The Embodied Poet

In the Work of Emerson, Whitman, and Hesiod

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Abstract

This thesis examines Ralph Waldo Emerson’s lecture and essay version of “The Poet;” Walt Whitman’s Preface to his 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry;” and Hesiod’s *Theogony*. The beginning concept for this thesis was to examine the three authors’ versions of the poet’s role and display their agreement that the poet is an archaeologist of language, which is fossil poetry. Early in his career as lecturer and essayist, Emerson discusses the value and import of the poet in society and culture, which was a concept that Whitman literally heard and responded to. The poet’s importance can be traced back to the era of Ancient Greece, specifically Hesiod, who sang the song of the Muses. Through his singing their song, he was instilled with the gift and power of truth, and also became a guardian of their legend. He was, in essence, a historian. Through a deep textual analysis of these three poets, I was able to define an important causeway drawn between the classic Ancient Greek and the two American Romantics. Through this technique of pure observation with some evidential support, it became apparent that poets are transcribers of nature, history, begetters of symbology, and undertakers of a deeply primordial truth. They are guides out of the chaotic darkness from which all are born.
“Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” From Emerson’s essay, “Nature”

Drawing of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Transparent Eyeball,” by Christopher Pearse Cranch.
Author’s Biographical Sketch

Kathleen Hensley was born and raised in Lexington, Kentucky. She received her B.A. in English Literature from the University of Kentucky in 2005. She has lived in Missoula, Brooklyn, Detroit, and Portland, Maine, before deciding to return to school for her ALM degree from Harvard—this academic quest being one of the most rigorous and courageous of her pursuits yet. Part of her desire and drive to research the role of the poet, as she does in the following pages, is due to her own role as poet and truth-teller.
For Granan, Kathryn Clancy Bieschke, the first person to hear and know my song.
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Table of Contents

Author’s Biographical Sketch ......................................................... v
Dedication ........................................................................................ vi
Acknowledgments ........................................................................... vii
Prologue ............................................................................................ 1
Introduction: The Poet ...................................................................... 3
Background ....................................................................................... 13
Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nature and the Powers of the Poet” ................. 20
Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Poet” .................................................. 31
Meditations on Hesiod’s Theogony and Albert Lord’s Singer of Tales ......... 53
Walt Whitman’s Preface from Leaves of Grass, 1855 Edition ................. 66
Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” ....................................... 88
Conclusion ......................................................................................... 96
Bibliography ..................................................................................... 103
Prologue

From Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nature and the Powers of the Poet”:

“There is a great destiny which comes in with this as with every age, colossal in its traits, terrible in its strength, which cannot be tamed, or criticised or subdued. It is shared by every man and every woman of the time, for they are as leaves on this tree which bears them. In solid phalanx the generation comes on; the pattern of their features is new in the world: all wear the same expression, but it is that which they do not detect in each other. The Genius of the time is one spirit but of many operations. One and the same it ponders in the philosophers, drudges in the craftsmen, dreams in the poets, dilates in the love of woman. It inspires every exertion that is made. It makes life sweet to all who breathe it. It is this which the ambitious seek power that they may controul: this they wish to be rich that they may buy; when they marry, it is out of love of this; when they study it is this which they pore after; this which they aim to read and write and carve and paint and build. It is new in the Universe: it is the attraction of time: it is the last work of the Creator: calm and perfect it lies on the brow of the enormous eternity: and if in the spectators, what is there they would hang upon but this, the spoils of foregoing time? Is there not a strange folly to fear whilst the world stands here and we in it, that the day of poetry and creation is past? Is there not something droll to see the darklings of this age, those for whom a happy birth and circumstance and the rarest influences of Culture have done the most,—timid and querulous, ignorant of this resistless onward Fate, which
makes the Individual nothing,—to hear them interrupt the awe and gladness of the time with their officious lamentations that they are critical and know too much? If ever anybody had found out how so much as a ryestraw was made! They seem to me torn up in a whirlwind, borne by its force they know not whence, they know not whither, yet settling their faces and their robes in the moment when they fly by me with this self crimination of impertinent melancholy. But the grandeur of our life exists in spite of us—all over and under and within us,—in what of us is inevitable and above our control. Men are facts as well as persons, and the involuntary part of their life is so much, as to fill all their wonder, and leave them no countenance to say anything of what is so trivial as their private thinking and doing.

We are all poets at last, and the life of each has high and solemn moments which remind him of that fact in a manner he cannot choose but understand. Each of us is a part of eternity and immensity, a god walking in flesh, and the wildest fable that was ever invented, is less strange than this reality. Let us thank the poets as men who saw and celebrated this marvel whilst we slept” (364-5).
Chapter I
Introduction: The Poet

“‘Listen, you country bumpkins, you pot-bellied blockheads, / we know how to tell many
lies that pass for truth, / and when we wish, we know to tell the truth itself.’” - Hesiod¹

“For poetry was all written before time was.” - Emerson²

“I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil.” - Whitman³

In his 1844 essay, “The Poet,” Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, “language is fossil
poetry” (Emerson 190). He elaborates upon the inherent human quality in and of poetry.
Poetry is, in fact, in his vision, a second nature. It is through the creative genesis of
language that we interpret the symbology of nature. Words give nature purpose, meaning,
value—a second chance, a second use, not only a rebirth, but also a reformation. Emerson
fuses together language and nature, the former emitting a new brilliance that originates in
the latter. “Every word was once a poem” (189). Our origins are rooted in poetry.
Through language we interpret the sacredness around and within us.

In this thesis, I will explore Emerson’s blending of the religious with the poetic,
arguing that he escalates the task of the poet to a level of natural holiness. I will further
seek to illumine how Emerson reforms the role of the poet as that of an archaeologist of
the human spirit and mind. Early on, Emerson chooses to pursue an inner quest

¹ A quote of the Muses in the beginning of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, p. 11.
² From Emerson’s essay “The Poet,” p. 185.
³ Quoting Whitman in John Townsend Trowbridge’s *My Own Story*, p. 367.
alternative to what the church offered. He largely surrendered his position at the pulpit,\(^4\) symbolic of his rift with tradition. I will argue that for Emerson part of this quest is with regard to the poet, who maneuvers in the darkness, looking for the inner fires of knowledge and truth. Furthermore, I will argue that Emerson sees the poet as the true prophet in the wilderness, above and beyond established religions.

Emerson views origination as sacred; this sacredness is connected to an imaginative force for which poetry is the mouthpiece. Moreover, in the human mind origination begins not with language, but with poetry. This proximity of poetry to origination creates a powerful dynamic that wields creativity as divine energy.

Emerson further touches upon our immanent spirits, the mystery residing within us: “We are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes when we know least about it” (184). This burning internal fire is the spark to life and nature, an unsolvable mystery: “We are put into our bodies, as fire is put into a pan, to be carried about” (183). This departure from the usual literary rhetoric of transcendence and idealism to that of energy emitting from within causes the focus within the essay to shift from externality to internality. It is here that Emerson begins his mythology of self-reliance, as he gives an uncommon pause to the inner workings of

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\(^4\) Robert Richardson wrote eloquently on the matter, “It is not a break with theism, not a rejection of the religious view of the world. It is a specific rejection of the idea that the center of Christianity is the fall of humankind in Adam and Eve and the redemption of humanity through the sacrifice of Christ. This conception of Christianity as the ‘scheme of redemption’ is what gives meaning to the sacrament of Communion, or, as some Protestants call it, the Lord’s Supper. Within a week of his calling the scheme of redemption ‘absolutely incredible,’ Emerson sent his church a letter saying he had changed his views about Communion and wished now to change the administration of that sacrament. He expected that the church would balk at his request and that he would as a result resign his position as minister. The church was not eager to lose Emerson . . . Emerson’s disagreement with his church was simply the occasion for announcing and formalizing a separation that had already occurred” (125).
humanity, hinting at a power within that had yet to be explored. Mythologies examine and explore the mysterious. Through immanence Emerson hints at the human spirit’s mythology. Emerson’s focus is upon a limitless self, and acknowledges the holiness and boundlessness within. Emerson goes on to say that creation of language is initially creation of poetry; that is, all words at their most raw are poetic. In other words, Emerson sees language as evolving originally from poetry. The expression is primary to that which is expressed. We transmit meanings to our symbols through the maneuver from nature to words. The expression is activated within us. Expression, too, relates to divinity.

Albert Lord, who will be discussed in greater depth later, wrote a seminal text on the art and history of the oral epic poets, entitled *Singer of Tales*. In it he comments on something that reverberates with what Emerson describes as the mystery and divinity of what emanates. Lord writes,

> While both remembering and creating (in the sense of making, not necessarily ‘originating’) play important roles, the latter, creating, is especially significant. The singer cannot, and does not, remember enough to sing a song; he must and does, learn to create phrases (43).

Part of singing an oral epic relies on that which is within the singer. More specifically, Lord writes of the singer’s need to create in the moment, which suggests an immanent imaginative tendency. According to Lord, the singer is a preserver of both tradition and history, “a guardian of legend” (28). Because the singer relies on his or her memory, not on that which is written, limitations can be expected. At this moment, the poet’s imagination is crucial. It is an “unconscious process of assimilation” (33).

Emerson defines the role of the poet with a religious fervor, describing him or her as one who enunciates human origination as well as humanity’s relationship with the cosmos. The power and responsibility of the poet becomes greater than simple verse
making: it evolves into clarity of the makings and creation of the world. The utterance of such truths is thus not only sacred action, but also gives rise to a rare and nearly deified position. He waits for a Christ-like birth of the one true poet, who is “an eternal man” (185). “The world seems always waiting for its poet” (186). Emerson’s poet brings a sacred proclamation of beauty and truth to the world. “All that we call sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology” (186). The burden on the poet is that he or she is not just a writer of beautiful verse, but is truly a prophet. The poet, for Emerson, is sacred: unity, complexity, and wholeness in the flesh. He justifies our deep appreciation of and curiosity for our origins: “No wonder, then, if these waters be so deep, that we hover over them with a religious regard” (188). The primal nature of humanity is made of the same stuff as the primordial nature of the whole universe. It is the poet’s job to fathom this depth, and to dig it out and bring it to the light.

Emerson also equates language with action, as both come from sacred origins and are interconnected. “Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (185). There is a living quality to language, and a way in which life resides in our words. Emerson displays a connection between language and activity in the physical, natural world. The connection is a divinity that manifests itself ubiquitously. He sees goodness in nature, goodness in action and language, and affixes the two to a new mythological stratum. Divinity, to Emerson, permeates all of life, including that which is ethereal, that which is untouchable and unknowable. Emerson describes the sacredness of earthly energy through myth. Emerson’s natural morality explains his eventual abandonment of the pulpit, and more clearly delineates his path to embodying the poet-prophet.
Jerome Loving, among other scholars, notes that Walt Whitman attended Emerson’s “Nature and the Powers of the Poet” in March 1842. (Loving 85). Though the lecture and the essay “The Poet” share a handful of quotations, the essay is more revised and inspired than its lecture of the same name. As an avid Emerson follower, Whitman likely also read Emerson’s essay series that included “The Poet.” Gay Wilson Allen, noted Whitman biographer, writes, “Whitman no doubt thought he was fulfilling Emerson’s prophecy,” which was pronounced so fervently in the essay (A Reader’s Guide 14). There is nothing new about this claim, except that I will add to it by emphasizing that the evolution of the role of the poet from Emerson to Whitman is one of primarily sacred passage, from rhyme-maker to prophetic truth-teller. Such a concept is not new; rather, it has been an ancient theme in the history of epic poetry, yet not one explored between the two American thinkers. I will show that the role of the poet echoes this ancient pattern reverberating between the two American poets, of expressive, experiential religion in poetic idiom. Whitman hears Emerson’s description of language as fossil poetry and amplifies the notion in order to express the importance of his own song.

The association is often made between the Transcendentalists and the British Romantics, though my emphasis will instead be upon exegeting the origins of the poet in Emerson and Whitman through the lens of the Greek Geometric period classic, Hesiod’s Theogony. This association strongly represents the spiritual and prophetic “carrying capacity” of the poet. “With sweet voices they speak of things that are / and things that were and will be, and with effortless smoothness / the song flows from their mouths” (Hesiod 12). Hesiod’s Muses, who are Hellenic goddesses, give him the gift of truth and
vision for past and future alike, as well as creative inspiration that contains the world’s stories. Though Hesiod’s journey, unlike that of Emerson’s and Whitman’s, is not one that explores the psychology of humanity, prophetic specialness is a quality in the poet highly valued by all three, as is constant access to time and truth. That Hesiod’s *Theogony* is a work almost certainly originally of oral poetry is vital to my argument. The very structure of Hesiod’s epic poem was one that changed over time. Similar to that of Whitman’s own *Leaves of Grass*, recomposition and evolution of oral poetry was standard: “In any oral tradition . . . the process of composition is linked to the process of performance, and any given composition can be recomposed each time it is performed” (Nagy 282). This aspect of process over time was crucial in varying degrees to the composition of each author’s poetic natures, including in relation to the mythology of the sacred poet-prophet. Emerson and Whitman seek an image and persona worthy of the American bard. The need to create such a personality is vivid and raw. The poet is no longer a rhyme maker, but a truth seeker, imbued with sacred energies.

