

Whitman's Lyrics?

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Did Walt Whitman write lyric poems? In the traditional division of poetic modes into lyric, epic, and dramatic, lyric is the genre that claims the closest connection to written poetry's origins in 'song', foregrounding the phenomenal features of linguistic shape and sound, and promoting these elements to the status of organizing principles (over and above the narrative elements that structure epic and dramatic poetry). Moreover, the concept of lyric, like other generic categories, is fundamentally comparative, such that these features gain significance through the ways in which a poet adopts and adapts conventions from other poems that have been classified as lyrics. From an early point in his career, Whitman had a complex relationship to this framework, claiming ancient and early modern texts as models but rejecting conventions (of both genre and versification) from more recent poetic traditions. He admired the scale and ambition of Homeric epic and Shakespearean drama, and clearly aimed to produce the kind of 'national epic' that would become a shorthand for a new, American national and cultural identity,¹

¹ In his notes, Whitman kept annotated lists and article clippings about such works, including not just European models but also examples from Ancient Egyptian, East Asian, Hebrew, Indian,

while also acknowledging his work to be decidedly 'subjective' (a term he associated with lyric) rather than 'objective' (meaning historiographic, a term he aligned with epic and sometimes drama).² In a note dated September 1856, Whitman writes: 'Leaves of Grass must be called *not* objective but altogether *subjective*—"I Know" runs through them as a perpetual refrain. Yet the Greek poems, also the Teutonic poems, also Shakespeare and all the great masters have been objective, epic—they have described characters, events, wars, heroes, &c.'³ This comment shows some of his ambivalence toward identifying his work with the lyric mode alone: on the one hand, the lyric/subjective mode is conceived of as a regularly recurring feature, a 'refrain', in a (presumably mixed-mode) whole, but on the other hand, he seems to aim at a synthesis of subjective and objective modes: *Leaves of Grass* would be 'altogether' subjective (lyric) but on an epic scale.⁴ In addition, the distinction between a first-person, subjective voice of lyric and a third-person, historical voice of epic is highly schematic, leaving Whitman's relation to a more nuanced set of conventions that have come to be associated with lyric largely unstated and perhaps unconscious.

How the idea of lyric operates at the level of individual poems and groups of poems confronts a similar issue. Several of Whitman's poems can be identified with specific lyric subgenres such as elegy ('When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd') or ode ('Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'), but whether a substantial portion of them can or should be considered lyrics involves an implicit conception of the poet's oeuvre in general: was Whitman a multi-modal poet who

Native American, Persian, and Scandinavia traditions. See Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, ed. by Richard Maurice Bucke (London, Ontario: A. Talbot & Co., 1899).

² Whitman's understanding of epic as objective and lyric as subjective follows the German romantic definitions of epic, lyric, and drama as objective, subjective, and mixed modes, respectively (though in some accounts epic is seen as mixed and drama objective). For a cogent discussion of Whitman's thinking about genre in relation to ancient literary traditions, see Wai Chee Dimock, 'Epic and Lyric: The Aegean, the Nile, and Whitman', in *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes the Present*, ed. by David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), pp. 17–36; and Dimock, 'The Egyptian Pronoun: Lyric, Novel, the *Book of the Dead*', *New Literary History*, 39.3 (2008), 619–43.

³ Fragment 70 in Whitman, *Notes and Fragments*, p. 73; also quoted in Dimock, 'Egyptian Pronoun', p. 643.

⁴ Another note reads in part: 'Subjective or lyric, objective or epic, as for instance the Iliad is notably objective but "Leaves of Grass" are profoundly subjective' (*Notes and Fragments*, p. 161).

wrote in many different genres (of which lyric was one)? Or did he write in a largely unified, iconoclastic mode, the very purpose of which was to break with traditional distinctions among genres, including even the distinction between verse and prose? This latter line of questioning shifts the focus (too quickly, in my view) onto what is *new* about Whitman's poetic practice, passing over the continuities with existing genres—the comparative background against which his innovations can be recognized as such—in favour of describing the features of a radically new poetic style that has left genre distinctions and other conventions, including internal variations, behind. Large-scale poems like 'Song of Myself', which have come to exemplify what we think of as 'Whitmanian', are characterized by his free-verse line, demotic American diction, paratactic epic catalogues, and the personal, poetic, and political project underlying Whitman's expansive concept of the poetic *I* ('I am large, I contain multitudes').⁵ These are considered to be the hallmarks of his poetic style, such that it is quite easy to identify Whitman as the author of almost any passage of ten or twelve lines selected from any point in his career, but in fact there is considerable variation in how these features appear across his oeuvre in poems of different lengths, occasions, groupings, and modes of address.

The question of what kinds of poems Whitman wrote is fraught with historical complications as well. Genre distinctions do not receive much attention in the poet's own statements of poetics, which emphasize political aims over artistic matters: Whitman's poetic project was a nationalist one, seeking to write poems that would celebrate and sustain the young American democracy and rejecting poetic conventions inherited from what he called 'feudal' European societies—rhyme, meter, and ornate diction and syntax—in favour of a 'free growth of metrical laws'.⁶ To the extent that he discussed poetic technique, it was often in negative terms, as in his boast that he had succeeded, after great effort, in

⁵ 'Song of Myself', l. 8, in Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass' and Other Writings*, ed. by Michael Moon (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2002), p. 26. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Whitman's poems are from the 1891–92 'deathbed' edition of *Leaves of Grass* as presented in this volume. Subsequent references to this edition will use the abbreviation *LG* followed by page and line numbers as needed.

⁶ Whitman introduces the 'free growth of metrical laws' in the preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (*LG*, p. 622).

removing all of the 'stock poetical touches' from the poems included in *Leaves of Grass*.⁷ Yet, as Stephen Cushman has demonstrated, these statements cannot be taken at face value.⁸ If anything, such warnings and misdirections, which became increasingly insistent later in the poet's career,⁹ suggest that more attention should be paid to Whitman's efforts to mask his verbal artistry, since these, too, by necessity, are achieved through linguistic means.

As we look beyond Whitman's reticence on questions of genre, form, and verse technique to examine how verbal organization and rhetorical structures condition the meanings of his poems, the critical understanding of his versification provides an instructive analogy. There is a persuasive argument to be made that readers and critics did not begin to view Whitman as a founding figure of American free verse until very late in his lifetime, perhaps not even until several decades after his death.¹⁰ Whitman's long, frequently end-stopped lines, which coincide with rather than interrupt the rhythm of his oratorical periods, bear little resemblance to the short, heavily enjambed lines found in later free-verse poetry. The poet may be considered a founder of free verse less for his actual versification than for his rhetoric of poetic freedom, genre busting, plain speaking, and convention bucking. This belatedness, by which Whitman only 'became' a free verse poet in the early twentieth century in the context of modernist poetry and criticism, mirrors a problem that has recently been raised (though not for the first time) in the critical study of lyric, namely, that the twentieth-century understanding of this category should not be applied to poems from earlier periods, which would have been

⁷ In a diary-style entry collected in the prose work *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882), Whitman writes, '[18]55, lost my dear father this year by death. Commenced putting "Leaves of Grass" to press for good, at the job printing office of my friends, the brothers Rome, in Brooklyn, after many MS. doings and undoings—I had great trouble in leaving out the stock "poetical" touches, but succeeded at last.) I am now (1856–7) passing through my 37th year.' Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 729.

⁸ Stephen Cushman, *Fictions of Form in American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 25–41.

⁹ In the late essay "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1888), Whitman writes: 'No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism' (*LG*, p. 484).

