines,

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I
should be of my body. (5.62-4)

The speaker's individuality, along with that of the reader and of "every real thing," is accessible only as a result of their physicality. The double-nature of existence does not indicate that everything is the same; rather, it explains that physicality is necessary and that it delineates the borders between different entities. This understanding of reality emphasizes that on a fundamental level, everything shares a basic identity. Because the speaker is able to say this, we understand that the speaker is connected with the historical Walt Whitman, with the physical world presented in the poem, and even with us, the poem's future (now present) readers. This is the crux of the speaker's argument; without this understanding, the fusion between the speaker and reader would simply be words on a page.

However, James E. Miller Jr. reminds us that this realization in no way negates the importance of the physical world. He writes, "As elsewhere in Whitman, we discover the paradox of the spiritual attained through acceptance, not denial, of the physical or material" (89). The conclusion of the poem is a sincere and heartfelt offering of worship to the physical world, since it is only through the physical world that we can attain knowledge of the spiritual. The interconnectedness of all creation links that creation with the divine as well. An idea that had always intrigued Whitman, from his doubts about appearances in "There Was a Child Went Forth" all the way up to his remarks about looking back over a career of more than thirty years, the notion of a divine nature existing

within the outer shell of appearances emerges in this poem, as well as several other poems of the second edition. Whitman, in a sense, is simply reiterating the sermons of Henry Ward Beecher, who said, “Do you suppose I study old, musty books when I want to preach?...*I study you!* When I want to deliver a discourse on theology, *I study you!*” (Reynolds 173).

Another point of interest is the popular success of both the poem itself and of the second edition (1856) of *Leaves of Grass*, in which it first appeared. In evaluating that success, we discover a mixed response. In a letter to H.G.O. Blake, Henry David Thoreau comments,

That Walt Whitman, of whom I wrote to you, is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his 2nd edition (which he gave me) and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. Perhaps I remember best the poem of Walt Whitman an American & the Sun Down Poem [“Song of Myself” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”]. (Moon 801)

Despite such critical acclaim from such a noteworthy source, the overwhelming critical sentiment was even more negative than the response to the first edition. Ezra Greenspan comments that the “first edition had excited a small but intense interest in a few places; the second edition generated all but none. Sales were few and reviews were virtually nonexistent” (174). David Reynolds quotes one of the few critical reviews of the edition, William Swinton’s from the New York *Daily Times*; he writes that Swinton

noted with irony that “this self-contained teacher, this rough-and-ready scorner of dishonesty, this rowdy knight-errant who tilts against all lies and shams, himself perpetuates a lie and a sham at the very outset of his career.” (362)

Reynolds ultimately concludes that, “Having spoken again, the Answerer was even further from mass acceptance than before” (363). Indeed, his status as a poet was far from being validated by his own standards.

However, we should not judge his work merely by reading contemporary reviews. Although they are a good source of information about his own public's response to his work, they need not in any way influence our own interpretation. For that we must look at the poem itself. What we find in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is an imaginative feat on a par with the greatest poems written in English. The poem brings into balance the tensions between the imagination and reality, between the physical and the spiritual, and indeed between the speaker and the reader. Judging the poem by the poem's own logic, it is an enormously overwhelming success. As we read the poem we do indeed agree with the speaker's assertions; if we were to disagree we would cast ourselves out of the communion. The poem will always be there to welcome us back. Moreover, the poem allows for an intimate connection between an individual speaker and an individual reader. Whitman's projection of his own existence into the future, although imagined, is real within the poem's own sense of reality.

This brings us to our final point, that the poem is a success in itself, not despite its existence but because of it. As spiritual as the speaker asserts and as intimate as we imagine the union to be, we cannot forget that what stands between the speaker and reader is the poem itself. The text is our only link to the reality Whitman has created. However, it is also a barrier between his existence and our own, an intermediary between our respective selves, and a link, from which Whitman himself is notably absent. As an imaginative work that must be read within the flow of time, its own assertions about the negation of time and space are brought into question. We cannot help but notice the clock before and after our reading of the poem; we cannot help but realize that time has elapsed; we cannot help but realize that we are indeed sitting in a chair in a room while reading a book we are holding in our hands. Whitman is quite aware of our relation to time and space, and perhaps this is the reason he ends his poem with a salute to the physical world, for it is in that world that we are situated and in that world that we read the poem. Nevertheless, just as the actor removes his costume and resumes his own

individuality, the speaker ends the poem and we conclude its reading. Our imagination, deeply enriched as a result of the reading, is faced again with the solidity of real things, perhaps seen in a new light. Nevertheless, this reader cannot help but look twice at his own reflection in the water, and even over his shoulder, while reading the poem.

Bibliography

- Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973.
- Cavitch, David. *My Soul and I: The Inner Life of Walt Whitman*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Writings Of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. William H. Gilman, ed. New York: New American Library, 1965.
- Greenspan, Ezra. *Walt Whitman and the American Reader*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Grier, Edward F., ed. *Walt Whitman: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts: Volume I: Family Notes and Autobiography Brooklyn and New York*. New York: New York UP, 1984.
- Jarrell, Randall. *No Other Book: Selected Essays*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.
- Kaplan, Justin. *Walt Whitman: A Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980.
- Larson, Kerry C. *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Miller, James E., Jr. *Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- Moon, Michael, ed. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*. Walt Whitman. Norton Critical ed. New York: WW Norton & Co., 2002.
- Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York:

Vintage Books, 1995.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New Folger Library ed. New York: Washington Square Press /Pocket Books, 1992.

Waskow, Howard J. *Whitman: Explorations in Form*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.