Whitman embodies Emerson’s poet metaphor. Through a close examination of Whitman’s reflexive corpus, I will show that *Leaves of Grass* hypostasizes Emerson’s sacred poet through Whitman himself, and life as he experiences and witnesses it. Whitman brings Emerson’s ethereal, idealistic model literally down to earth, among and of the people. Where Emerson focuses upon a return to nature, Whitman focuses upon a spiritual reunion with humanity. Whitman attempts an enactment of the poet-prophet, but his work attempts to de-stratify the ancient poetic rhetoric, notably found in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s hope is to create a new religion with himself as the high priest. The religion would suit the new land and country, while also echoing the origins
of humankind. While Whitman and Emerson share this dream of creating a new religion, they mandate this in subtly diverse ways, something I will outline further in the thesis. In writing his explorative, plundering, liberating, self-professing epic, Whitman returns the role of the poet to the ancients, as in Hesiod’s prologue to *Theogony*, where all poetry is religious, where myth is truth-telling, and also where a panentheistic approach informs these findings. He responds to Emerson with a language that is both new and old, and with a poetic style also new and old. His relationship with his text is also unusual and confounded, for he thinks of it as an autonomous living being, one that gestated from a mysterious and sacred imaginative process. This echoes Emerson’s description of words as actions, and thus of words as life. Whitman allows his creative work to change over time, as he himself changes over time.

An important aspect of Whitman’s work is his panentheistic vision, which allows him to encompass universally, not only particularly. He adopts a sensual attachment and connection to embodied life, which allows him to tap deeply into human nature. I will argue that, diverging from Emerson, Whitman’s focus is less upon nature as a whole and more upon human nature, dissociating man from his surroundings, perhaps unintentionally. Such dissociation might concern Emerson, as the vitality of the human spirit is only found through its commune alone in the wilderness.

_Suchlike I love . . . I loosen myself and pass freely . . . / and am at the mother’s breast with the little child, / And swim with the swimmer, and wrestle with wrestlers, / and march in line with the firemen, and pause and / listen and count. (Leaves of Grass 119)_

In the above excerpt from his long epic poem, we sense that Whitman longs to truly immerse himself in humanity of all walks of life. He wants to connect with and experience as anyone does, outpacing chronology, age, and unbarring any terms or
bounds. His connection comes by way of a kind of ungirthing, “loosening” himself, making room for the energy and experience of all. He does not deride his own self, but rather manifests a spiritual oneness in which that self is transcended. He is an imbiber of human experience. Through liberation Whitman gains the multifarious insights that allow him to tap into an Emersonian “divine energy.” He deciphers poetic immersion in that which is common, and does so with a Christ-like compassion. Whitman intimately describes the good and bad with equal admiration and understanding. Though Emerson and Whitman approach the good-bad dichotomy from different angles, they essentially emerge with complementary understandings. Emerson approaches truth as something that evolves and changes over time, something that can at one turn be good, can also be bad. In true Emerson fashion, however, truth is also discussed as an absolute, complicating the discussion to one of questionable, dichotomous paradoxes. I will explore Emerson’s paradoxes as they affect his version of the poet, and more specifically poetic truth, more fully within my thesis. Whitman chooses to embody the more versatile version of truth: Whitman himself is both good and bad. He encapsulates entire ranges, countries, and peoples. In his poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman writes, “I am he who knew what it was to be evil” (311). He captures all essences in his verse.

Whitman begins his initial 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* with a preface, in which he describes who the great poets are and what they do. He defines that which illumines America, and specifically the task of the American bard. He describes the importance of interconnectivity, thus: “The fluency and ornaments of the finest poems or music or orations or recitations are not independent but dependent. All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain” (11). Whitman makes a claim from which
Emerson strays: origination not only comes from within, it also materializes through physical bodies. Whitman beautifies physical reality and life. Not only does he incarnate Emerson’s poetic mythology, he turns it into everyday and eternal radiance.

Whitman also charges his reader in this preface, perhaps as a point of clarifying religious passage in this new America.

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, . . . dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face. . . . (11).

In so setting these precepts, Whitman aims at nothing less than the liberation of his readership from all former aesthetics. He urges them to adopt Emerson’s idea of self-reliance, but through a celebratory unification. In Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance,” he discusses the intuition as a sort of divine, “primary wisdom” (Emerson, CW 37). It signifies origination, spontaneity, and creativity. It is an “essence,” shared by all walks of life (37). As Whitman sees it, for any single person the only true idol is the one residing within each person’s own blood and matter, a perspective not entirely separate from Emerson’s ideal of self-reliance. Whitman’s departure, however, is in his admiration for this physical blood and guts reality. Also Whitman escalates his interpretation of poetry in conjunction with life, “your very flesh shall be a great poem” (11). He diversifies poetry by singing that which is sacred is found in the very physical structure of all sentient life.

Emerson heightens the importance of the immanent origination of poetry, and thus of divinity, symbology, and meaning. He admits that it wells from within. The makings of this energy are entirely mysterious. Poetry is religion. Because Whitman
identifies intensely with *Leaves of Grass*, in a highly spiritual and perhaps even mystical way, he embodies Emerson’s poet myth, and humanizes the role. He also manifests the religion that Emerson proposes as the highest sort of seeing. In *Leaves of Grass* we see Whitman’s interpretation of Emerson’s “words as fossil poetry,” whereby the hypostasis of Emerson’s mythology comes to life. This redefines poetry, mythology, and religion, connecting the terms with a divinity only accessible to mortals through the poet-prophet.
Chapter II
Background

Because this work will focus on the operation of the Emersonian and Whitmanian versions of the poet, I want to describe what I call the genealogy of the poet in 19th century English literature. As far as the emergence of Literary Transcendentalism, noted American scholar Lawrence Buell describes it as “not an isolated phenomenon; its hybrid mixture of religion and rhetoric had its origins in the cultural milieu from which the movement arose, namely Boston Unitarianism, cross-fertilized by English romantic though and the antecedent tradition of platonic mysticism” (18). The idea of the special oracular gift of the poet evaporated once modernism’s disillusionment emerged, with its turn away from nature. Through Romanticism, the classically worthy subjects of poetry, for example nature, became the focus of major works by the likes of Wordsworth and Keats, and became the vital mechanisms, which activated the poetic imagination. Reality—and more importantly, nature—revealed itself to the Romantics, and inspired them. Poetry’s power and origination came from within the poet, rather than from a metaphysical source—a muse. Emphasis on the poet’s own thought and emotion began to play a powerful role. Long before the Romantics, the ancient Greeks viewed poetry as inherently mimetic of nature, a mirror to the world:

Two causes seem to give rise to poetry as a whole, and these are natural. Imitation is innate in human beings from childhood, and they differ from the other animals in that the human is the most imitative and begins its education through imitation (Aristotle 507).
Emerson joined the conversation and wrote of the poet that he or she is “a mirror carried through the street” (197). With the dawning of British Romanticism, and its desire to divorce from empiricism, the emphasis became more heavily fixated upon the inner workings of the human mind and spirit, than upon physical sensation. Lawrence Buell recognizes this literary insistence and relationship between the English and American romantics.

The Transcendentalist paradox of self-preoccupation versus self-transcendence has its origins in the three traditions of democratic, romantic, and (especially) Protestant thought . . . The poet’s basic faith is that if only he looks far enough inward, or merges himself with the world-soul through nature, he will reach the unconscious or universal . . . English and American romantics, in general, seem to have been more aware of the risks of self-consciousness than their European counterparts (Buell 271).

In the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth pleads with his readers to welcome a new dawning of a new poetry, one that speaks in layman’s language. He wants the poet to “express himself as other men express themselves” (Wordsworth 608). The poet descends from his or her all-knowing gaze, to the vision of the real, and language of the limited. In fact, the limitations inherent in verbal expression become a preoccupation by the early 19th century. Wordsworth accepts man’s necessary attachment to sensation, and also that this is at the heart of poetry: “it is to follow the fluxes and reflexes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature” (598). The oft-rendered drab reality of the senses is not only good enough for poetry. It is in fact the centerpiece and focal point of poetry’s origins. Wordsworth calls for a re-centering, a grounding, an immanent procurement, one that begins here, as opposed to the lofty, celestial, cerebral boundaries commonly navigating and defining the whereabouts of poetry. It is the inner
quest of the poet, and the localized search, that manifests a sophisticated and deep awareness of the universal. Wordsworth sensed this.

Wordsworth, however, gives the poet power of flight. He says the poet moves and is inspired best by sensation. The poet’s favorite guides are “wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings” (606). The end-goal is still transcendence. The significant departure from the Enlightenment within Wordsworth’s vantage point is connecting man and nature, and displaying the divinity therein. The poet “considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature” (606). Thus the conversation of mimesis continues into the Romantic age.

Coleridge disagrees with Wordsworth notably in Biographia Literaria, which was published at the turn of the 19th century. According to Engell, Coleridge “views the creative or poetic imagination as the same in kind with the philosophical meaning of imagination, but higher and more intensified in degree” (Coleridge 170). Imagination comes from great heights, not from the normalcy of everyday interaction. Poetic language and intonation stems from the stuff of mythology, not from the limitations of a rustic life. Coleridge’s great heights are evident in his esemplastic arts. The word “esemplastic” first appears in Chapter 10 of his Biographia Literaria. He confesses he constructed the term himself, an adjoining of Greek words meaning, he writes, “to shape into one,” a reverberation of a holist perspective that Whitman takes full throttle (168). The gathering of particulars into the universal whole becomes an important part of Coleridge’s argument. He says of the writer, “until you understand a writer’s ignorance, presume yourself ignorant of his understanding” (232). Here Coleridge draws an important
conclusion—the human mind and the human capacity for knowing, understanding, and interpreting one’s surroundings all have limitations. He deciphers a liminal paradox, which inhibits the arts as well as the capacity of human thought. One cannot know what one does not know. Moreover, one cannot understand what one does not know. Though the arts come from a higher breed of thought, according to Coleridge they are still subject to a certain unknowableness.

With regard to the capacity of language, Emerson explores, and then explodes language’s limits. He peruses the limits of language, specifically with relation to the poet. Part of poetry’s importance, for Emerson, is its new associations within language. To Emerson, imagination is “a very high sort of seeing” (191). Language is transitory, migratory; it is not a “homestead” (195). Because of this active quality found in language, all things spoken can be and are true and false. Meaning of the symbolic language changes over time. This creates the hazy dilemma that all words can become truth, and can give paradoxical symbology to the imaginative forces. As such, evolution and change become large and important aspects for Emerson, because these are large and important aspects found within nature—the creator of symbols and thus of poetry and language.

In the late 1830s, and continuing onward throughout his life, Emerson wrote of the poet in enigmatic, ambiguous terms. The ambiguity was not accidental, nor has it been lost on Emerson scholars. Emerson calls for a Wordsworthian man of men with special sensitivities to life’s subtleties, while at the same time insisting that the power of poetic imagination resides in everyone. Emerson democratizes the poet, brings him down to earth, and also insists that he is the “eternal man” (185). Just as Emerson gives universal access to the poetic function, he claims such power and insight requires an
impossibly ethereal understanding of the mechanics of the universe. Emerson’s position, and place in time, was evidence of transition and renewal. The mid-19th century was a flawed, deeply liminal moment in history, particularly in America. Culturally and politically, as well as geographically, America was shifting. The lack of societal reliability brought on tensions, and a desire for continued renewal and identification, post-Revolution. America was a new nation, and the culture was attempting to purge itself of its European roots. Given this backdrop, Emerson’s commentary on the poet marks an important pivot culturally between Romanticism and Modernism, and between European thought and American thought. Emerson continues the thread that was left by the Romantics, the transcendental qualities of the poet, the importance of nature. The visceral ascension that is a markedly human spiritual evolution of the poet happens most readily through an inward transformation. It is through a descent into nature that humans, and specifically the poet, both demystify life and hold its secret close. Emerson comments with no subtle realism about the angelic, all-knowing Romantic poet that, “the all-piercing, all-feeding, and ocular air of heaven, that man shall never inhabit,” that man and poet alike are earthbound and limited (187). Following in Wordsworth’s footsteps, and elaborating on certain details Wordsworth may not have agreed with, Emerson describes the poetic function as one to which every man has access. This democratic notion, however, is set paradoxically alongside the limited capability of man, language, and the depth of the human mind.

Whitman, however, had a holist design. He had an urge to both emulate neighbor and stranger and perhaps more to the point, become them. Whitman believed himself to be the poet that Emerson theorized. It is safe to assume Emerson’s own opinion on the
matter evolved, especially with the later editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Because, as I have said, Whitman heard Emerson’s lecture “The Poet,” and was aware of his essay by the same name, it is likely he self-consciously imitated this persona. He distinguishes himself as part of everyone, and everyone a part of himself. He was a man of men, truly the answer to Wordsworth’s subtle pleadings in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Whitman does not stop at pantomiming the language of common folk: he chooses to entirely embrace all lifestyles, choices, places, and births. Instead of addressing solely Wordsworth’s desire to emulate the language, Whitman catapults ahead and claims to *be* them, to know them intimately, and to love them. He sees the beauty in the whole. The particular, for Whitman, loses its vitality except via its role in the universal. Whitman redefines the role of the poet, of himself, as truly democratic, envisioning a blending within and of society that erases demarcations, heightens the importance of anonymity, and hastens to define the poet as an anti-hero. If in his epic poem Whitman himself is the hero, then so too is everyone else, thus either reducing importance of heroism, or deeming it common. Conversely, Whitman’s anonymizing factor reflects a democratic vision that emanated the vernacular and culture of the times. Whitman is not so much writing mimetically as he is incorporating the mass of the universe within himself. In effect, he envelopes the mirror, becomes reflected and reflecting. Borges briefly comments upon Whitman’s trinity: “a private man, a glorified public man, let us say a kind of demi-god, and also the reader” (12). The assessment is brief and to the point, although I would argue Whitman created a powerfully inclusive dynamic with his readership, beginning a conversation and a story that includes everyone, not just the writer and his protagonist. Also, and quite importantly, I will argue that through *Leaves*
of Grass, Whitman abandons Romantic notions of transcendence and cerebral flight. He lays all importance within nature, society, and physical connection. By retaining these crucial features, Whitman brings the poet democracy and earthiness.
Emerson often associated himself as primarily a poet, then a naturalist, essayist, lecturer, or preacher, among the many hats he wore. It should not surprise one, then, that early on Emerson rhapsodized the importance of the poet in lecture, essay, and journal. Emerson’s essay, “The Poet,” was derived from the notes for his lecture given in November 1841, which was originally called “Nature and the Powers of the Poet” (347). It has been commented upon by others, notably Robert E. Spiller, that the lecture is significantly different from the essay of the same title, though the two share some perhaps benign excerpts. All the same, the study of Emerson’s poet would be partial without first examining this earlier version of Emerson’s poetic thought.