¹⁰ See, for example, the argument of Patrick Redding, 'Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912–1931', *New Literary History*, 41.3 (2010), 669–90.

received by contemporary readers according to pre-modernist formulations of poetic genre and different conceptions of the social function of poetry.¹¹ According to this historicist view, Whitman's idea of lyric, in the schematic distinction between subjective and objective modes, is not necessarily compatible with concepts of lyric that developed in twentieth-century literary criticism.

With these complications in mind, I nonetheless suggest that the modern category of lyric is particularly useful for understanding Whitman's poetic practice. As Jonathan Culler has argued, 'generic categories frame both reading and writing—writers write in relation to other texts and textual traditions, both consciously and unconsciously, imitating, misreading, and rejecting, and readers approach works differently according to how they conceive them, even if those expectations are going to be disappointed.'¹² To focus on the traditions, conventions, and expectations of poems as lyrics—even in the case of a poet best known for breaking with tradition—entails viewing poems less as dramatic monologues within an implicit narrative frame (be it fictional or autobiographical) than as rhetorical performances that highlight the non-narrative elements distinctive to verse—a model that 'leads us to think of the lyric speaker not as a character in a novel, whose motivations must be elucidated, but as a performer picking up traditional elements and presenting them to an audience'.¹³ This essay takes the poems in 'Calamus', a group of poems from *Leaves of Grass* that has often been viewed in an autobiographical framework, as rhetorical performances that relate to the traditions and conventions of lyric in this sense, in order to test the usefulness of a more comparative, lyric context for Whitman's poetry. The first section examines the critical reception of 'Calamus', which has been crucial to the understanding of the poet's sexuality and the emergence of homoerotic discourses in nineteenth century America more generally, exploring how Whitman's language

¹¹ For an example of this critique that will be discussed later in the present essay, see Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Jackson's thesis—that twentieth-century criticism oversaw the consolidation of myriad poetic genres, social functions, and modes of circulation into the single category of "lyric"—becomes the organizing principle for *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

¹² Culler, 'Lyric, History, and Genre', *New Literary History*, 40.4 (2009), 879–99 (p. 881).

¹³ Culler, 'Why Lyric?', *PMLA*, 123.1 (2008), 201–6 (p. 204).

was deeply rooted in a variety of contemporary social, political, and scientific discourses. The following two sections build on this historical scholarship to examine modes of poetic address and rhetorical structure in these poems that exceed or complicate the customary biographical understanding of the group. The final section returns to the methodological challenges posed by historical poetics. The discussions below are intended to examine whether and how reading certain Whitman poems as lyrics improves our understanding of how they work in ways that might not be available without the category of lyric.

1. Stuck on You: Adhesiveness, Comradeship, Democracy

One of the most promising places to examine Whitman's poetic practice in shorter poems is in the 'Calamus' cluster, a section that was first introduced in the third (1860–61) edition of *Leaves of Grass* and which remained largely (and unusually) intact in all subsequent editions.¹⁴ 'Calamus' is the section of *Leaves of Grass* most explicitly dedicated to homoerotic content and the political program Whitman associated with 'comradeship' and 'adhesiveness', the phrenological term referring to a propensity for forming intense friendships with members of the same sex. Whitman's use of the pseudo-medical term 'adhesiveness', which had largely positive connotations in the phrenological literature, was meant to bolster his political belief that passionate same-sex friendships were necessary to strengthen the Union and preserve the fledgling democracy. In a note to the long political essay 'Democratic Vistas' (1871), Whitman writes: 'It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship, (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative [opposite-sex] love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it,) that I look for the counterbalance

¹⁴ The 1860–61 'Calamus' cluster consisted of forty-five numbered poems. Over subsequent editions, Whitman replaced the numbers with titles, removed three poems entirely, added one, and moved four to another section, leaving thirty-nine poems in the 1881 edition that remained unchanged in the 1891–92 edition. Of the poems that were not removed or placed in other sections, the texts are largely consistent across editions (with relatively minor changes in typography and punctuation). The most significant revisions between 1860–61 and 1881 are in the ordering of poems within the section. For a detailed comparison of manuscript sources and published editions, see *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love: 'Live Oak, with Moss' and 'Calamus'*, ed. by Betsy Erkkila (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011).

and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy [. . .] I say democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself' (*LG*, pp. 770–71n7).

In many ways, the 'Calamus' poems quite clearly are love lyrics—exploring various phases of romantic attachment from attraction, anticipation, and giddiness to the ecstasy of union, the anxiety of unrequited affection, and longing after a lover's departure—though Whitman's insistence on the political significance of same-sex affection makes it impossible to read them as strictly personal or private, however intimate they may be.¹⁵ For instance, in 'Earth, My Likeness', the poet describes his mutual attraction to a particular male youth, but in addressing the Earth and comparing his desire to an accumulation of volcanic pressure that may 'burst forth' violently and unpredictably, he gives his feelings a global scale and suggests that such passion is both universal and natural:

Earth, my likeness,
Though you look so impassive, ample and spheric there, I now suspect
that is not all;
I now suspect there is something fierce in you eligible to burst forth,
For an athlete is enamour'd of me, and I of him,
But toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me eligible to
burst forth,
I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs. (*LG*, p. 113)

This poem is a classic and familiar instance of the pathetic fallacy—nature sympathetically reflects the poet's inner state of burning desire hidden beneath an impassive external appearance—but the scale of the analogy is nonetheless

¹⁵ In the preface to the 1876 centennial edition of *Leaves of Grass* and its companion volume, *Two Rivulets*, Whitman writes of the political significance of *Leaves of Grass*, and 'Calamus' in particular, in terms similar to the passage from 'Democratic Vistas' cited above: 'Poetic literature has long been the formal and conventional tender of art and beauty merely, and of a narrow, constipated, special amativeness. I say, the subtlest, sweetest, surest tie between me and Him or Her, who, in the pages of 'Calamus' and other pieces realizes me—though we never see each other, or though ages and ages hence—must, in this way, be personal affection. [. . .] Besides, important as they are in my purpose as emotional expressions for humanity, the special meaning of the 'Calamus' cluster of *Leaves of Grass*, (and more or less running through the book, and cropping out in 'Drum-Taps,') mainly resides in its political significance' (*LG*, p. 657n2).

surprising. The speaker's desire is not echoed by a twittering bird or smiling acanthus but a massive geological formation. The optical viewpoint that the poet must arrive at just to observe and frame the comparison between poet and planet takes us into outer space—a view from which the Earth appears 'ample and spheric'—before zooming in, in the space of a single line, to the enamoured relations of two individuals. Read alongside other nineteenth-century lyrics, the poem's closing line may appear to be a familiar expression of romantic ineffability. But read for its biographical content, the same line suggests self-censorship or repression, and it is this mode of inquiry that has generated the bulk of critical attention on the 'Calamus' poems, prompting both projects that seek a better historical understanding of Whitman's sexuality in its nineteenth-century contexts and readings aimed at uncovering the expressions of desire that Whitman may have suppressed.

Since the 1970s especially, the 'Calamus' poems have been most frequently discussed as a rich source of first-hand documentation about the sexuality and psychobiography of the historical Walt Whitman. Comparatively less has been written about the poems' prosody, genre, and other rhetorical features.¹⁶ This emphasis is understandable for a number of reasons. For one, many poems throughout the Whitman corpus present his poetic persona as an autobiographical self. Just as 'Song of Myself' (which in 1856 carried the title 'Poem of Walt Whitman, an American') opens with declaration of the poet's age at the time of composition—'I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin'—the 'Calamus' cluster both opens and closes with poems that reference similar time-stamped acts of composition.¹⁷ Moreover, there was much critical work to be done

¹⁶ I am aware of only one study of 'Calamus' that takes genre and formal structures as its primary focus: Nils Claesson, "'Hours Continuing Long" as Whitman's Rewriting of Shakespeare's Sonnet 29', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 26 (2009), 131–42. But this is not to suggest that the topic has been entirely ignored or that there have not been significant studies of Whitman's poetics in general. For examples of the latter, see the detailed Jakobsonian analyses of C. Carol Hollis, *Language and Style in 'Leaves of Grass'* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), and important methodological insights in Cushman, *Fictions of Form in American Poetry*.