Emerson opens the lecture with a similar claim to the one found in the opening of his essay “The Poet”: he describes the unimportance of the poet’s critic. He says, “If I were not, as I am, a devout lover of the Muse, I must still feel that its nature is not in danger from critics, that it is something not to be reached by criticism” (348). Emerson is already attempting to build a new framework for how the poet is perceived by his or her followers. Emerson also hopes to assure his audience that he speaks not simply from the biased stance of lover of poetry, but rather from a more objective perspective. The poet eschews and in fact transcends typical conversation of aesthetics, as described by the critic. Emerson’s audience is likely mystified by the poet’s realm, as it is described. Moreover, Emerson claims an ability neutrally to discuss this. As the lecture’s topic,
Emerson suggests that the nature of the poet goes beyond mere intellect and theory.

Similarly, he describes the unending interest beholden to the poet’s muse. The depth of the muse is infinite and boundless. Emerson tells his audience, “there is no fear that you will exhaust or dispose finally of a subject so subtle and evasive” (348). The poet’s truths are seemingly unwieldy, yet nearly imperceptible. True poetry has no known depth or height. It is unfathomable Emerson seems to indicate. There is a constant mystery, no matter how seemingly clear the image or message.

Emerson evokes the angelic imagery as a temporary comparison for not simply the poet, rather the actual poetry, thus personifying an otherwise inanimate ethereal thing. He claims it to be an untouchable presence that “you cannot profane” (348). The poem has unwavering purity. Emerson describes a kind of ascendant persona:

. . . on its person hands were never laid,—never can be laid. . . . if you come where it was, lo! It has departed and glitters in the distance like a planet; for its essence is inviolable, it is ever wild and new (348).

The latter part of this, “ever wild and new,” associates poetry with a re-creating, synthesizing energy. There is a constant need for discovery and freshness associated with poetry, which then exemplifies the pursuit of poetry by the poet as an exploration.

Beyond purity, Emerson’s stress upon the non-sensuality of the personified poem decries that hands cannot reach for this theorized person. It is beyond human measure and human reach.

At the same time, Emerson describes poetry as a vital part of nature’s origins. Despite its elusiveness, it is inherent and ubiquitous; moreover, it is primary to expression. “Poetry finds its origin in that need of expression which is a primary impulse of nature” (348-9). Humankind needs a form of expression: “Every thought in man
requires to be uttered, and his whole life is an endeavor to embody in facts the states of
the mind” (349). This urge to express is a poetic impulse, one that leads to an eventual
human uncovering, or as Emerson describes it, “to be unfolded, explained, expressed,
that is the boon we crave of the Universe” (349). Through expression and poetry we
demystify and are demystified, though through the process we are still unable to unravel
poetry’s own mysterious quality. It is a constant quest, which Emerson suggests does not
have a finale.

Emerson’s suggestion of poetry being akin to a constant mystery is evident when
he writes of the air blowing through an Aeolian harp. In ancient Greek mythology,
Aeolus was the ruler of the wind, and gave Odysseus a bag of winds to guide him on his
journey. Emerson’s Aeolian harp analogy is not found anywhere in the essay version of
“The Poet.” It is hard to imagine why he abandoned this particular line when he
converted his lecture notes to an essay:

He wants every rude stroke that has been dealt on his irritable texture: he hangs
out his life like an Aeolian harp in a tree, where every wind from the northern
tempest to the softest breath of southwestern air may play on it (357).

This image is significant for Emerson because it begins to describe passivity of character
as a poetic ideal. The poet is active seemingly only in his or her act of perceiving.
Otherwise the poet is a vehicle for the universe to act through, although I would argue
that Emerson did not believe it was this simple. Perhaps it was the complexity of this
relationship that caused Emerson to drop the Aeolian harp metaphor when transitioning
to the essay version of the lecture. A similarity can be drawn between the “wind from the

5 From Book 10 of The Odyssey: “He, not at all refusing, stripped the hide / Of a nine-seasoned
steer, and gave it to me. / Therein the courses of the winds he tied, / He their one keeper by the
Sire’s decree, / At will to quench and raise by land or sea. / So with a silver cord he bound them
fast, / Escapeless . . .” (232).
northern tempest” and Hesiod’s Muses. They breathe poetic life into Hesiod, “and then breathed into me / divine song, that I might spread the fame of past and future,” just as air, nature, and the universe breathes the poetic word into Emerson’s poet (Hesiod 12). Perhaps even more important than the passive aspect, the Aeolian harp incites a lack of the human finesse needed for poetry to exist. The Aeolian harp relies upon the air to move through it and create its music. It needs no human impulse, just as Emerson’s poet needs no human touch or sense to burst forth with expression. It is an external force. The Aeolian harp adds further texture to Emerson’s portrait of the elusive poet as mysterious and not curated by humankind, but by that which surrounds him or her, and is out of human control. Beyond the literal calls of nature made by the Aeolian harp is the concept of spontaneous creation. To Emerson, the movement that created the harp’s music was a “divine direction” (“Perpetual Forces” 84).

Emerson further describes the poet as a vehicle for a divine force. “Him the circumstances of life dazzles and overpowers whilst it passes, because he is so delicate a meter of every influence. You shall find him noble at last” (358). This further enhances the previous notion indicated of passivity, which is a divine force speaking through a person. Emerson also indicates that the poet makes himself or herself available to “the circumstances of life” (358). Even the trivial or mundane overtakes the poet. As for the notion of nobility, Emerson’s use of the word here is curious. He seems to say that with the ultra-sensitivity with which the poet is equipped, comes also a nobility. The nobility of poets is a special class, designating this immeasurable and unfathomable power.

Similarly, Emerson describes the poet’s relationship with and toward language as a power. This connection is curious, though this relationship is not powerful in the sense
of domination. Emerson sees language as the “the half god, language, the most spiritual of all the works of man . . . scarcely less beautiful than the world itself” (358). There is quasi-religious power in the ability to pronounce the symbols found in the universe. Emerson writes of the ear, “by and by it learns the secret, that love and thought always speak in measure or music,—that with the elevation of the soul, the asperities and incoherence of speech disappear, and the language of truth is always pure music” (358). Firstly, passivity is necessary for receiving the poetic word, which is in essence “pure music.” Otherwise, Emerson perceiving language as a gift makes this comparable to Hesiod with the gift of poetry from his Muses. Where the Muses give Hesiod something he would otherwise not have had—the story of the Gods, the real gift for Emerson’s poet is a sensitive ear, and thus the potential to “sense” profoundness waiting to be newly described in language.

Emerson distinguishes between what he calls stock poetry and poetry. The former is the inferior, and the latter is the genuine. He says the difference between the two is “in stock poetry the metre is given and the verses are made to it, and in poetry the sense dictates the tune or march of the words” (359). One might think of Albert Lord’s discussion of the oral poet, which will be discussed in depth later. In Lord’s opinion, the singer began with the rhythm and then established the words secondarily:

Even in the pre-singing years rhythm and thought are one, and the singer’s concept of the formula is shaped though not explicit. He is aware of the successive beats and the varying lengths of repeated thoughts, and these might be said to be his formulas. Basic patterns of meter, word boundary, melody have become his possession, and in him the tradition begins to reproduce itself (32).

Emerson’s poet, then, seems to be one who works distinguishably from his or her distinctly unique vision, with much less emphasis on the structure. To Emerson, structure
follows truth. Poetic inspiration comes first.

To Emerson, poetry has one thing that prose does not, and that is truth. He does not speak of “apparent but spiritual truth, which is not allowed in prose. Music is the uncultivated man’s Parnassus” (359). Emerson discerns that the depth of truth revealed through song and verse is significant. The claim also distinguishes music, which appears to be roughly synonymous with poetry, as the working men and women’s Parnassus. In Greek mythology, Mount Parnassus, located above Delphi, is the home of poetry. Emerson is claiming that music is the place of poetic creation. Furthermore, though these words are spoken by a lecturer, thus not through the mechanics of an Emersonian poet, one trusts the speaker to be forthright. Emerson’s own loophole within this statement is that he identified, above all, as a poet. Emerson writes of music and poetry, “every note is an insult to all the common sense that has been droning in our ears all day. It gives it the lie” (359). He declares further, biblically so, “You shall not speak truth in prose: You may in verse” (359). The poet keeps in the foreground “those cardinal truths and ideas which make the religion of man” (360). Truth, poetry, and religion are hardwired into the Emersonian poet who delivers that which is real, shedding the useless, and describing life at its most sacred core.

Emerson also touches on a sacred power, not unlike the power of truth. Emerson says, “. . . poetry serves a great office to mankind in keeping before the mind of the most critical and unbelieving age those cardinal truths and ideas which make the religion of man” (360). Just as Emerson incites the wonders of an evolutionary nature throughout the lecture, he reminds his audience of the religion in it. Religion picks up where science cannot yet explain—mysteries of the world become the poet’s terrain. “Whence the new
proceeded, is the secret of nature. Only what is new delights us, for it is the last communication from God” (360). The poet receives, in essence, the words of God, so the poet speaks God’s truth. Without saying so directly, Emerson suggests a sacred power to the poet’s song. Similarly, Emerson determines the ownership of true poetry. Poems are not the poet’s words; thus “he valued his poems not because they were his, but because they were not” (360). Similar to what Lord describes in *Singer of Tales*, there is a transmission of the song to the speaker. In the case of Emerson’s poet, however, the transmission comes from God. The process is far more mysterious. There is a resonance between the ownership of Emerson’s poet’s words, and Hesiod’s words coming from the Muses. Neither Hesiod nor Emerson’s poet can claim possession or responsibility for that which is transmitted.

Related to the alien and sacred nature of poetry and its origins is the fear reading it can inspire. Emerson describes the fear that comes with reading poetry. This fear is associated with the depth and breadth of what poetry reveals:

> We are a little afraid of poetry,—afraid to write and afraid to read it . . . we do not very willingly trust ourselves on the back of that wild winged horse of the Muses, ignorant whither he will carry us and where we shall alight (361).

The hearer or reader of poetry is taken away to his or her real place of heritage. I read this new yet old place as our return to our second innocence. Emerson says poetry carries us away “to make us, at a later period, adopted children of the new land, and, in the end, to disclose to us, that this is really our native country” (361). The hearers of poetry are children, symbolic of purity and innocence, and returning to an Edenic home. In the above quote Emerson mentions the Muses, who clearly take their passengers to unknown and unknowable terrain—again, this is not unlike Hesiod’s Muses.
Similar to the fear of reading poetry is the concern that poetry can presently exist, or still be new. Emerson touches for a moment on the anxiety of poetry being real, and relevant—a concern that weighed heavily at the time, especially in an era that succeeded the British Romantics:

And yet, as nothing so much concerns us as the question, if it can be a question, whether Poetry is possible in the present time, Why not? What is poetry but the truest expression? And if the thing exists, so will its expression follow. . . . Nature does not repeat herself, but invents (361).

Emerson goes into more detail about his logic of expression. First, the thing exists within nature. Then, humans notice it, and soon after they begin to describe it. These first utterances of a true thing in nature are poetry. Once this language becomes commonplace, it becomes archaic, fossil poetry. His concept in the lecture is less distinguished, and yet retains a necessary kernel: poetry is derivative of nature’s truth.

Emerson then touches upon the place of poetry, or poetry of place, which is a crucial next step from poetry’s relationship to and with nature. First, he criticizes any reliance upon the sensual, saying, “we have defiled our own houses to the degree that they suggest to us places of indulgence and mere comfort or outward convenience, and not the residence of sacred and awful pleasures” (361). For Emerson, sensuality eludes the greater concepts that true poetry reveals. Externality is the focus, especially in his description of poetry being dependent on nature. Yet Emerson calls for an internal hunt that leads to transcendence. “And yet the genius of poetry is here” (362). By “here” Emerson means in America, and more specifically, in the very room he stood in while speaking those words, as he gave this lecture in Concord, Massachusetts.6 He did, after

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6 Robert E. Spiller notes that the lecture was likely given first in Concord, then in Boston, Providence, and New York from late 1841 until early 1842. See Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo
all, go on to say that the poet “is Yankee born” (362). I argue that he also elucidated that
poetry is ubiquitous and present much like the wind in an Aeolian harp. Emerson said of
the poet:

He is in the forest walks, in paths carpeted with leaves of the chestnut, oak, and
pine; he sits on the mosses of the mountain; he listens by the echoes of the wood;
he paddles his canoe in the rivers and ponds (362).