¹⁷ The first poem, 'In Paths Untrodden', states 'Afternoon this delicious Ninth-month in my forty-first year, / I proceed' (*LG*, p. 97, ll. 15–16). The final poem in the section, 'Full of Life Now', similarly gives 'I, forty years old the eighty-third year of the States [i.e., 1859–60]' (*LG*, p. 116, l. 2).

to correct for decades of writing about Whitman that prudishly avoided, downplayed, denied, or in some cases openly attacked the sexual content of his poems, with the goal of recovering Whitman's status as the first major openly gay American poet and a founding figure of an up-to-then suppressed homosexual literary tradition.¹⁸ Critics engaged in decoding the veiled (or simply overlooked) references to same-sex attraction in Whitman's writings had to contend with the efforts of the poet himself and his contemporary followers, who beginning in the mid-1860s had promoted an image of him as the 'good gray poet', a desexualized, grandfatherly figure and moral exemplar who had volunteered tirelessly as a wound-dresser in military hospitals around Washington, DC during the American Civil War.¹⁹ While Whitman had begun his poetic career with a robust defence of the healthy, frank expression of sexual desire and continued to reference his theory of adhesiveness and robust love as critical to the political health of the future nation,²⁰ some scholars have suggested that the revisions to postwar editions of *Leaves of Grass* had served to deliberately mute the sexual content of his work, perhaps as a preventative response to threatened censorship (particularly in the Boston area) or to more dramatic experiences of homophobic reprisals in his biography.²¹

¹⁸ For an account of the implicit and explicit homophobia in much twentieth-century Whitman criticism up to the end of the 1970s, see the opening chapters of Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979). For reflections on the evolution from denial to a more open and nuanced discussion of Whitman's sexuality among the poet's many biographers, see Gay Wilson Allen, 'Whitman Biography in 1992', in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. by Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), pp. 3–9.

¹⁹ See William Douglas O'Connor, *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (New York: Bunce & Huntington, 1866). O'Connor wrote this defense of the poet in response to Whitman's dismissal from a clerkship at the U.S. Department of the Interior in June 1865.

²⁰ For an early statement of this view, see the well-known open letter to Emerson, which was published in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856); *LG*, pp. 638–46, especially pp. 644–45.

²¹ *Leaves of Grass* was banned in Boston in 1882 under antiobscenity laws promoted by U.S. Postal Inspector Anthony Comstock. Jerome Loving notes that none of the 'Calamus' poems were included in the list of poems and passages deemed offensive by the Boston district attorney, whose primary objections were to heterosexual content and potential religious heresy. See Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 252; and Reynolds, pp. 540–43. Reynolds also presents evidence that Whitman may have been tarred and feathered after being publicly accused of sodomy while working as a schoolteacher in rural Long Island in 1840–41, though Loving casts doubt on the veracity of this anecdote; see Reynolds, pp.

Further complicating the recovery effort was the fact that the bulk of Whitman's poetry was written prior to the emergence of the very category of homosexuality (or the homosexual as 'species', in Foucault's term) in the 1870s.²² While still wanting to show Whitman's importance in the emergent canon of gay literature and culture, critics tended to highlight the anachronism of referring to him as a homosexual poet. Many studies sought to contextualize Whitman's writing about sexuality, including in the 'Calamus' poems, in contemporary American discourses prior to the emergence of specific distinctions among categories of sexual identity. At the time of Whitman's birth, in 1819, passionate, intimate, and even physical relationships between members of the same sex were common and often celebrated as an idealized form of friendship, both in popular, sentimental literature and in highbrow discourse (which often included analogies to same-sex relationships in Ancient Greek culture).²³ This began to change quickly, however, with the religious revivalism of the Great Awakening in the 1830s, just as Whitman was becoming an adult. As Michael Moon and other have noted, American society became increasingly concerned with policing the sexual activity of unmarried men, with a flood of pamphlets, books, medical treatises, and lectures on the subject of anti-onanism beginning in the 1830s and continuing through the end of the century.²⁴ Anti-onanism in turn, was part of a larger male-purity movement aimed against all forms of 'dissipation' among young men, which encompassed the temperance movement and other efforts at moral reform. As Moon notes, the male-purity discourses did not stem from religious revivalism

68–80; and Loving, pp. 514–15n4. M. Jimmie Killingsworth reviews the critical discussion of whether Whitman toned down the sexual content in revisions to later editions in Killingsworth, 'Whitman's Sexual Themes During a Decade of Revision: 1866–1876', *Walt Whitman Quarterly*, 4.1 (1986), pp. 7–15.

²² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 43. Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds notes that the term "homosexuality" entered American discourse even later, in the 1890s, and at first only in medical circles. See Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's American: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), pp. 391–403. The term 'heterosexuality', of course, came later still.

²³ See Reynolds, pp. 391–94, 576–79.

²⁴ Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in 'Leaves of Grass'* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 19–25.

alone but also from anxieties about larger societal trends in mid-nineteenth-century America:

[T]he unprecedented numbers of young men (especially newly arrived ones in the cities or on the frontier) living outside traditional restraining institutions—most notably the extended patriarchal agricultural settlement or the apprenticeship system—precipitated a crisis in the social control of young men, to which chastity lectures and anti-onanist tracts were one kind of response. [. . .] When [anti-onanist writers] threatened their readers with disease, disgrace, and premature death for masturbating, they were inveighing—with varying degrees of awareness of their actual target—against a whole range of emergent social forms of male autonomy, including male homosexuality, for which ‘onanism’ served as a general label.²⁵

Moon’s landmark study goes on to show how Whitman both adopted and subverted the terms and rhetorical strategies of the male-purity movement in order to present his own political arguments about the importance of ‘comradeship’ and ‘manly love’, insisting on the fluidity and indeterminacy of Whitman’s preferred terminology, which allowed the poet to refer to literal, physical same-sex activity in ‘safe’, admissible terms.

Other critics were not so careful to preserve this ambiguity. When the goal was to uncover, clarify, and contextualize the thinly veiled (but still quite apparent) expression of same-sex attraction in Whitman’s writing, a certain style of rhetorically attentive close reading of poetic texts that wrestled with ambiguity, indeterminacy, and interpretive impasses—flourishing in the study of the European romantic tradition at this time—was often seen as unwelcome in Whitman scholarship. Knotty linguistic details, rhetorical shifts, and other interpretive stumbling blocks might easily be dismissed as self-censorship rather than essential features of poetic craft.²⁶ Indeed, studies of Whitman’s poetics that

²⁵ Moon, p. 25. Moon here is paraphrasing the work of sociologists such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and others on the wider demographic trends. He also notes that concerns expressed about the threats that dissipation posed to the healthy male ‘constitution’ overlapped considerably with the terms used in political discourse at the time to describe threats to the political ‘constitution’ of the ‘adolescent’ republic (see pp. 15–20).