The poet goes out into nature and returns to society with the news, which is earlier
described as “communication from God” (361). Emerson sees the genius of poetry, as
found “not so much in metrical forms, as in eloquence” (362). He lets go of tradition and
welcomes a more radical approach. An important aspect of poetry is how closely it
resembles the truest expression.

From this claim of the place of poetry being within the very woodwork of nature
is Emerson’s next claim about the democracy of the poetic function. In a fashion akin to
Hesiod and Whitman, Emerson says that an obscure layperson can be a poet. He goes on
to describe a “hard-featured, scarred, and wrinkled Methodist . . . who never knew the
looking glass or the critic” (362). Just before this description, Emerson also describes the
whereabouts of poetic genius as something found “in strange, improbable places” (362).
Emerson hopes to deviate from a normative view of the poet, as well as what inspires the
poet’s voice. He goes on to stake a claim that sounds more like Whitman, which is that
the poet is “a man who conquers his audience by infusing his soul into them” (362).
Emerson’s poet is made whole with his or her audience, and in fact without this true
expression is not possible. The poet must be a holist.

From the democratic poetic function comes the necessity for absolute change and

*Emerson Volume III* from Harvard University Press, specifically the lecture’s introductory notes
p. 347.
growth. Through the inspiration provided by the speaker, or the poet, roles that Emerson curiously discusses as one and the same, “we feel that a man is a Mover . . . our actual life and society appears a dormitory” (363). Emerson capitalizes “mover,” suggesting it is archetypal. Humans move, shaping both their world and themselves. Change is immanent. Those present at the lecture would not have seen this capitalization, but perhaps would have heard it through dramatic emphasis. Regardless, Emerson suggests that life is movement and impermanence, and that our role is to remain mobile. Life and society as a dormitory gives thought and other non-sensual aspects of existence a more meaningful position because of their absolute and ongoing position in our reality.

The fact of the poet’s existence is as inextricable as the importance of that which is new. These two absolutes rest on a different absolute: that of impermanence. Emerson describes the appearance and existence of the poet as a matter of fact. He says to his audience, “To doubt that the poet will yet appear is to doubt of day and night” (363). He transitions from this to claiming that “wherever there is a fact there must follow the expression of the same” (363). Emerson sees fact as closely tied with “the new.” He says, “New topics, new powers, a new spirit arise, which threaten to abolish all that was called poetry, in the melodious thunder of the new” (364). Fact is then fused with transience and impermanence. Fact is change. Newness is fact absolute. Emersonian poetry does not rest in tradition, as alluded to when he says, “all that was called poetry” (363, emphasis mine). Poetry relies upon a shifting energy that creates and recreates repeatedly. Emerson senses evolution in the universe. If the poet is to relay the facts, this seems to be the most crucial, elemental one.

Emerson’s conclusion to the lecture version of “The Poet” describes a force that
seems to be beyond anyone’s control. Emerson calls it “destiny” (364). It is a force “terrible in its strength, which cannot be tamed, or criticised or subdued. It is shared by every man and every woman of the time, for they are as leaves on this tree which bears them” (364). Emerson suggests that all are dependent upon this force for life, like the Aeolian harp as well as Hesiod’s poetry and the Muses. This is the unstoppable force upon which the entire universe rests. “It is new in the Universe: it is the attraction of time: it is the last work of the Creator: calm and perfect it lies on the brow of the enormous eternity . . .” (364). Again the appearance of unending time is a factor. “The Genius of time is one spirit but of many operations” (364). This is what inspires one to be a “Mover.” Emerson believes imagination and its fusion to destiny and time was the last creation of God.

Emerson concludes his lecture with wonderment about how time and destiny are not within our control. As a result, we are just as observable as all the facts of nature about which the poet writes. “Men are facts as well as persons, and the involuntary part of their life is so much, as to fill all their wonder . . . ” (365). We are subject to the observation of the poet. Moreover, Emerson describes a concept seen later with Whitman:

We are all poets at last, and the life of each has high and solemn moments which remind him of that fact in a manner he cannot choose but understand. Each of us is a part of eternity and immensity, a god walking in flesh, and the wildest fable that was ever invented, is less strange than this reality (365).

This is a substantial suggestion he makes to an entire room full of listeners in the early 1840s. The poetic function is tied within our destiny. It is a mechanism for understanding the elusive magic and mystery of reality.

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7 See Prologue for full paragraph text.
In “The Poet,” Emerson discusses the divinity of poetry, and the divine nature of the role of the poet. He writes:

The sign and credentials of the poet are, that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes (185).

This is reminiscent of the opening to *Theogony*, the muses and their declaration of the power of truth-telling. We can also reflect on more recent literature, specifically Emerson’s lecture, “Nature and the Powers of the Poet,” and recall the importance of newness to fact, and then fact to poetry. The poet is the authority, herald, prophet, knower, and giver of truth. Emerson describes the role as such, “the poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands in the centre” (185). There is a natural gravity for the universe to fall toward the poet. Thus, the poet is inclined to be passive, and to wait for poetry to arrive. The poet is the Emersonian all-seeing transparent eyeball, here witnessing beauty, and transmitting its message, notably not above it as a heraldic angel, rather among and of its essence, and a part of the whole. There is no definitive creation, even though Emerson says that “beauty is the creator of the universe” (185). This is peculiarly challenging to dissect. Emerson suggests a necessary immanence ascribed to the poet, which is not the ocular, ephemeral transcendence that is commonly associated with the poet. Though Emerson seems more often to be preoccupied by high idealism, his line of thinking is actually nearer to sensual realism.
Emerson grants poetry the gift of timelessness—a thing created before time itself. It is fossil poetry, stemming from archaic nature. “For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings, and attempt to write them down . . .” (185). This resonates with one of the last lines of his lecture, where he speaks to his audience of genius and imagination, “It is new in the Universe: it is the attraction of time: it is the last work the Creator . . .” (“The Poet,” 364). Poetry has an eternal quality—it is pre-temporality. It is truth and it is infinite. Furthermore, Emerson indicates that poetry and truth exist in the very air we breathe. This is beautifully illustrated in poetry’s resemblance to the Aeolian harp. Also interesting is the fact that Emerson calls the music in the air, in other words poetry, “primal warblings,” suggesting that the communication is as old as time (185).

The dimension of time comes up repeatedly in the essay. Often Emerson’s way of defining the difference is through comparison. He describes someone who has “poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre” (185). Emerson decides that the poet is “plainly a contemporary, not an eternal man” (185). He distinguishes between a person poetically talented, but only relevant to one era instead of many. The true poet, however, overcomes the hurdles of temporality. Time no longer bars the poet to his or her particular time chronologically, though a few paragraphs later Emerson says “the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet” (186). Though each age is waiting for its poet, each poet tends to have a timeless message. This problematizes Emerson’s interest in fact being constantly refreshable. If
fact changes as quickly as Emerson suggests, then the poet’s message, no matter how revealing of the truth, will not be absolute.

When Emerson begins to write about the ascending powers of poetry, he describes a quality of newness—newness has a special relationship to time. He also writes, perhaps paradoxically, of infinitude with relation to ascension. Emerson writes, “the melodies of the poet ascend, and leap, and pierce into the deeps of infinite time” (191). Emerson believes that the truest poetry is timeless, so truth stands outside of time. Time, then, becomes a meaningless construct, one that does not separate truth from reality, or truth from ages. A paragraph later, however, he again makes a temporal reference of another kind. He writes of newness, “the poet also resigns himself to his mood, and that thought which agitated him is expressed, but alter idem, in a manner totally new. The expression is organic, or, the new type which things themselves take when liberated. . . .” (191). The poet’s quest to universal truths is a process, much like those found in nature, thus relying upon a passage of time. Truth gestates and emerges from some kind of origins. Upon its creation it becomes an ageless entity. Poetry is words arranged perfectly and deigned from the heights of imagination. Ascension is immanent. One senses Emerson’s distinctly Kantian aesthetic, though his angle seems more mysterious than what Kant would desire in a poetic theory. Emerson departs from the physical world. He writes only two paragraphs later that “every intellectual man quickly learns . . . he is capable of a new energy . . . by abandonment to the nature of things”

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8 Kant wrote, “A judgment of taste on which charm and emotion have no influence (even though these may be combined with the satisfaction in the beautiful), which thus has for its determining ground merely the purposiveness of the form, is a pure judgment of taste” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment* 108). Kant is careful to note that no cognitive or logical judgments are to be made when observing a beautiful object, such as a poem, but that, in the observer, the object is related “by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding)” (89).
Though Emerson’s intellectual man has his feet firmly planted on the ground, he is synthesizing something that has never before existed. This is the power of poetry.

Emerson’s placement of “The Poet” in the sequence of his *Essays Second Series* collection was a significant and deliberate choice. Chronologically, it comes first, primary even to “Experience” or “Nature.” Emerson’s message is clear: before everything in the natural world, not to mention the human experience within it, there was poetry. Emerson longs to illustrate this point. “All that we call sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology” (186). Poetry’s news is ancient and eternal, and the poet is the long awaited voice of sacred truth. Emerson regards the poet with some religious reverence. “No wonder, then, if these waters be so deep, that we hover over them with a religious regard” (188). This particular quote is palpably reminiscent of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:1-2). The poet coming unto his or her expression is a primordial and chaotic beginning.

Emerson separates poetry from the realm of literary criticism, placing it in a divine sanctuary. “Here we find ourselves, suddenly, not in a critical speculation, but in a holy place, and should go very warily and reverently. We stand before the secret of the world, there where Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety” (187). Emerson describes transience, shape-shifting, change and activity. He describes the site of these things as the beholder of the universe’s secret, and moreover the environment of creation. He also christens this the moment when the entire universe is split into pieces.
In “The Poet” Emerson distinguishes persons of taste, or those “who have acquired some knowledge of admired pictures or sculptures, and have an inclination for whatever is elegant” (183). He goes on to discern between the value of the souls of such people, and makes a Kantian claim. Like Kant, he seems to ratify a fairly impossible standard of what beauty is, and assumes the common critic would be ignorant to this. Emerson separates out the mundane ability to recognize an artistic work from a higher vision laced with morality. With a person of taste, as Emerson spies, “they are selfish and sensual. Their cultivation is local, as if you should rub a log of dry wood in one spot to produce fire, all the rest remaining cold” (183). Emerson indicates that “esteemed umpires of taste” have perhaps cultural value and relevance, but with regard to deep, moral, truth-knowing, they are useless. As Kant was want to differentiate between true beauty and that which pleases, Emerson deciphers between a kind of soil-level artistic perspective, and a much more deeply plundering vision and conceptual stance. To complete the deciphering, Emerson continues with the fire metaphor. The person of taste is as compelling to him as an unignited log, while a person interested in more deeply penetrating truthful understanding reveals a metaphoric immanent spark. “For we are not pans and barrows, nor even porters of the fire and torch-bearers, but children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes when we know least about it” (184). Immanence, then, plays a crucial role in the development of Emerson’s poet. Emerson, though, hints at the makings of this internal fire, the immanence. He writes that “the Universe is the externization of the soul” (187). The distinction becomes clear between external and internal.
Having dispatched with the literary critics, Emerson administers to himself a particular responsibility. He is a trusted ally of poetry. He prepares the reader for the monumental task of digesting and understanding the magnitude of poetry, and what the poet is responsible for and represents. He dissects unwanted, disingenuous artistic and spiritual expression from that which is discerned only by the laws and secrets of the universe. “We know that the secret of the world is profound, but who or what shall be our interpreter, we know not” (186). As always, Emerson is careful to discern between a reveler of the times and one who truly understands the darkened proverbial waters, “talent may frolic and juggle; genius realizes and adds” (186). The poet creates knowledge. The poet sees the truth of the world, and proclaims it, before those proclamations become fully realized pragmatically. The poet is the spokesperson for the experience of all mankind, to “utter our painful secret” (184). The painful secret that Emerson suggests the encompassing truth of life, which is daunting, fearful, and inescapable—and also appears to be a birthplace.

It is curious that Emerson notes the many hidden meanings behind a thing. “But the highest minds of the world have never ceased to explore the double meaning, or shall I say, the quadruple, or the centuple, or much more manifold meaning, of every sensuous fact” (183-4). Later in the essay this concept—bringing meaning to objects—becomes symbology. The material world takes on new and higher meaning.

Beyond this universality of the symbolic language, we are apprised of the divineness of this superior use of things, whereby the world is a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity, in this, that there is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature; and the distinctions which we make in events, and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol (188).
Emerson’s symbology of and within nature is primary—his symbols are universally useful. It is a measurement by which we calculate value, worth, and meaning. It is common and democratic. Symbols are the human way of interpreting both self and external surroundings. Emerson does not halt here, however. He goes on to describe this symbology as the divine metaphor.