²⁶ Self-censorship was a key issue in the discussion of ‘Live Oak with Moss’, an early manuscript version of several ‘Calamus’ poems. See Alan Helms, ‘Whitman’s “Live Oak with Moss”’, in *The*

highlighted ambiguity and indeterminacy were sometimes criticized for repeating the homophobic evasions of sexuality that had characterized Whitman scholarship earlier in the century.²⁷

At the height of the effort to give Whitman's sexuality a more prominent place in the critical discussion of his work, the issue became central to debates on textual scholarship aimed at demonstrating whether or how Whitman's revisions between editions deliberately muted the sexual frankness of earlier editions. One particularly notable debate concerned the text of an early manuscript version of several key 'Calamus' poems. In the 1950s, Fredson Bowers had discovered an unpublished manuscript from 1859 of twelve poems under the heading 'Live Oak, with Moss' in the collections of the University of Virginia library.²⁸ This manuscript clearly formed the basis of the poems that would make up the 'Calamus' cluster in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but Bowers's discovery received little discussion for several decades. In 1992, Alan Helms published a hypothetical 'final' version of 'Live Oak, with Moss' that rearranged the 1860 poems in the order of the 1859 manuscript.²⁹ Bowers, in 1953, had suggested that the poems might have a loose narrative unity, modelled on Shakespeare's sonnets, and Helms argued that Whitman, in an act of self-censorship, had obscured the narrative of a same-sex relationship in reordering the poems for the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, which if left in the order of the 1859 manuscript might have amounted to a 'gay manifesto.' Another scholar, Herschel Parker, objected strongly both to Helms's argument and proposed reorganization, and he offered a competing text of the 'real "Live Oak,

Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman, ed. by Robert K. Martin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), pp. 185–205; Herschel Parker, 'The Real "Live Oak, with Moss": Straight Talk about Whitman's "Gay Manifesto"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51 (1996), 145–60; and the exchange between Helms and Parker in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 52 (1997), 413–16.

²⁷ In addition to comments along these lines in the Helms and Parker essays cited above, see, for example, Robert K. Martin, 'Whitman's Song of Myself: Homosexual Dream and Vision', *Partisan Review* 42.1 (1975), 80–96; and Vivian R. Pollak, 'Poetic Value and Erotic Norms: A Response to Helen Vendler', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 18, no. 3 (2001), 134–46. A notable exception to the suspicion of readings that highlight ambiguity is Moon's *Disseminating Whitman*.

²⁸ Fredson Bowers, 'Whitman's Manuscripts of the Original "Calamus" Poems', *Studies in Bibliography*, 6 (1953), 257–65.

²⁹ Helms, pp. 185–205.

with Moss”³⁰. In the debate that ensued, each accused the other of obscuring something vital about the historical Walt Whitman’s experience of ‘homophobic oppression’ in their competing texts and interpretations.

Two decades later, this climate of suspicion has thankfully abated. While Moon’s warnings against ‘de(homo)eroticizing, de-historicizing, and depoliticizing readings’ of Whitman remain highly relevant,³¹ there is more work to be done on the poems themselves, especially in terms of rhetorical strategies that received less attention in earlier discussions centred on what the ‘Calamus’ poems reveal or conceal about sexuality with respect to the historical Whitman, nineteenth-century American culture, and twentieth-century literary criticism.

2. Return to Sender, Address Unknown

A number of poetic and rhetorical features of the ‘Calamus’ poems cannot be fully accounted for with reference to Whitman’s psychobiography alone. Chief among these are a figurative density not present in the earlier, more sprawling poems and, most strikingly, the prevalence of direct address to the reader. The shift in focus from the expansive, encompassing *I* of the long poems to a variety of subjects addressed as *you* in ‘Calamus’ is one of the main aspects that make these poems seem to belong to a different, more lyrical mode.

While retaining the free-verse line, the shorter poems of ‘Calamus’ also contain a noticeable shift away from aspects of Whitman’s style in the longer, bardic poems: instead of epic catalogues enumerated in lengthy, paratactic lists, we find an increased use of metaphoric substitution. (In Jakobsonian terms, the shift is from figures of contiguity [metonymy], in which elements are combined horizontally in a series, to figures of similarity or substitution [metaphor] that are condensed vertically along the axis of selection.)³² This is especially noticeable in the treatment of the poetic *I*. In the mode of ‘Song of Myself’, the *I* tends to

³⁰ Parker, pp. 145–60.

³¹ Moon, p. 215.

³² Roman Jakobson, ‘Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances’, in *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 95–114.

identify with and encompass a series of subject positions enumerated in a list, as in section 15, where a sixty-two line catalogue itemizing various persons and occupations—carpenter, spinning-girl, opium-eater, Wolverine [i.e., Michigander], and President, to choose just a few—closes with the line ‘And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.’³³ By contrast, the *I* in the ‘Calamus’ poems tends to take on more fully developed metaphorical personae—as lover, citizen, teacher, religious leader, and, in a number of poems (to which we will turn later) as the book of poems addressing its reader. Often, the persona adopted by the poetic *I* seems to follow from the *you* Whitman seeks to address rather than the other way around.³⁴

Some poems specify an addressee—a partial list would include not just the longed-for lover but a student, a religious initiate, the United States as a nation, Democracy, a stranger, men in Europe and Asia, various people walking hand in hand, recorders ages hence (i.e., historians), the island of Manhattan, the State of California, and the Earth. In several instances, the poet addresses the reader in the act of reading *Leaves of Grass*, and sometimes also addresses the poet’s earlier ‘leaves’ or poems. The scope of the reader/comrade addressed as *you* in ‘Calamus’ may not be far off from that of the poetic *I* of ‘Song of Myself’.

In other poems, the context of address is less clear, and the addressee is left largely unspecified. In these cases, the pronoun *you* remains grammatically indeterminate in both gender and number, despite the recurring thematic context of a male poet addressing an absent male lover. As a result, the default referent of the *you* (when not otherwise specified) becomes *you* yourself—the reader—who are not merely overhearing the poet’s speech, as in the case of a dramatic monologue,

³³ *LG*, pp. 36–39.

³⁴ In using address to constitute the poetic speaker, Whitman is operating on more traditional romantic terms. As Culler writes of apostrophe: ‘We might posit, then, a third level of reading where the vocative of apostrophe is a device which the poetic voice uses to establish with an object a relationship which helps to constitute him. [. . .] If, as we tend to assume, post-enlightenment poetry seeks to overcome the alienation of subject from object, then apostrophe takes the crucial step of constituting the object as another subject with whom the poetic subject might hope to strike up a harmonious relationship’. See Culler, ‘Apostrophe’, in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 135–54 (pp. 142–43).

but are being directly addressed by the poet at the very moment, the ‘now’, of your reading. As Jonathan Culler has noted, the *you* of apostrophic address (as well as other deictics such as ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘this’) tends to call an absent addressee forward into the ‘now’ of the lyric present: ‘what might be called a timeless present but is better seen as a temporality of writing [. . .] a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say “now”’.³⁵ This special temporality, Culler continues, ‘is a time of discourse rather than story’ in which the objects of poetic address ‘resist being organized into events that can be narrated, for they are inserted in the poem as elements of the event which the poem is attempting to be.’³⁶ Contrary to the view of lyric as a discourse of personal expression or private confession, and in tension with biographical interpretations that seem to support that view, the ‘Calamus’ poems become more lyrical as the lovers they address become less specific, more loosely tied to an identifiable referent in Whitman’s biography, and more deeply involved with their own status as linguistic performance.

Helen Vendler offers a rich account of how Whitman’s *you* frequently invokes an addressee who is not merely absent but described as being far off in the future, long after the poet’s death.³⁷ The future *you* is not a specific, known addressee who is absent and longed for by the poet, but an entirely unknown person: ‘one a century hence or any number of centuries hence’ in the words of ‘Full of Life Now’, the poem that closes the ‘Calamus’ section (*LG*, p. 116). Whitman’s lyric intimacy (in Vendler’s phrase) with the unspecified, unknown person amounts to an abstract statement of ethics—how Whitman would relate to anyone, anywhere,

³⁵ Culler, ‘Apostrophe’, p. 149. For the suggestion that the larger categories of deictics and direct address invoke the same ‘special temporality’ in lyric contexts as the narrower category of apostrophe, see p. 153.