In the above quote, Emerson also mentions the disappearance of binaries when he writes, “the distinctions which we make in events, and in affairs, of low and high, honest and base, disappear when nature is used as a symbol” (188). While we use nature to distinguish our symbols, classifying as we experience, we also eliminate liminality, according to Emerson. The divinity of nature’s symbols begins to emerge through the blending of binaries and opposites. This symbology is precisely what the Poet is able to pronounce with sophistication and unusual clarity. Emerson reminds his reader of the all within the one, a holist overture prevalent throughout much of his work. He senses a macrocosm within the microcosm. “There is no fact in nature which does not carry the whole sense of nature” (188). Everything is both containable and knowable in each separate entity within nature. Thus, the symbols are universally available. For Emerson particulars are universals, and universals are particulars. This conundrum allows him to blur meaning and being in a way that defies rationalism. It is perhaps this line of thinking that leads later to Whitman’s own identification with all of humanity. For Emerson, though, it is nature at large that contains our symbols—not simply humankind. Nature contains the symbols for our interpretations. Our experiences with nature must be simplistic and unhindered.
Emerson describes the world as “a temple, whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures, and commandments of the Deity” (188). He gives an assortment of emblems in the paragraph prior: “stars, lilies, leopards, a crescent, a lion, an eagle, or other figure, which came into credit God knows how . . .” (188). Emerson enlivens the conversation of the Poet with religious undertones, which elevate the purpose and necessity of both the communion within nature, but also the direness of the translation of the symbols nature provides. He writes of the Poet, “His worship is sympathetic, he has no definitions, but he is commanded in nature, by the living power which he feels to be there present” (188). Indeed, for the poet, the world is a temple, and “the commandments of the Deity” are nature’s laws, which inspire new associations for the poet.

Emerson does what his Poet does. That is, he both describes and uses the natural world as the framework for his symbology: the ocean, mountains, gardens, and wilderness. These all take special purpose. “For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend a higher form . . .” (189-90). The emphasis here ought to be on the changeability found in nature. Changeability allows these pieces of the natural world to fill the gaps within the abstract and often clumsy structure of language. Emerson is aware of the limitations of language and nature, though constantly describes poetry as a universe unto itself and only slightly less rich than the real universe, upon which language depends.

What is the relationship between the poet, the muses, language, and history?

The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius . . . (190).
He describes the archaeology of language and intuits its natural evolution. Language ages with civilization. He insinuates again that all words are first poetry—origins and creation are closely linked to poetry. Imagination is crucial to the evolution of things.

Furthermore, in this particular passage, Emerson mentions poetry to be “a sort of tomb of the muses” (190). This is different than what Hesiod is doing, which is akin to keeping the Muses, and thus the Goddesses alive, by singing their story. For Emerson, poetry is an archive, related to burial of the muses. In a sense, Emerson is reviving the long lost Muses. This phrase, “tomb of the muses,” refers also to Hesiodic and classical Greek languages, as the early foundations of poetry.

Emerson’s poet turns from organized religion toward a more mystical spirituality. Religious qualities are found in the sacred translation of idea to word. Imagination for Emerson is likely the thing that holds the answers to the universe’s secrets, which he is so compelled to unlock. The specifics of why the Poet has higher access to such universal truths than, say, another sort of artist is not satisfactorily touched upon. One could assert that Emerson’s foundation is the classical approach to the Poet; in other words, the poet is a person more attuned to spiritual cause, bestowing mostly untouchable wisdom and truth. This is the approach of the ancients. Each word begins as poetry, and leads to the archived vault of the muses. Though over time words lose the initial luster, their origination holds some archaeological value. Value, then, changes over time. “Language is fossil poetry” (190).

Emerson relies upon nature organically to send messages and passages to the Poet. The energy and message are already within nature. Poetry is “a corrupt version of some text in nature . . . Why should not the symmetry and truth that modulate these, glide
into our spirits, and we participate the invention of nature?” (191). He reconnects humanity with nature through the distinct ear and voice of the poet. For Emerson a deeper spiritual awareness comes through a turn away from culture and society, and a corollary turn toward nature’s constantly changing presence. This is not a new reflection of Emerson’s perspective; later, this will seem poignant as it stands flush alongside Whitman’s radically different view. As a point of contrast, Hesiod kept the muses alive; whereas Emerson digs up the poets’ graves, where he also finds life.

Emerson relates the importance of a transient quality that all of language and symbols carry due to their relationship with nature, which is also constantly in flux. “For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead” (195). Related to this is the act of associating two seemingly unassociated things, like man as a tree, for example, “a man to be a heavenly tree, growing with his root, which is his head, upward” (193). There is constant resubmission of meaning to the symbols—creating symbols is a linguistic chaos. He concludes by remarking that “the history of hierarchies seems to show, that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and, at last, nothing but an excess of the organ of language” (195). Emerson brings language literally to life by describing it as an organ. It is important to note that having a symbol stay settled in a particular meaning creates discord. This concept of a necessary fluidity helps explain some of Emerson’s paradoxes. He allows room for growth, change, and discovery—for being wrong. I don’t believe he was aiming to create a moral dichotomy—I believe he was searching truthfully, like a poet, for what felt to be his truth—a reality that shifts with evolution, with the pressures and ebbs of time.
The divinity of language emerges:

What a little of all we know is said! What drops of all the sea of our science are baled up! And by what accident it is that these are exposed, when so many secrets sleep in nature! Hence the necessity of speech and song; hence these throbs and heart-beatings in the orator, at the door of the assembly, to the end, namely, that thought may be ejaculated as Logos, or Word (23).

Words reveal the secrets of nature. There is a quality of procreativity—that these words spoken, have power to build. The words begin to define the story—as with Hesiod and Whitman. A truth is revealed. And this truth is divine because of its capacity to create.

Furthermore, Emerson disguises divinity as a metaphoric sea, which has unknown depths that are “accidentally” uncovered. Out of its darkness comes the song. Emerson writes of knowledge, worldly and natural wisdoms, as droplets of the sea. This depiction is of something amorphous, transient and indefinable.

In the spirit of Schiller’s play drive, I have adopted similar phraseology to discuss Emerson’s poetic theory. Emerson relates what I will call the drive of poetry to a matter of genius. He also makes clear that there is a poetic drive in all of humankind. It is both a creative force as well as a function of genius. The theme of relateability is touched upon elsewhere in the essay “Self-Reliance.” “What is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men,—that is genius” (27). Beyond universality, Emerson comments in a journal, “Genius seems to consist merely in trueness of sight in using such words as show that the man was an eye-witness and not a teller of what was told . . . these are poets” (Journals 37). Emerson does several things here. He democratizes the private, personal experience. He draws it out to be that experience of everyone. He then says this

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9 Schiller writes, “With beauty man shall play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play” (On the Aesthetic Education of Man 107). The play-drive, unlike Schiller’s sensual-drive or form-drive, is an unending act of the imagination; it is not static. “. . . the play-drive, therefore, would be directed towards annulling time within time, reconciling becoming with absolute being and change with identity” (97).
anonymous “genius” is in all of us; it is not a special, exclusive force. This same genius is discussed also in “The Poet.” “Every man is so far a poet as to be susceptible of these enchantments of nature: for all men have the thoughts whereof the universe is the celebration” (188). Emerson deciphers a natural disposition to the poetic drive, though he seems to indicate that actual and successful expression is available to the very special few. The vision of the poet, however, is innate and primal.

Emerson, admittedly “in vain,” desires the arrival of the American bard. He writes, “Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres” (196). Akin to the arrival of a messiah, Emerson looks “in vain for the poet whom [he] describes” (195). It seems that his call is answered by Whitman, who picks up this language of America as poem. More so, though, Emerson gives new meaning to the nation, that it is a poem, waiting to burst forth. America, then, resembles song, is the promise of such. Like Hesiod’s Muses living eternally through his song, America, too, will discover its poet that will sing its song.

It is important for Emerson that the Universe creates a Trinity:

. . . born at one time, which reappear under different names, in every system of thought, whether they be called cause, operation, and effect; or, more poetically, Jove, Pluto, Neptune; or, theologically, the Father, the Spirit, and the Son; but which we will call here, the Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty (184-5).

Here is Emerson’s own Theogony. Each of these three children of the Universe is equal to one another. Emerson calls the Poet the Sayer, the voice of beauty. Its theological equivalent is the Son. The Poet, then, is the vocalist and professor of truths—he or she is a kind of prophet. The Poet utters and tells. This commitment to translating truth and universal secrets to words redefines the unspoken to that which is pronounceable. An idea
becomes real. It shifts from purely imaginary to being ensconced in its own poetic garb.

The transformative process of the imagination is part of the mystery that confounds Emerson. The Poet is the one able to see the symbols around us and announce their relevance to our human experience:

    The sign and credentials of the poet are, that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes (185).

Emerson describes the Poet as a doctor who commands a healing authority on the whole.

With the Poet comes reason and nurturance.

    Emerson’s stress upon the vociferous nature of the poet is not an accident. “He hears a voice, he sees a beckoning. Then he is apprised, with wonder, what herds of demons hem him in” (196). The vocal quality of the poet’s inspiration sounds subtly godlike, mysterious. The poet transcribes the voice. The poet senses the eternal quality of this sacred word, and also longs to transcribe utterances from this voice. Again, Emerson recalls Hesiod, who himself is apprised of wonder of the Muses and their enchanting tune. He first hears their voice, before he proclaims his own—much like Emerson’s description here.

Moreover, there is a reason that Emerson constantly refers to the senses. These are the lenses through which we experience life. So when he mentions the fate of the shepherd, “blinded and lost in the snowstorm,” it is understandable his reliance upon one being lost and also one being blind (194). The poet breaks through ignorance as well as darkness, a concept that runs elsewhere through the essay and will be discussed shortly. The poet is granted vision—Hesiod would specify that he is granted a voice. This difference in the poet’s sensorial experience reveals that Emerson truly found symbology
in nature—and the senses specifically become the interpreter of those symbols, namely vision in this case.

The point of departure of Emerson’s thought is important. The immanent origins of imagination are not reducible to rationality. It is more mysterious and appears out of darkness.

The poet knows that he speaks adequately, then only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, ‘with the flower of the mind;’ not with the intellect, used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service, and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life; or, as the ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect alone, but with the intellect inebriated by nectar (192).

The reliance upon an earthly inebriation is unusual for Emerson. Though the reference to Bacchus and Pan are evident, the reader would be remiss to take these words and associations at face value. His point is less about inebriation and more about welcoming unknown factors so that they might influence patterns of thought. This is decipherable from his “‘flower of the mind,’” which sounds like a ridding of intellectual thought, and welcoming an uninhibited viewpoint. He is writing about a childlike, restless openness and trustfulness of the instinct. The trust is basic, and yet the key to visions of sublimity. “The spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the creator, comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine. The sublime comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body” (192). In other words, though Emerson is not casting off sensuality altogether, he suggests that complete openness can only happen under the intoxicating influence of purity, not substances or other deinhibitors.

Emerson actually inverts the process of inebriation in several ways. He describes poetry as “God’s wine,” a notion he borrows from Milton. Emerson writes of Milton,

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10 Milton wrote, “... but the poet who tells of wars, and of heaven under Jove to manhood grown, of pious heroes, and of demigods, the leaders of men—who sings now of the sacred decrees of
“that the lyric poet may drink wine and live generously, but the epic poet, he who shall sing of the gods, and their descent unto men, must drink water out of a wooden bowl” (192). The most receptive mind, then, is able to endure the sacred word. Later he writes that the poet does not become intoxicated in order to write. Rather, the poet is pure and chaste in mind and inebriated only by poetry. “If the imagination intoxicates the poet, it is not inactive in other men . . . we are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air . . . Poets are thus liberating gods” (193). Incited from this passage is Plato’s cave, where the philosopher is freed from the chains of the cave to discover that the shadows by which life was interpreted were simply incorrect guides to reality. The poet, however, is the great liberator from this darkened reality. For everyone, “the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop” (193). Each new innovation of the imagination reignites an immanent understanding of the universe. The passage into new thinking, new concepts and new symbols is inherent to human nature. It is our instinctual derivation of truth and knowledge.

Emerson hints at a complicated series of things in the above quote about the intoxication of the poet. First, he declares that imagination is democratic. Second, he insinuates that it is a mechanism that comes from within—it is immanent—and because of these two things is a human function and part of human nature. Third, it is through a process, i.e. metamorphosis, that the imaginer finds joy. Lastly, Emerson claims that the imaginative, creative process also creates joy.

the gods above, and now of that deep realm guarded by the barking dog—he indeed must live sparely, after the manner of the Samian master, and herbs must supply his harmless food. Let only the crystal-clear water in a beechen bowl stand near him, and let him drink temperate draughts from the pure spring” (115).
Emerson also writes that through our reception to poetry we receive freedom as well as a new understanding of the universe:

We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air . . . Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world, another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop (193).

The cave might evoke Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Plato claims that we are all prisoners without any understanding of the light, but that once one of the prisoners is forced into the light, they eventually understand that the sunlit universe is superior to the cave from which he or she came. Plato writes that if the prisoner “recalled the cell where he’d originally lived and what passed for knowledge there and his former fellow prisoners, don’t you think he’d feel happy about his own altered circumstances, and sorry for them?” (Plato 243). Similar to this are Emerson’s poets, who he describes as “liberating gods.” This new awareness that the light from outside the cave gives, leads toward definition and description—thus toward language. Emerson then composes a rather Whitman-esque list of classical and literary examples. For instance:

When Socrates, in Charmides, tells us that the soul is cured of its maladies by certain incantations, and that these incantations are beautiful reasons, from which temperance is generated in souls; when Plato calls the world an animal; and Timaeus affirms that the plants also are animals; or affirms a man to be a heavenly tree, growing with his root, which is his head, upward . . . (193).