³⁶ Culler, ‘Apostrophe’, p. 149. For this reason (that is, the way in which apostrophic address introduces a temporality that works against narrative), Culler suggests that the neglected, embarrassing figure of apostrophe may be central to the distinctiveness of lyric as a genre: ‘Apostrophe resists narrative because its *now* is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, of writing. This temporality of writing is scarcely understood, difficult to think, but it seems to be that toward which the lyric strives’ (p. 152).

³⁷ See the chapter ‘Walt Whitman and the Reader-in-Futurity’, in Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 31–56.

at any time—that underlies his politics of affection. But Vendler is too quick, in my view, to see the turn to a future *you* as an expression of pathos and longing—a type of intimacy that Whitman must resort to only after he concludes that physical intimacy with an actual lover is impossible (presumably as a result of one or more biographical romantic disappointments):

Only after the physical fails does Whitman become a poet of intimacy with the invisible. Sometimes unable to secure, and always unable to sustain, actual sexual intimacy, Whitman is driven to invent an intimacy with the unseen; the poet is cast toward the lover-in-futurity by the faithlessness of the lover-in-the-present.³⁸

Vendler reads the *you* of the 'Calamus' poems first as a longed-for, actual lover, and only later as a future reader, but this implicit narrative of heartbreak and resignation grants more specificity and definiteness to individual instances of *you* than the indeterminate language of the poems often allows: frequently, the addressee is both nearby lover and distant reader simultaneously rather than sequentially. As a result of the same grammatical ambiguity, the addressee is also frequently the plurals of these terms—the collective lovers and readers he sometimes addresses as people from various geographic locations or as representative of abstract concepts. Moreover, where these ambiguous referents occur, their meanings are conveyed in a layered, simultaneous way that suggests a more lyrical and condensed mode of expression compared to the enumerated lists of the longer poems, which *are* organized in series and sequences. As Betsy Erkkila notes, the ability of the *you* to refer simultaneously to both specific, individual lovers and collective, political groups was essential to Whitman's political project in 'Calamus', which imagined an ever-expanding United States held together not by the rule of law or military might but by the voluntary association of men loving men.³⁹ Hence, the poem 'A Promise to California' proposes a Manifest Destiny—

³⁸ Vendler, p. 33.

³⁹ Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 182–83. Though Whitman had mixed feelings about U. S. militarist expansionism, he remained an enthusiastic expansionist in this voluntarist political mode and a firm believer in Manifest Destiny, predicting an expansion of the nation to include forty, fifty, or even one hundred states (*LG*, pp.

style expansion of ‘robust American love’ into new territories to support that of the United States as a political entity:

A promise to California,
Or inland to the great pastoral Plains, and on to Puget sound and
Oregon;
Sojourning east a while longer, soon I travel toward you, to remain, to
teach
robust American love,
For I know very well that I and robust love belong among you, inland,
and
 along the Western sea;
For these States tend inland and toward the Western sea, and I will
also.
(*LG*, p. 111)

In contrast to the political project that might expand indefinitely in space and time, the heartbreak narrative adopted by Vendler and others, which reads the turn to the future *you* in ‘Calamus’ as a sublimation of failed physical encounters, operates on a much more limited scale and reads the poetic gesture toward a future lover-reader as more melancholy than may be necessary.⁴⁰ Though it may well imply some amount of resignation concerning disappointments in the present, apostrophizing a reader not-yet-born puts an optimistic spin on more conventional modes of poetic address, amounting to a sort of inverse elegy: instead of a living poet facing the past to address someone who has died, Whitman faces forward, writing in the voice of a deceased poet addressing his unborn reader. Or, to make another comparison to a conventionally melancholic genre: unlike the *stabat viator* of epitaph, which reminds readers of their own mortality to come, Whitman’s

643, 770). Building on the arguments of Michael Moon and others, Michael Warner has shown how Whitman drew on the politics of voluntary association and individual free will that he found in social movements as a model for nonstate political association that shaped the ‘strange conception of a public that distinguishes his poetic writing and his publishing practice’; see the chapter ‘Whitman Drunk’, in Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005), pp. 269–89 (p. 271).

⁴⁰ See, for example, another reading that somewhat oversimplifies the multiple or ambiguous referents of address in Whitman in support of a stronger narrative interpretation: Stephen Railton, ‘As If I Were With You’—The Performance of Whitman’s Poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. by Ezra Greenspan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 7–27.

future-oriented address prefigures the reader's birth, his or her entry into the realm of life. One effect of such addresses is that in reading these poems today, in 2014, the 'now' of direct address to the future reader is felt even more strongly than it might have been closer to the time of publication, when the reader 'ages and ages hence' was merely hypothetical. Today's reader *is* the future *you* that Whitman imagined but—by the very design of his conception of a future reader—never could have met.

Whitman's addresses to readers far in the future only become stronger as more time elapses. The greater the distance from the time of composition, the more it demonstrates Whitman's poetic power to bridge enormous spans in space and time between poet and reader.⁴¹ In 'Full of Life Now', Whitman foregrounds the ever-increasing gulf of time that the poem will cross by mentioning his (and the United States') age at the time of writing in 1859 in the same poem that addresses an unborn reader in his most ambitious expression of just how far into the future he seeks to project his poetic address:

Full of life now, compact, visible,
I, forty years old the eighty-third year of the States,
To one a century hence or any number of centuries hence,
To you, yet unborn these, seeking you.

When you read these, I, that was visible, am become invisible;
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me;
Fancying how happy you were, if I could be with you, and become your
comrade;
Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you.)
(*LG*, p. 116)

3. Wrapped Up in Books

The third poem in the sequence, 'Whoever You are Holding Me Now in Hand', brings together many of these stylistic threads: address to an ambiguous *you* as a

⁴¹ For a similar gesture, in which the poetic address seeks to overcome the poet's death in order to make the poet present to a future reader in the moment of reading, see Culler's reading of Keats's 'This Living Hand' at the conclusion of 'Apostrophe', pp. 153–54.

future reader, invocation of the lyric ‘now’, and a rhetorical shift in treating Whitman’s expansive and inclusive poetic *I*. It begins:

Whoever you are holding me now in hand,
Without one thing all will be useless,
I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,
I am not what you supposed, but far different.

Who is he that would become my follower?
Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections?

The way is suspicious, the result uncertain, perhaps destructive,
You would have to give up all else, I alone would expect to be your sole
and
 exclusive standard,
Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting,
The whole past theory of your life and all conformity to the lives
around you
 would have to be abandon’d,
Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let go
your hand
 from my shoulders,
Put me down and depart on your way. (*LG*, p. 99, ll. 1–12)

The phrase ‘whoever you are’, which recurs throughout ‘Calamus’ and elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass*, represents the extreme, or at least the extreme foregrounding, of the indeterminate *you*. The commingling of quasi-religious and political language (‘follower’, ‘candidate for my affections’, ‘novitiate’) provides some context for the kind of *you* the poet envisions, and the questions in the fifth and sixth lines use the pronoun ‘he’, but all of this seems to be overridden by the extreme openness of the introductory phrase. The poet may wish for a dedicated follower—and given the attempts to warn off the unmotivated, ‘whoever you are’ is not meant in the welcoming sense of ‘come one, come all’—but this leaves only one remaining sense of the phrase: ‘whoever you are’ is a frank admission that the speaker doesn’t really have a clue about the identity of the *you*. At least at first, it seems that the poem cannot discern its own addressee, and there is some suggestion that the questions—‘Who is he that would become my follower?’ and ‘Who would sign

himself a candidate for my affections?’—are meant in earnest, not posed rhetorically as warnings or challenges. The last line in this passage, however, confirms what one might have guessed about the phrase ‘holding me now in hand’: the presence of an extended metaphor or conceit of the speaker as the physical book of poems being held by the addressee (now more clearly seen to be another instance of the future reader) in the very moment the poem is being read.

Two questions then arise: First, why the explicit mention of ‘now’, when Whitman has already proven himself extremely capable of invoking the lyric ‘now’ through direct address alone? Second, why has the speaker adopted the persona of the book rather than continuing to speak as the poet himself, translated forward (and potentially, from beyond the grave) into the ‘now’ of the present reading? The answer to both is the same: the direct address to *you* has successfully brought the represented voice into the present ‘now’, but Whitman’s ambition has always been to encounter the reader *physically*. By becoming the book of poems, he can adopt a physical form or shape that the reader can touch and hold. It is notable, though, that the transformation of the speaker to a speaking book involves a two-step figurative process: first, the speaker must shift metonymically to become identified with his book. Second, the book must reacquire the power of speech through an anthropomorphism. One may wonder why Whitman does not claim to translate his physical body into the lyric present, but this goes against his desire to speak to and be physically present with a future reader long after his actual death. His figurative language does not have the power to bring the poet back from the dead and resurrect his body; yet it is imminently plausible for the poet to assume that any future reader of the poem will be holding a physical book that contains its text. So the original speaker becomes a book that in turn becomes a speaking book. This appears to be an excellent strategy for getting in the room with the reader, endowed with both a poetic voice and tangible, physical shape. This transformation seems all the easier since the book-speaker was already a poet-speaker to begin with. It hardly strains credulity to grant Whitman the rhetorical feat of embodying the book.

Awkwardly, however, the poet in book form can ‘speak’, but he cannot move on his own, hence the repeated demand: ‘put me down and depart on you way’.

This anxiety about being unable to move of one's own accord, yet being held by an as-yet unknown and untrusted other may go further to explaining the persistent challenges, questioning, and imperative commands than the alternative interpretation, that Whitman has developed some esoteric ritual that his followers must perform in order to continue the successful encounter.⁴² It seems unlikely that the same poet who boasted, in section 2 of 'Song of Myself', 'Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems', would now be so pessimistic. Nor does it follow that the same poet, who will close the 'Calamus' section with 'Be not too certain but I am now with you', and who has built a political program on the idea that adhesiveness is a latent quality to be encouraged in everyone, would now be so coy about forming attachments. But more than that, the text of the poem continues beyond the demand to 'put me down', suggesting that, if we simply continue reading, we will have successfully 'passed' the first test of will and demonstrated our desire to keep holding and touching the book-speaker.

Or else by stealth in some wood for trial,
Or back of a rock in the open air,
(For in any roof'd room of a house I emerge not, nor in company,
And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead,)
But just possibly with you on a high hill, first watching lest any person
for miles
 around approach unawares,
Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea or some
quiet island,
Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,
For I am the new husband and I am the comrade.

Or if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
Where I may feel the throbs of your heart or rest upon your hip,

⁴² Other scholars have taken the gnomic demands more seriously, examining an esoteric logic underlying the seemingly impossible encounter the poem sets out. See Allen Grossman, 'Whitman's "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand": Remarks on the Endlessly Repeated Rediscovery of the Incommensurability of the Person', in *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. by Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 112–22.

Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;
For thus merely touching you is enough, is best,
And thus touching you would I silently sleep and be carried eternally.
(13–26)

Here the book-speaker suggests, in a classic Whitmanian gesture, that to *intensify* the intimacy of the encounter is the best way of initially coming to know one another. The book asks to be taken over land and sea and miles away from any other person or, alternatively, to be hidden away in the reader's clothes. Clearly we have to touch the book in order to read it or carry it, but how do we account figuratively for the 'long-dwelling kiss'? The key to this transformation is hidden in plain sight: at line 11, the book-speaker had demanded, 'therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further, let go your hand from my shoulders'. Because the speaker is in the shape of a book at this moment in the poem, his 'shoulders' have a technical, bibliographic rather than anatomical meaning. In a hardbound book with a convex, rounded binding, the 'shoulders' are the points where the sewn block of pages meets the flexible hinges of the front and back covers (i.e., the fulcrum points at which the cover boards pivot when opening and closing the book).⁴³ The anthropomorphic terminology of bookbinding allows the poet to shift from his embodiment in book form to a more fleshed out human form by means of a simple pun. Starting from shoulders and spine, it takes only a few additional leaps to imagine the book-speaker's body as having other aspects of the human body, namely lips, so that poet and reader can not only touch and hold but also kiss. The translation of anatomical features between bodily and bibliographic forms in the 'Calamus' section is not limited to this poem; in 'Trickle Drops', for example, the poet addresses his own blood, calling on it to become ink that will 'stain every page, stain every song I sing, every word I say, bloody drops' (LG, p. 107).

A similar ease in moving between what we might call 'bibliomorphic' terminology and organic terms occurs in the titles *Leaves of Grass* and 'Calamus'.

⁴³ Having worked as a professional printer for decades, Whitman's familiarity with the technical aspects of printing and binding is certain. He likely typeset at least the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* himself, and closely oversaw the typesetting, printing, and binding of all editions published in his lifetime. See also the poem 'A Font of Type' (LG, p. 427).

The titular pun, passing from leaves of grass to leaves in a book, is well known, but it turns out that ‘grass’, too, has a particular meaning in printer’s jargon, referring to casually employed type compositors, the work that they do, or, as Jerome Loving has suggested, to playful typographic compositions produced when business was slow.⁴⁴ The examples discussed above help to understand why such puns in the title are less groan-inducing than many others. In the organicist economy of the book, Whitman wants to get from leaves of grass to a book of poems that has organic form, but because the natural term and the bibliographic term are the same (‘leaves’), and because paper is often made from plant matter, the passage from ground (botanical, organic) to figure (bibliographic seen as organic) is barely noticeable. The figure of leaves as pages in a book that supposedly mediates between botanical leaves and poems already offers direct access to the organic ideal.

The title of the ‘Calamus’ cluster (the only division within *Leaves of Grass* to bear a botanical name) shares this feature with the title of the book. *Webster’s Dictionary of American English* (1850) defines ‘calamus’ as:

1. stem, reed, stubble; or writing reed or pen (for papyrus).
2. pipe or wind instrument.
- [. . .]
5. the sweet flag, called by Linnaeus *Acorus calamus*.

Whitman’s own explanation, in an 1867 letter to William Michael Rossetti, who was preparing a British edition of *Leaves of Grass*, has led many to observe the phallic form of this particular figure: “The recherché or ethereal sense of the term, as used in my book, arises probably from the actual “Calamus” presenting the biggest and hardiest kind of spears of grass—and their fresh, aquatic, pungent

⁴⁴ Loving, p. 179. Clifton Joseph Furness appears to be the first to suggest the connection between Whitman’s title and the meaning of ‘grass’ in printer’s slang; see his introduction to Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Reproduced from the First Edition (1855)*, ed. by Clifton Joseph Furness (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), pp. v–xviii (pp. x–xi).

bouquet'.⁴⁵ Indeed, when in bloom, the plant's spadix is extraordinarily phallic in appearance. It is less frequently noted, however, that in the same letter Whitman refers Rossetti to 'Webster's Large American' for the full dictionary definition as a supplement to his gloss.⁴⁶ It is surprising that the contemporary dictionary definition gives 'writing implement' as the most common sense, a musical instrument as the second, and the botanical species only as the fifth meaning. As with 'leaves', Whitman's use of 'calamus' as a figure for poetry and song leaves little space between literal and figurative meanings: the term already implies both writing and music, perhaps even more strongly than its precise botanical referent. And the same is true for the phallic image: to get from the calamus plant to 'phallus' or 'sex organ' requires no leap at all, for its most shapely and suggestive part is already the plant's own sex organ. The denotative sense of the term already supplies the figurative meaning.⁴⁷ In Whitman's system of organic, erotic, and bookish figures, these terms can be substituted in an endless circle: the plant's sex organ is visually analogous to a phallus; the phallus substitutes metaphorically for a (pro)creative writing implement; the pen is a metonymy for poems; and the poems, through the titles of the book and section, aspire to the natural, organic form of the plant. Whitman's organic trope does not always, or only, find that the poem is somehow nature-like; it also finds that nature is already poem-like or book-like. Though relatively simple, the persistence of figures of writing and bookmaking throughout this chain of analogies and substitutions complicates the usual picture

⁴⁵ Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. by Edwin Haviland Miller, 6 vols (New York: New York University Press, 1961–77), I, p. 347.