The examples he gives all seem to be of new, unusual relationships between things. Man as tree, plant as animal, universe as the “statue of the intellect,” and so on (193). Emerson uncovers what his Poet uncovers—a hidden truth, a hidden meaning, a hidden relationship, and that these associations between seemingly unalike things are constantly bursting forth. The reason these new truths occur constantly is because language is relational to nature, and within nature is the spirit of evolution, or the act of present
change. When language is able to reflect this vivacity—the moments of change and liminal fragility—it is rewarding, and, indeed, brings joy.

Emerson goes on to clarify this new understanding. He does not mean to say that every thought is a chance at experiencing this transcendent freedom. He means that every new thought is a liberator. New thoughts, he indicates, are quite a bit more rare. “We love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains, and admits us to a new scene” (194). This new scene is again reminiscent of Plato’s prisoners leaving the cave.

Again Emerson mentions the light from outside shining within. “To each other, they appeared as men, and, when the light from heaven shone into their cabin, they complained of the darkness, and were compelled to shut the window that they might see” (195). This appears to again refer to Plato’s allegory of the cave. It is with a higher sort of vision that the poet senses the many versions of a man, or as Emerson puts it, “There was this perception in him, which makes the poet or seer an object of awe and terror, namely, that the same man, or society of men, may wear one aspect to themselves and their companions, and a different aspect to higher intelligences” (195). Because of the light from outside of the metaphoric cave the poet has a fuller picture. As the breath from the Muses gives Hesiod his song, so does the light from outside the cave, or cabin, give Emerson’s Poet vision.

The artist acts as a mirror to all that surrounds him or her: he writes, “therefore the rich poets . . . have obviously no limits to their works, except the limits of their lifetime, and resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing” (197). The poet, then, gives sight to others. The higher vision from
outside the cave is gifted to the poet’s audience, the vision full of awe and terror. This image of the poet walking through the street sounds more rustic, urban, and ubiquitous. The poet is able to reflect even the mundane, though Emerson might disagree and describe the mundane as secret kernels of the universe.

Toward the end of “The Poet,” Emerson writes,

Art is the path of the creator to his work. The paths, or methods, are ideal and eternal, though few men ever see them, not the artist himself for years, or for a lifetime, unless he come into the conditions (196).

This describes precisely what I am unfolding among the three authors. They each have different mediums—Hesiod has his Muses, Emerson has Nature, and Whitman has human society. It is through these mediums that they each work out the answer to such questions as what is truth, what is beauty? Hesiod certainly came “into the conditions” that Emerson describes, much as an Aeolian harp comes into its conditions when it is set out in the open air; he received the words as breath from the Muses. The relationship Emerson has with his conditions, and likewise Whitman, are more abstract, but similarly definable as ‘other.’ In other words, their poet’s ultimate inspiration comes from elsewhere.

Thus begins an immediate resemblance between Emerson’s “The Poet” and the transformation Hesiod undergoes in the *Theogony*. Hesiod becomes a poet through the Muses; their anointing him as the poet who will tell the story of the gods, which is the literal translation of “theogony,” transforms them into goddesses. The moment of transformation is fused with divinity. For Emerson’s poet, something similar is at work; again the line, though now cast with this different light:
He hears a voice, he sees a beckoning. Then he is apprised, with wonder, what herds of daemons hem him in. He can no more rest; he says, with the old painter, ‘By God, it is in me, and must go forth of me’ (22).

An image emerges of an artist who cannot help but create whatever is immanent, and whatever is speaking to him. This is similar to Hesiod, who is fairly bound in the matter of becoming a poet, the representative of the Muses. It is different, however, in that for Emerson the revelation of poetry is more singular and relative to the person creating, and his or her receptivity to this internal voice.

Emerson also writes, “He pursues a beauty, half seen, which flies before him” (22). The internal voice, then, is responding to some ‘other’ stimulus. As previously mentioned, for Emerson’s poet that stimulus is most readily found in nature. The link between art and beauty begins to dominate—beauty being the true and ultimate thing that inspires art. Also, the beautiful thing is in motion, flying “before him” (22). It is transient, transitive, and performs constant escape. Emerson’s poet is one who chases Beauty, though perhaps often unsuccessfully.

Emerson goes on to write directly to his Poet, an unusual turn that creates a suddenly personal outcry.

Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity (23).

As he describes it, the poet struggles with his or her power—a dream power no less—of language, by way of stammering and hooting, until at last it arrives, much like the birth of a child. Indeed, much like a child, it is first “in me” before it is born. The process is messy and originates in darkness. The result is intense, perfect, and new. Though
Whitman would likely support this line of thinking, I am not sure what Hesiod’s response might be. The divinity of telling the story of the gods is in itself perhaps a kind of poetic immaculate conception—the Muses impregnated Hesiod with their story. Also this concept of a “dream-power” that shows one’s independence to one’s self, that thee is thine own, seems like a key to Emerson’s thought on the creative process (23). The real power is in one’s true separate and unique identity. Being led by this power is the real art and beauty. The transformation from Hesiod to Emerson is in finding the singular internal voice, which still renders one helpless quite similarly to Hesiod’s reliance upon the breath of the Muses. Regardless, the divinity becomes not divinity of the gods, but divinity of the self. This is more forthrightly glorified when we arrive at Whitman.

The Emersonian poet’s world revolves around the muse; all else evaporates. Time, including the present age, becomes a meaningless construct. “Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only. Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shalt take all from the muse” (23). The poet is a spokesperson for the muse—a gift that appears to transcend, time, place, and society. If one ties this back to Emerson’s previous premonition that the poet is really driven by his or her own dream-power, and also means to say that this power is the muse, then the poet’s inner voice is an eternal dialogue full of divine Logos waiting to be born.

Emerson writes to the poet directly, shifting into second person. He describes the image the poet will impart. It is an image of the fool, but also an image of Pan:

The world is full of renunciations and apprenticeships, and this is thine; thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season. This is the screen and sheath in which Pan has protected his well-beloved flower, and thou shalt be known only to thine own, and they shall console thee with tenderest love (197).
Does Emerson here assert that the poet is Pan’s “well-beloved flower”? If so, then the poet is one who reveals the truths and secrets of nature. Indeed, a footnote suggests that Pan is sometimes “credited with creating ‘panic’ when he appears” (197). Furthermore, Emerson tells the poet he or she must concede to appearing socially unacceptable. The muses’ wisdoms are not immediately apparent; and this social unacceptability actually works in favor as a defense mechanism for the poet, “the screen and sheath” (197). It is a protection that creates necessary distance as well in order for the poet to fully envisage.

Emerson continues to write directly to his Poet, who he is sure is listening (and he was, in the form of Whitman):

God wills also that thou abdicate a duplex and manifold life, and that thou be content that others speak for thee. Others shall be thy gentlemen, and shall represent all courtesy and worldly life for thee; others shall do the great and resounding actions also. Thou shalt lie close hid with nature (197).

This isn’t precisely a call for the Emersonian poet to return to nature, so to speak, but rather to become as observant and detached as possible. The poet is as hidden as his or her message, as well as the light outside of the cave. The previously mentioned “sheath,” or the appearance of a fool, would camouflage the poet as a hidden flower in nature (197). The poetic vision is reliant upon leaving the ordinary life, but not completely departing from it—getting far enough away to quietly observe without prejudice.

The reward, says Emerson, for living this understated life is “the ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the actual world shall fall like summer rain, copious, but not troublesome, to thy invulnerable essence . . .” (198). The whole of the human experience, good and bad, are “shed for thee,” for the poet—and all of the things that exist, exist alongside Beauty, “plenteous as rain,” none of it to be stricken as “inopportune or ignoble” (198). The Emersonian poet experiences all of life as a
constant, unstoppable force. Rain is individual drops—just as experiences are individual moments, but they all fall together, again rendering time irrelevant.

In the end, no experience is to be left out of the poetic vision. Everything possible is welcome to the poet. Emerson’s is an inclusive, holist vision.
Chapter V

Meditations on Hesiod’s *Theogony* and Albert Lord’s *Singer of Tales*

Though Hesiod lived long before Emerson and Whitman, his *Theogony* raises important concepts of the poet that resonate between the two American Renaissance authors. Hesiod coincides with the two when discussing the origins of poetry, as well as the identity of the poet. Two important dimensions of Hesiod’s *Theogony* are the truth-telling power beholden to the poet, and the relevance of the oral tradition as it enhances poetic structure.

Throughout this chapter, I will also explore Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales*, which will help to complete the discourse with Emerson and Whitman about how ancient songs change over time. Milman Parry began research for *The Singer of Tales*, and died before he could complete the study. Albert Lord, Parry’s colleague who had assisted with collecting data for the project, continued Parry’s work and completed the book. The aim of the study was to understand how oral works are composed, learned, and transmitted. It is a study of the composition of oral narrative poetry (Lord vii).

Understanding the cultural roots of *Theogony*’s ancient Greek is elemental to the structure of this thesis. In the introduction to his translation of *Theogony*, Apostolos Athanassakis writes of Hesiod:

> He is, after all, the oldest repository of Western culture when it comes to the origin of the cosmos and the many divinities in it, as well as to the social values and practices that make human culture and human survival possible (xii).
Athanassakis focuses on Hesiod’s origins and beginnings, and notes the difference between Hesiodic origins and Biblical origins. “The incredibly appealing divine command known to all of us from the beginning of Genesis is absent here. The word, the command, does not produce a physical entity” (xvii). This is a beautiful and poignant illumination to the conundrum of Hesiod. Athanassakis places Hesiod within the lineage of literature and thought, and leads toward his alignment specifically with Emerson and Whitman. Hesiod was ahead of his time in that what he often described, in sophisticated materialist terms, looked like physics. “Hesiod sang of primitive, yet very bold physics. His songs must have been as lost on his audience as some aspects of modern physics are lost on the average citizen” (xvii). This curiosity is later played out with Emerson, who often seems on the brink of scientific-poetic invention.

The debate of whether Hesiod was of the oral tradition or part of the beginning of the written tradition in Ancient Greece has been resolved by more informed scholars in the field. I will work under the premise that Hesiod was, indeed, of the oral tradition. However, I agree with Athanassakis that the dispute is not entirely settled. “Hesiod certainly inherited oral poetry, and he produced oral poetry in a way that was more self-conscious and deliberate than that of his teachers and his ancestors” (xiv). Emerson and Whitman were also more self-aware than their peers and predecessors, in hopes of creating a new poetic voice and vision.

An intriguing similarity between Hesiod and Whitman are their ways of using lists. For Whitman, the sometimes banal lists of, for example, birds or land features, which are featured both in his Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, as well as in the poems themselves, read as a working meditation, or a means to an end. Whitman seems to be
searching for the right words or illuminations to appear when he performs his lists, and
indeed it often leads into a great leap of imaginative flurry. For Hesiod, alternately,
incanting lists reflects durable memory, belonging to “the performative dynamics of
competing oral singers” (xv). There is a test of time involved, an ability to see and recall
deeply into the past and revive its importance to the present. For example, when telling
the gods’ lineages, Hesiod says, “To Nereus and Doris of the lovely hair, / the daughter
of Okeanos, the stream surrounding the earth, / a host of godly daughters was born in the
barren sea: / Proto, Eukrante, Amphitrite, and Sao . . .” (17). Hesiod goes on to list 45
more daughters. It is not only an honoring of lineage or deities, but it is an opportunity to
enhance the past through its association and interconnection with the present.

Similar to Hesiod’s test of time and memory, in The Singer of Tales Lord writes
about the singer’s role partly as historian. The song is an ancient poem only coordinated
through the careful steps of new imaginings:

The picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of
tradition and creative artists; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the
constant re-creation of it. The ideal is a true story well and truly told (29).

Relatedly, “we find it necessary to recreate in our imagination not a general but a specific
moment of performance. The singing bard must be our guide; and the singing bard is
never a type but an individual” (31). The ownership of the song shifts. Though perhaps
some tradition or story is preserved, it is done so with the stamp and originality
specifically beholden to each unique singer. “Language always bears the stamp of its
speaker” (31). The pause between each speaker creates a subset within the tradition, or a
branch. With each singer comes a departure from the original.
Though the transmission of certain oral formulas and oral traditions are essential to the burgeoning singer, so is the concept of creativity. Lord argues, “While both remembering and creating play important roles, creating is especially significant. The singer cannot, and does not, remember enough to sing a song; [the singer] must, and does, learn to create phrases” (43). The singer’s new changes are subtle, “the process of building formulas is so quiet and unspectacular and so slow that it is almost imperceptible” (43). This slow process over time resonates naturally. It hesitantly shows raw, perhaps sometimes messy, growth.

Just as Lord says that creativity is significant, he also says the singer has no interest in originality—expression, yes; originality, no. “He seeks expression of the idea under stress of performance. Expression is his business, not originality, which, indeed, is a concept quite foreign to him and one that he would avoid, if he understood it. To say the opportunity for originality and for finding the ‘poetically’ fine phrase exists does not mean that the desire for originality also exists” (45). Beyond the aversion to originality, this business of expression is one Emerson would whole-heartedly welcome. He believes the deep underlying passion of the poet is the desire to express. To enhance his conversation about originality, Lord writes that the singer “does not shrink from the habitual; nor does he either require the fixed for memorization or seek the unusual for its own sake” (65). There is relevance and function to the mundane. The singer sees no need to abandon the typical. This idea was not one readily accepted in his time—rather, the poet was special, gifted, and not a layperson. The oral poet resonates with Whitman’s picture of the poet, and of his picture of himself as poet.
Though of the ancient tradition, Hesiod deliberately stuck with a materialist, tangible description and understanding of the universe. In Lord’s view, poetry “is his singer’s way of explaining the tangible, the visible and the imaginable material universe in terms of matter” (xvii). This same demonstration runs through Emerson and Whitman, as well.

Theogony means “the birth of the gods.” Hesiod’s *Theogony*, which is originally the theogony as told by the Muses, marks not the beginning of time, rather “the apex of a tradition” (Athanassakis 3). Hesiod’s poem does not begin with ex nihilo. His interest is not in explaining the nothingness from which everything arose. He starts with his own poetic beginning, marking the beginning of a pan-Hellenic tradition, which begins with divine Chaos, out of which the gods arise. Hesiod was already in process at the beginning of *Theogony*. The poem starts when Hesiod meets the Helkonian Muses, and they teach him “beautiful song” (11). This point of transference resembles a transmission of the poem itself, over generations throughout time orally. One aspect of the poem is that performances continue. As others are quick to point out, Hesiod does not choose to begin at the dawn of time. One of the directives he receives from the Muses is to “always begin and end my song with them” (12). By “them” Hesiod means the Muses, thus the gods and goddesses. Genesis is not a Theogony—it is an origins story. Like Hesiod’s *Theogony*, however, it retains the belief that Chaos has always existed. Genesis is not a story of how the gods are born, as *Theogony* is, but how God creates the world out of Chaos. Hesiod goes back one more generation, and tells of the gods being born from Chaos. Through this, the listener learns that the gods come from the larger, more unexplainable forces of nature—specifically and most prominently Chaos.
The poet has a position that is securely all-knowing, beyond the scope of the gods and the divinities which make up all of creation. Because the poet knows and reveals the lineage of all that exists, he or she also reveals tensions and connections where none had been previously established. The poet, Hesiod specifically, knows how the earth and its universe are born. This gift of ancient and sacred sight reveals the poet’s power, something akin to a final word. According to Athanassakis, Hesiod does not “believe that anything, including Chaos, can be born of nothing” (7). He does not accept the ex nihilo idea of the physical world, but rather decides the obvious choice is to not decide: the universe comes from the unknown.

The aspect of the chronological development of poetic message over time is crucial when considering the oral poetry of Hesiod. Nagy points out the importance of viewing Hesiod’s *Theogony* diachronically as well as synchronically. The two interpretations lend out poetic ownership differently from each other. First, “in oral poetry, composition and performance are aspects of the same process. So, when a composition is performed at different times and in different places, it can be recomposed in the process of composition-in-performance” (Nagy 274). Because oral poetry is recited by more than one singer, and is often passed along through centuries of time, the poem will change, as will the poem’s owner. Diachronic examination of a poem accounts for the evolution of oral poetry on a more holistic level, noting the poem’s process over time, especially crucial to a form that thrives on an “in the moment” quality. I will be less focused on the synchronic approach, as its tendency is to freeze the poem in time, to capture the isolated moment of creation. Though there are ways in which this is beneficial, a wider lens is more welcome and useful for the work at hand.
Relevant to this is Albert Lord’s description of the singer’s relationship with words. He writes, “when [the bard] begins to sing, the manner of presentation comes for a long time to the fore” (33). Throughout his or her young life, the manner of song is assimilated unconsciously: rhythm, patterns, boundaries, and so on. The idea is intriguing on a larger scale. There is a poetic function inherent in all walks of humanity, albeit undiscovered, until the moment of practice. Once the singer realizes the importance of his or her relationship to words, “[the bard] uses them, sometimes unconsciously twisting them. They are not sacred, but they are useful” (34). Words are not sacred, absolute, or necessary. Changeability becomes sacred. Movement and the ability to wield is where sacredness begins for the singer.

Lord discusses the complex nature of the singer’s existence in any given moment. The singer signifies the many in the one. “Our oral poet is composer. Our singer of tales is a composer of tales. Singer, performer, composer, and poet are one under different aspects but at the same time. Singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act” (13). These multiple roles become the one fused role of the poet. Hesiod is both shepherd and poet. Emerson is both lecturer and poet as he writes and announces. Whitman is entangled with his own words, which in his mind enliven themselves—he is both poem and poet. He is also enmeshed with the voices of many. “An oral poem is not composed for but in performance” (13). The moment the miraculous and unspoken words appear to the singer is the moment of composition. This moment requires that the singer have access to many roles. The creative moment is borne from a tumult of experience and roles.
When Whitman and Emerson are evaluated diachronically, the historical context of their work takes fuller shape. Hesiod’s *Theogony* is the voice of many singers, though we define the voice as one, as that of Hesiod. Whitman writes six editions of *Leaves of Grass* in the course of his lifetime, on the other hand. These six editions create a continually evolving voice for Whitman. The poet, though counted as one, actually begins to take on a multi-voiced, multi-toned quality. Whitman’s poem changes over time, in message, shape, and emotion. Similar are Emerson’s lectures later turned to essays, as seen in comparing his lecture and essay forms of “The Poet.” One senses his angular shift from a more poetic, oratory style, which speaks immediately to the senses, to a more formalized, stilted style found in the essay.

A diachronic view of *Theogony* helps us to understand the multi-voiced messenger. The process over time of oral poetry lends more meaning to the concept of pan-Hellenic. As it goes the poem becomes somewhat democratic in message, style, tone, and voice. It becomes a poem of the people, “all Greeks under the sun” (Nagy 274). Nagy is careful to differentiate between the relativized meanings for pan-Hellenic. For Hesiod, it very much depended on “the various Greek communities that claimed [him] as their own” (275). The Muses descended from “Helikon’s peak” to the pastures where they discovered Hesiod and proclaimed “Listen, you country bumpkins, you pot-bellied blockheads” (11). Because the Muses can affiliate with both gods and peasants, Hesiod can and must also maneuver among the many.

Nagy raises this question of pan-Hellenization with regard to Hesiod’s Muses. Because the Muses are the daughters of Memory, an absolutized concept, so too are the Muses absolutized, and thus “the poet’s memory is itself absolutized and thereby pan-
Hellenized, since the Muses are said to give him an absolute authority expressed in terms of an absolute truth value” (275-6). Hesiod retains an all-seeing poetic gaze. Nagy makes an interesting claim about this that may well illumine the universal aspirations of Emerson and Whitman. Hesiod is “freed from having to say things that would please only his local audiences who are rooted in their local poetic traditions” (277). Similar to this is Emerson’s claim that the poet is the “eternal man,” or is one who transcends the limitations of time and place (Emerson 185). Whitman, too, claims to connect with generations long in the future, “I consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born” (311). Universality is necessary in the construct of the poet. For Hesiod, this aspect of pan-Hellenization, speaking to and of all Greeks, allows him to speak of a broad-reaching truth, or rather of an absolute truth.

This concept of a broad-reaching absolute truth resonates with Lord’s idea of essence, mentioned in chapters four and five of *The Singer of Tales*. It comes up throughout the book that the singer’s concept of exactness, or of stability, is different from our own.

We think of change in content and in wording: for, to us, at some moment both wording and content have been established. To the singer the song, which cannot be changed (since to change it would, in his mind, be to tell an untrue story or to falsify history), is the essence of the story itself. His idea of stability, to which he is deeply devoted, does not include the wording, which to him has never been fixed, nor the unessential parts of the story (99).

Change, to the singer, is different from our definition of it. The singer is undiscriminating about the slow recreating, word-by-word. Instead, to the singer, it is the essence of the story that must remain fixed—it is the part to what he or she is deeply devoted. In this way, it is a deeper truth, a deeper reality, and a deeply embedded message that resonates. It is not so much about the form, patterns, language boundaries, and so on. Though these
do play an important role, they do not define change for the singer. The manipulation of essence does, however.

In the process of anointing Hesiod as a pan-Hellenic poet, the Muses themselves achieve a new status, evolving from Heliconian to Olympian. Through granting a voice and narrator of their story to Hesiod, the Muses then attain their own special and absolutized status. This is a curious proceeding: they become goddesses in this process. Their transformation is interconnected with the poet’s transformation. Their mutual advancement cannot occur singly. When asking the question of why the two anointings are fused together, Nagy’s answer is that perhaps this can “be explained in terms of oral poetry as well” (281). His formulation is that composition, performance, reception, and transmission all play a role in the oral poetic structure, and perhaps more importantly, play a part in the final message. As Lord asserts, “What is important is not the oral performance but rather the composition during oral performance” (5). The diachronic approach is crucial to understanding how this all-encompassing nature takes hold for the Muses and Hesiod alike. Over time of the telling and re-telling of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, this message of annunciation into pan-Hellenic stature became part of the story. This transmission came by way of reception, an eventual part of the Hesiodic myth, which is what Nagy calls the story.

Somewhat related to Nagy’s telling of *Theogony*’s development is Albert Lord’s description of poets as magicians. “The poet was sorcerer and seer before he became ‘artist.’ His structures were not abstract art, or art for its own sake. The roots of oral traditional narrative are not artistic but religious in the broadest sense” (67). The poet as seer reminds me of Emerson’s transparent eyeball, but more than this Emerson ascribed
special meaning to vision, that it was a deeper kind of intuiting. He would agree with Lord that the poet is more of a religious figure, though he would have been careful to not describe with any mystical leanings. The poet that Emerson describes in his essay and lecture alike is not an artist, rather a visionary of the most extraordinary kind.

The Muses are the starting point for Hesiod’s poem. More to the point, the Muses begin the poem for Hesiod, the “content is passed on to Hesiod when the Muses literally ‘breathe’ into him the poetic *audē* ‘voice’” (Nagy 282). The Muses are giving a theogonic performance of their own, telling the origins story of the gods, and this then becomes Hesiod’s song. He sings it for them. Immediately ownership is transferred—the poem is the message of the gods, but is now told by Hesiod. This is a trademark of the tradition of oral poetry, transmission of ownership. A message of one singer transforms to become the message of another, and so on. Remolding and repurposing the poem become intrinsic to the work:

The performer who recomposes the composition in performance may be the same performer who composed it earlier, or it may be a new performer, even a succession of new performers. The point is, such recomposition-in-performance is the essence of transmission in oral traditions (282).

In oral poetry, reception and transmission are bound to one another. “In oral traditions, there is an organic link between reception and performance, since no performance can succeed without a successful reception by the public that sees and hears the performer or performers” (283). This same notion of transmission can be discussed similarly with regard to Emerson’s lecture style of writing, as it is seen in “The Poet,” and how that shifts when he translates it into essay form. There is a lyricism to the lecture that becomes solemnified in the essay.
Nagy argues something else about the actual identity of Hesiod, something that, in my view, resonates with the poet of Emerson and Whitman. Hesiod is practically sculpted by the Muses. In other words, the message, vision, and inspiration of the poem create Hesiod. They name him as well. Nagy describes the Greek etymology of Hesiod as roughly equivalent to “‘he who emits the voice’” (287). The name Hesiod is an epithet “describing the poetic powers of the Muses” (288). The entire destiny of the poet as individual and as one with identity becomes complicated and intertwined with his mission to poeticize and create his own myth. The same could be said for Whitman, as he identifies strongly with his role as poet, and even often describes his work *Leaves of Grass* as a living creature. It could be argued that Whitman’s epic poem, in fact, created him. The manifestation, as such, is slightly different. Poetry for Whitman becomes an extension of himself, whereas poetry for Hesiod was an extension of the Muses, and he the conduit. Emerson, on the other hand, views poetic identity as somewhat mystically holistic—the poet is born as the most complete person, a value in hindsight reminiscent of the Nietzschean Übermensch. The Emersonian poet is born with the poetic message and, though Emerson does not acknowledge the Hesiodic Muses exactly, his concept is more in keeping with the Hesiodic lineage. He relays the value of this gifted poetic vision as one that clearly sees and knows all, akin to Hesiod’s pan-Hellenic messages.

Considering Emerson’s description of the poet as akin to an Aeolian harp, one can see the direct link to a persona “who emits the voice” (287).

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11 On Whitman’s own formulation that “*Leaves of Grass’s* word is the body, including all, including intellect and the soul,” Gardner reflects, “The poet’s words could seem to suggest that the human soul is but a bodily epiphenomenon, a vapor generated and given off by the body. . . . ‘Body’ obviously means two different things to Whitman. It is a vessel filled out by matter, which deserves to be discarded in time, but more fundamentally, the vessel itself is a purely spiritual *form*, whose essence and origin lie beyond time and beyond the earth” (127-8).
Through examining the various myths surrounding aspects of Hesiod’s life, Nagy makes an important point. The different life and death stories of Hesiod do not necessarily reflect a conflict in truth-value between cultures. These varying myths ought to be viewed instead “as historical evidence for the reception of Hesiodic poetry by the various societies in which and through which this poetry was transmitted” (307). For my purposes, the conclusion from these many Hesiodic myths is not so much the truth-value as it is the spread of poetic transmission. Furthermore, as Nagy notes, “the primary ‘order of reality’ to be found in Hesiodic poetry is not Hesiod the person but the poetry itself. It was the poetry that brought to life the person that is Hesiod” (273).

By examining Hesiod’s *Theogony*, I have illumined the universal qualities inherent to his poet. These universal qualities are also visible in both Emerson’s and Whitman’s poets. The poet is a historian, or guardian of the legend. This aspect in particular suggests that the poet is both artist and archaeologist of what has been, and what has yet to be. And yet, the poet also serves as a reminder that people are naturally imaginative creatures. Expression for the oral poet is fundamental, Hesiod being no exception. We see this same idea in Emerson. Whitman, as I will discuss next, owes his identity to his expression. The three poets describe birth by poetry, and so ruminate on a unique origins story.