⁴⁶ See Russell A. Hunt, 'Whitman's Poetics and the Unity of "Calamus"', *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, 46.4 (1975), 482–94; and James E. Miller, Jr, 'Whitman's "Calamus": The Leaf and the Root', *PMLA*, 72.1 (1957), 249–71.

⁴⁷ While tropes such as the complex calamus symbol and the recurring pun on leaves of grass as leaves in a book are decidedly organic, the label 'organicism', however common, is not a sufficient gloss for Whitman's poetics. In the case of the plant *Acorus calamus*, the fact that Whitman's own gloss on the term evokes both the title of his book (*Leaves of Grass*) and a writing implement (via *Webster's Dictionary*) suggests that Whitman's organicism is more than a simple, one-way mimicry of or analogy to nature. It's not that Whitman's leaves imitate strong, healthy leaves found in nature—the terms cross and interpenetrate. Whitman uses the name of his book to explain his organicist trope, and vice versa. The calamus plant has the 'biggest and hardiest spears of grass', and in this sense the plant is the *exemplary poem*. And if the plant in question is already understood to be a writing implement, then the familiar organicist trope uniting nature and writing becomes redundant.

of Whitman's organicism as merely premised on describing his work in terms of organic forms and their 'natural' growth and development (unrestrained from unnatural or mechanical conventions such as rhyme and meter). To see figures of the book as material object enter so frequently into play as a third term between nature and poem (or organic and erotic) suggests that more attention may be warranted to the near-constant yoking of 'you' as lover and 'you' as reader throughout the 'Calamus' sequence.

Although the substitutions between and among Whitman's organic figures tend to run relatively smoothly, the chain of substitutions in 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand' remains quite dense and complex. The complicated figurative embodiment of the poet in book and bodily form also stands out at least in part because Whitman's primary poetic mode for presenting the poetic *I* is not substitution at all, but the enumerative listing of the long poems. The metaphorical density of this and several other 'Calamus' poems suggests a change in or perhaps even an outright reversal of his usual figurative strategies. As Paul de Man notes in a different context, 'such patterns [of reversal] constantly recur in nineteenth- and twentieth-century lyric poetry and create a great deal of critical confusion, symptomatic of further-reaching complexities.'⁴⁸ Though Whitman and Baudelaire are not often read in relation to one another, the complex chain of tropes discussed above, in which one figure becomes the ground for a subsequent figure, suggests promising avenues for comparative readings of Whitman with a wider range of postromantic lyric poetry than the Anglo-American context in which his poetic practice is commonly situated. With Baudelaire in particular, 'Correspondances' and 'Obsession', the two poems de Man studies in 'Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric', are very near contemporaries with the composition and first publication of the 'Calamus' cluster. Moreover, the clash between substitution and enumeration that de Man finds in Baudelaire concerns the same stylistic features that distinguish 'Calamus' from Whitman's longer works, although their frequencies in Whitman are reversed—what de Man calls 'the stutter, the *piétinement* of aimless enumeration' that is a disruptive force in

⁴⁸ Paul de Man, 'Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 239–62 (p. 257).

Baudelaire may well be the norm in Whitman. But given Whitman's aims to project not just the poetic voice but also his physical presence far into future scenes of reading, the knottiest problem de Man addresses, for Whitman (if it is not too perverse to suggest that he and Baudelaire *do* share a problem), is that of anthropomorphism:

But 'anthropomorphism' is not just a trope but an identification on the level of substance. It takes one entity for another and thus implies the constitution of specific entities prior to their confusion, the *taking* of something for something else that can then be assumed to be *given*. Anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence which, as such, excludes all others. It is no long a proposition but a proper name.⁴⁹

This indirect commentary rings strangely true for the persistence of bibliographic figures in 'Calamus' that seem to lurk behind what are supposed to be some of the poet's most earnest, personal, and confessional works. Once the poet's metonymic identification with his book, *Leaves of Grass*, has been further transformed anthropomorphically into a speaker in the form of a book in 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand'—also the moment at which the identification of the addressee as simultaneously lover and reader is strongest, precisely because the other side of the dyad is a *book*—it seems to freeze, or at least delay, the return of a relationship between poetic *I* and *you* of address that is not one of poet and reader, where the lovers hand in hand do not seem, at least for a moment, to be book in hand. It was argued above that the default position of an unspecified *you* in 'Calamus' is as a reader. This bibliomorphic aspect of 'Calamus' adds another layer of complexity to those readings of the section that have already examined the myriad ways that Whitman has imagined and addressed his potential male lovers. The male body that Moon so carefully charts in his study of corporeality in *Leaves of Grass* often becomes, in 'Calamus', a very different type of body desiring and yearning to be held by the beloved: a book, whose spine, shoulders, and blood refer to its binding and ink.

⁴⁹ De Man, p. 241.

Whitman often presents the relation of book to reader as only an intermediate stage before a relation of lover to lover, but the poems sometimes seem stuck there. It can be tempting, and perhaps commonplace, to see this as an instance of the general failure of literary language to bridge the gap between words and things or to make the (absent and/or long-dead) author truly present at the moment of reading. But the ‘Calamus’ poems’ future-oriented stance toward an absent addressee suggests something more optimistic. However strange or fictional it may be, lyrics create temporal spaces that bring poet and reader together. Their status as lyrics suggests that there are future ‘nows’ the poem can inhabit, so that if the full encounter fails in a given instance, and even if that failure is a structural condition of language, the attempted encounter can never fail completely or for the last time. Whitman will continue to address ‘these leaves’ to his potential lovers so long as there are readers of his poems. The relentless futurity of these poems is powerfully anti-nostalgic, and this lyric function complicates the biographical readings of ‘Calamus’ that view them only as expressions of longing or resignation. A reading of the poems as future-oriented lyrics also supports his political aims. The encounter between poet and reader is only half of Whitman’s project; he also wants his poems to encourage the ‘love of comrades’ between and among others in ways that do not require his presence.

4. Lyric Reading: Compared to What?

Though the above readings have argued that certain functions associated with the category of lyric are particularly useful in reading Whitman’s shorter poems, the utility of the category of lyric has come into question in recent years. To take one of many available examples, Virginia Jackson, in *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, argues that the expansion of the term ‘lyric’ to be a catch-all for all poetic works, and perhaps even the paradigmatic term of all literature, is an invention of modernist criticism in its drive for totalizing abstractions.⁵⁰ Her critique is aimed at a process of generic levelling, which she calls ‘lyricization’, and its attendant style of reading and teaching poems: ‘lyric reading’. Lyricization was (and is) the

⁵⁰Jackson, pp. 1–15, 68–117. See also Jackson and Prins, pp. 1–8, 159–65.

tendency to idealize and abstract poems from embedded social networks (such as the friends and family who received Dickinson's letter-poems) and historically contingent modes of production and circulation (such as nineteenth-century newspaper verse) that themselves might serve as generic groupings. Likewise, Jackson charts how an abstract style of 'lyric reading' developed that interpreted all lyrics in more or less the same way. Such readings created 'an abstract personification [i.e., a 'speaker'] in place of the historical person, and consequently created an abstract genre accessible to all persons educated to read lyrically in place of the verse exchanged by people with varying degrees of access to one another who may have read according to their own historical referents.'⁵¹ These abstracted readings tended to find the same abstract things happening in the poems said to belong to the increasingly abstract category of lyric: ambiguity, irony, indeterminacy, interpretive impasses, and other metonyms of the modernist honorific 'difficulty'. The aim of Jackson's study, then, is to historicize the abstraction that is 'lyric' as a peculiar product of twentieth-century criticism and then seek to recover, as much as possible, what poetic texts written prior to that moment might have been 'before they became lyrics'. Going forward, she argues, the attempt to recover lost ways of reading and receiving poems ought to be combined with a critical self-awareness about how we continue to read poem as lyrics: 'Because we cannot go back to a moment before they became lyrics, or back to a moment before lyric reading was the only way to apprehend a poem, we must try to keep both their material and contingent as well as their abstract and transcendent aspects in view at the same time.'⁵²

The overall critique is most persuasive when it lands on a deserving culprit—and Dickinson's early editors certainly qualify—but such a dedicated march to abstraction may not have been quite as pandemic as her diagnosis implies, nor do I think every gesture of abstraction has been of the unwarranted or unself-critical variety. What is particularly interesting about Jackson's critique in the context of Whitman's poetry, though, is the way in which it mirrors the structure of the debate about the poet's sexuality: it seems like the complaint against the twentieth-

⁵¹ Jackson, p. 100.

⁵² Jackson, p. 116.

century conception of lyric is not just that it is abstract but that it is *anachronistic* with respect to poetry before, say, 1910 in the same way that scholars have shown the term ‘homosexuality’ to be an anachronistic understanding of sexuality in Whitman’s time and culture. But when the question is posed in this way, we might feel less pessimistic about how long we are likely to be trapped in the late-twentieth-century conception of lyric as ‘the only way to apprehend a poem’. If anything, it suggests that we may soon be lamenting the fact that we can ‘never go back’ to the poetic culture of the 1980s and 1990s, before the founding of Google, massive full-text and audiovisual archives, TEI markup, or some other significant cultural shift in the reception, circulation, and teaching of poetry.

Given these reservations about how pervasive the phenomenon of ‘lyricization’ really was and is, it seems only fair to ask the question of the present essay: how closely do the above readings of direct address and other rhetorical movements in ‘Calamus’ resemble what Jackson describes as ‘lyric reading’? Do they not seem to neatly replicate the terms of her critique: putting Whitman through the ‘lyric reading’ machine only to find that, *voilà*, out comes ambiguity, indeterminacy, and rhetorical impasses, just as expected? Do the readings above simply demonstrate how ‘lyric reading’ has become a kind of Maslow’s hammer in the critical toolbox, for which every poem looks like a lyric?

I want to argue against that objection and in favour of the continued relevance of the broader category of lyric for several reasons. For one thing, there is not really an available nineteenth-century subgenre for the kind of poems Whitman is writing. It is difficult to place Whitman back into a previously existing nineteenth-century conversation if he is the one initiating it. And he really is inventing something new in American poetry, both in form (free verse) and subject matter (his peculiar brand of erotic democratic politics). We need the abstract, comparative category of lyric in this kind of situation to make sense of the new in relation to earlier works and works from other languages and traditions. The same is true of prosody: it would be difficult to study Whitman’s free verse poetry in light of the understanding of versification in his time, as a project in historical poetics might call for, if only because no such understanding existed. Many of Whitman’s contemporaries would insist on reading *Leaves of Grass* as a work of

prose. In this case, the benefit of the subsequent 150 years of free-verse poetry in English suggests that a broader horizon can be quite helpful in understanding and contextualizing Whitman's very early practice of the form.

Moreover, Jackson's paradigmatic example of what is lost by lyric abstraction in the reading of Dickinson—the abstraction away from the poet as a historical person sending letters and poems to particular recipients in her social network—is emphatically not the case for Whitman. In his case, the abstract category of lyric that sees his poems as addressed to anyone may actually be appropriate: they are in fact addressed to anyone and everyone, whoever we are, and the futurity of that address suggests that it would be impossible to 'lose' the sense of a historically specific addressee, since his intended addressees are in continuous supply.

This last objection, of course, is highly particular to Whitman's rhetorical strategies and to differences in the ways Whitman's and Dickinson's work was produced and circulated, which is precisely what Jackson is calling for readers to be more attentive to. But there are also more general issues with the critique of lyric as a broad and abstract category in favour of historically specific subgenres and culturally embedded networks. To insist too strongly on tying genre to contemporary modes of circulation begins to resemble reception history more than poetics, subtly shifting the object of study from the understanding of poetic texts to a thick description of the cultures and subcultures that received them. As Alan Young-Bryant notes in his study of 'perverse form' in Victorian lyric, 'historical poetics has so far produced new readings of poetic cultures, rather than new readings of the poems by which those cultures warrant closer attention.'⁵³ Both, of course, are eminently worthy goals, but this confusion about the object of study—poems or poetic cultures—may be built in to the project of historical poetics in a way that has not been sufficiently acknowledged. As Young-Bryant notes, 'historical poetics need not, however, confine itself to the study of the cultural work that poetry performs', but in order to practice a historical poetics aimed more squarely at poems *as* poems (and only to a lesser extent as documentary evidence in a study of the cultures in which they participate), 'what is needed, in

⁵³ Alan Young-Bryant, 'Perverse Form in Victorian Lyric' (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2011), p. 35.

fact, is a clearer concept of what “historical” means when adjectivally harnessed to “poetics.”⁵⁴

What is at issue here is not quite so categorical as the too-easy opposition of formalism and historicism—pitting the abstract, ahistorical category of lyric against historically situated subgenres and modes of circulation—but rather a question of degree concerning what level of abstraction is an appropriate basis for comparison. For both operations, in fact, involve abstraction. Taken to its extreme, defining a poem’s genre in terms of a historically particularized account of its reproduction and circulation would result in each poem belonging to a generic category unique unto itself, since no two poems have exactly the same reception history. Short of that, the question is: What level of abstraction is sufficient to allow comparison, at the generic level, between two poems? While Jackson’s focus on tighter subgenres such as the letter-poem and nineteenth-century newspaper verse yields bold and persuasive readings, larger abstract categories such as lyric exist to enable broader comparisons across periods, cultures, and languages. Lyric, in my view, is perhaps the only poetic category nimble enough to embrace Whitman’s love poetry—characterized by a free-verse line; sometimes frank, sometimes guarded expressions of same-sex desire; nonstate, voluntarist politics; post-romantic tropological structures; and direct address to readers in the very distant future—while still having enough ballast of tradition to help us begin to think of how we might bring additional poems, periods, and traditions into dialogue with ‘Calamus’ in order to continue to think, and think better, about how they operate as species of poetic utterance with whose conventions we are familiar yet never fully cognizant. To read poems as lyrics is not aimed at reducing them to sameness but at seeking the ground on which two poems, by definition dissimilar, can be brought into conversation. In Whitman’s case, the category of ‘lyric’ is precisely what would enable us to bring his poems into conversation with broader discussions of lyric in comparative romanticism and its wake, Victorian lyric, and other works even further afield in time and place.

⁵⁴ Young-Bryant, p. 34. For further reflections on historical poetics, see also Simon Jarvis, ‘What is Historical Poetics?’ in *Theory Aside*, ed. by Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 97–116.