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12 This ‘biography’ of Hesiod is distinct from the stories about Hesiod that we find in ancient texts external to Hesiodic poetry. Supposedly, those external stories ‘can easily be dismissed as legends, possessing little or no historical value’” (271).
Chapter VI

Walt Whitman’s Preface from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 Edition

“Samuel Longfellow away back was a student of Leaves of Grass, I was told,—liked it, called it Greek,—said I was the most Greek of moderns, or something like that—Others have made similar comparisons—He was making allusion not so much to the form as to the spirit of the book—the underlying recognition of facts which were the peculiar property of the Grecian.” Walt Whitman (*With Whitman in Camden* 502)

In the previous chapter I discussed Hesiod’s ancient Greek text, *Theogony*. At first glance, this appears as an outlier when discussing Emerson’s and now Whitman’s roles of the poet. Upon further speculation, however, one will see Hesiod’s ongoing relevance and importance in poetic discussion. In light of Hesiod’s multi-voiced messenger, who is a defender of legend, as others and myself described it, as well as the sacred being found in movement, an exegesis of Whitman’s Preface to *Leaves of Grass* follows naturally.

To focus on Whitman’s “Preface” to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* requires a shift from analyzing an essay and lecture, as I did with Emerson’s “The Poet,” as well as focusing on the ancient Greek text of Hesiod, to analyzing a prose preface. Though the two are dissimilar by terminology, the vibrancy and dilemma of the poet’s role remain in the fore. The preface does not reappear in any of the following five editions of *Leaves of Grass*13. Though there has been much speculation on its deletion, I will use the preface as

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13 One should consider also the evidence of his steady preoccupation with this piece. He continued to elaborate the notions and pronouncements of his essay in his poetry for nearly eleven years, transposing from it whole passages or single lines and phrases, as the case might be, unchanged or with the slightest alterations, into poems which were incorporated by him in what he considered the definitive version of his volume . . . In other words, according to [Weathers’] count, out of the 789 line of the preface, 347 are, one way or another, reproduced in poetic
a steering wheel to discuss Whitman’s view of poetry and the role of the poet at large. I believe it is diagnostic of poetic personification and panentheism in Whitman’s sense of his own poetic vocation.

Whitman begins the preface by enlivening and anthropomorphizing America. It becomes a thing that repels, accepts, and perceives (5). He then does a similar, though more abstract service to all Americans: he grants them a hyper-awareness to poetry. “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (5). Within the first two paragraphs of the preface, Whitman has shifted the defining characteristics of a nation and its people to be intertwined by poetic forces. He goes on to describe the laypersons of America as begetters of genius. Their doings are “unrhymed poetry. It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it” (6). Thus, Whitman gives himself permission to write the song of the nation.

Whitman personifies what he calls “American standards”: maternal guidance, love, liberty, good breeding, good manners, and so on (25). “Whether or no the sign appears from the mouths of the people, it throbs a live interrogation in every freeman’s and freewoman’s heart after that which passes by or this built to remain” (25). It is an instinct democratic and universal to all living in America. He describes this as a quality of which its owner is not necessarily aware; rather it is akin to an essence. He calls it the “jealous and passionate instinct of American standards” (25). To Whitman, the American man or woman is the American bard, and each is made of fiery stuff.
Whitman describes the country’s bard as one who harnesses the entirety of the nation’s spirit, “his spirit responds to his country’s spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes” (7). This amazing transformation between person and landscape and vice versa is thematic to Whitman’s work and relationship with poetry, as well as his connection with society. As poet, he is not only representative of his nation, but is entangled in the entirety of it and takes a holist approach.

Whitman is also careful to describe an immanent and localized need for poetry in America. He writes of it as if it was blood, the United States having “veins full of poetical stuff” (8). America is again anthropomorphized, becomes enlivened and akin to humankind. Instead of blood in the American “body,” there is poetry. America then is abstracted to a nation of poetry. Of all nations and people throughout the world, Whitman believes that Americans have the greatest need for poets (8). He is one among the many who requires poetry. He writes, “of all mankind the great poet is the equable man” (8). Perhaps for Whitman, the Muses are in fact American people—though unlike Hesiod’s Muses, Whitman’s are unaware of their impact, as well as their eternality.

Whitman writes of the poet that he or she “is not tallied by the blue breadth of the waters below more than the breadth of the above and below is tallied by him” (7). In other words, we are to consider the whole of the universe when reflecting upon the poet—not only the depths, but the heights and widths as well. He says that the poet much like the land spans between the oceans, “from east to west and reflects what is between them” (7). Whitman himself chose to embody this poetic fact. Panentheistic streaks run vibrantly through his text and his thought, and later his poetry. The poet stretches with the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, along the coastlines, and “on him rise solid growths that
offset the growths of pine and cedar . . .” (7). The poet is a regenerative force among the forests, icicles, and swamps.

Whitman echoes the words of Emerson, specifically his infamous “transparent eyeball.” He writes in the preface:

He 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 . . . What the eyesight does to the rest he does to the rest. Who knows the curious mystery of the eyesight? (10).

Whitman assigns ultimate importance to vision, while the rest of the senses hold inferior purpose. The complex and open discovery of a simple glance can alter “all the instruments and books of the earth and all reasoning” (10). We are born with an ability to find poetry through vision and the power of observation. The association of this to Emerson’s essay, “Nature,” is important. Emerson described himself as the transparent eyeball—he is nothing, he sees all “the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God” (10). This is not any normal kind of visual observation Emerson describes; furthermore, Whitman describes vision as a mechanism of completion, “he is complete in himself,” whereas for Emerson he becomes “nothing” through the act of seeing. Regardless, Emerson and Whitman alike interpret an importance found in vision; it allows a deep internal and external seeing.

Related to this idea of the poet as seer, according to Whitman, is the poet as a receiver beyond the sense faculty of vision. “To him enter the essences of the real things and past and present events” (7). He then begins a long list of the historical events that become the poet, many of which are politically crucial to America’s formation, including the revolution and the writing of the constitution. The list does not end there, however. Whitman also writes that the poet embodies “the general ardor and friendliness and
enterprise—the perfect equality of the female with the male” (8). Again, Whitman describes an egalitarian notion of the sexes, which was not an opinion shared by the majority. He goes on to also list the power of slavery, and its opponents, “which shall never cease till it ceases or the speaking of tongues and the moving of lips cease” (8). Within two pages, Whitman has described the poet in conjunction with coastlines, forests, many species of birds, historical events, and abstractions like gender and racial equality. The poet receives these, ingests them, and thus creates the song of all these, and all else. This is reminiscent of Emerson’s concept of the whole human experience as “shed for thee,” which is significantly the conclusion to his essay (198).

Similar to Emerson, Whitman describes the poet’s relationship with eternity. The relationship, however, varies. “In the talk on the soul and eternity and God off of his equal plane he is silent. He sees eternity less like a play with a prologue and denouement . . . he sees eternity in men and women” (9). Instead of a timeline—a structure with a beginning, middle, and end—the poet sees a deeper, more complicated content emanating from within people. Whitman describes who contains eternity, and carefully defines the laypeople. This resonates with Emerson’s views on temporality, and ridding those constructions, creating an ageless quality.

As formerly discussed, the poet knows that the universe of which he or she is attempting to fully engage with is fathomless. Like the prism, “a great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning” (24). He describes what the poet gives to his or her reader as a ride to “live regions previously unattained . . . thenceforward is no rest . . .” (24). As such, the landscape changes, and the reader has no choice but to acclimate to
the changes brought on by this work. It is altering, prismatic, and constant. Like Emerson, Whitman relies upon evolution as a mechanism for the poet’s muse.

Whitman returns his attention to the overriding quality of the common person. “There is that indescribable freshness and unconsciousness about an illiterate person that humbles and mocks the power of the noblest expressive genius” (9). Thus, he appears to tell us, the poet senses the wonder in the mundane. At the same stroke, however, the poet “breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe” (10). Everything has its ultimate importance and interconnectedness within the universe. The poet is able to see the connection and speak of it. It is not, then, the smallness or largeness of a thing—it is the place that thing has in its larger context. The poet has the ability to appreciate the smallness, while also foretelling of its grandness in the big picture. Whitman later writes, “the fluency and ornaments of the finest poems or music or orations or recitations are not independent but dependent . . . the fact will prevail through the universe” (11). Those long-held topics of poetry—nature, beauty, love, loss, for example—are interrelated.

Though the poet, for Whitman, does not bestow any moral creed, the poet does manifest a balance akin to morality, and at its center is infinity:

He knows the soul. The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own But it has sympathy as measureless as its pride and the one balances the other and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other (13).

Whitman defines few parameters, in fact. Most of the important details come boundlessly and endlessly, with infinite stretches and beyond the confines of time and space. Nature, poetry, and poet all lack defined contours. The three create a daunting, massive spectrum of experience of life. For Whitman the poet is able to synthesize between pride and
sympathy, which serves as an example for all. Balance within the many spectra is a reverent category.

Like this thesis, Ivan Marki wrote his analysis of *Leaves of Grass* working largely within the limits of the poem itself. In *The Trial of the Poet*, Marki is quick to judge the lists marked throughout both the Preface and the poems in *Leaves of Grass* as unimaginative, though he remarks that the lists “do not give the impression of enumerations so much as of a search for a precise formulation” (34). This search, an evolution of style and thought, enlivens and embraces the paradoxical and confusing.

Whitman’s radical call for less stylized writing and more guttural claims is directly linked to his own eventual writing process with *Leaves of Grass*. The boundless yet concentrated quality he defines as necessity for authentic poetry is apparent in the very words of his preface, which see their own transformation and evolution. The growth of *Leaves of Grass* in its six editions follows Whitman’s own life, changing as he does, with progressions and contractions. It is an organic process, and the process of time, which involves both growth and decay—it is crucial and evident in Whitman’s own work. The need for more experimentation and less instruction by style appeals to this ideal of limitless poetic growth, and creates an atmosphere of expansion.

Where the poet arrives from is as important as what he or she becomes in the end. “The hereditary countenance descends both mother’s and father’s” (7). The poet is equal distribution from his or her past, no part outweighing any other part, and manifesting his or her descendants with truthful and unlimited foundation. The poet must have a deep awareness and knowledge of his or her past in order to forecast that which lie ahead,
although it is surprising that Whitman’s poet does not ingest each side wholly, but rather
is judiciously even.

Similar to Emerson, and perhaps more explicitly stated, Whitman writes that the
scientists are “the lawgivers of poets and their construction underlies the structure of
every perfect poem” (15). He goes through a list of which scientists: “the anatomist
chemist astronomer geologist phrenologist spiritualist mathematician historian and
lexicographer” (15). Why does Whitman cluster the spiritualist with the scientists? The
cluster is also given in rapid succession without separating punctuation, as if the many
are the one. He suggests inclusion and alikeness. Regardless, these are those who give the
poet access to poetic truth and donate structure and content. They read as an understated
Muse, or guardian of truth.

For Whitman, poetic nature is strongly connected to a holist value structure.
“Extreme caution or prudence, the soundest organic health, large hope and comparison
and fondness for women and children, large alimentiveness and destructiveness and
causality, with a perfect sense of the oneness of nature and the propriety of the same
spirit applied to human affairs” (20). Again we encounter a list, and here Whitman
describes what bubbles forth in the poet’s mind and life. He incites a certain kind of
organic health. Organic means “of a part of the body: composed of distinct parts or
tissues” (“Organic”). Whitman’s mention of “the oneness of nature” engineers holism,
while emphasizing that spirits are kindred, alike, and made of the same.

Again, Whitman hints at the poet’s relationship to origination. “Now there shall
be a man cohered out of tumult and chaos” (24). The poet is joined with, united to, and
created out of chaos. The poet becomes one with chaos, creating a whole. It is through
this union of poet with chaos that creates a lens through which to see the universe, “which shall never be quiet again” (24). The poet brings new life, thus gives birth. Whitman summons chaos, not unlike that found in the creation story. Though unlike the story found in Genesis, Whitman’s story unites man and chaos—an unlikely pairing that does not create rest or finality, but continual openness.

Whitman describes the poet’s peculiar position in time: “Past and present are not disjoined but joined. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is . . . he places himself where the future becomes present” (13). The poet is the bearer of news, and the scientist curiously bestows this position to the poet. The poet is prophetic and transcends the limitations of time, which is a power dutifully reflected in the poems.

Whitman gives the nation a soul, personifying what is an otherwise abstract thing, “the soul of the largest and wealthiest and proudest nation may well go half-way to meet that of its poet” (26). Again Whitman personifies, but now it is the country as a whole. It is an embodied thing, which “may well go half-way to meet” (26). His reference is not simply the country, but all the individuals that make the country. They function united. “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (26). This matter of “affection” is deeply important to the synthesis of poet with country. Country and poet have a relationship not unlike chaos and poet, as previously described—the similarity being that the two are cohered. Affection, though, is crucial to this particular assembly of nation and poet. The poet does not disdain his nation, rather absorbs its many qualities with a sense of love and wonder. This is the last sentence of the Preface, thus making the point more critical to Whitman’s entire argument. The point
is that the poet is able to personally universalize and immortalize the nation through a sacramental-like communion.

Whitman carefully distinguishes that the American bard does not create factions, nor does he or she divide and conquer: “the American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most” (15). The bard sees indivisibly. The bard sees the whole, and none of the parts are greater than this whole, and the poet democratically and judiciously knows this.

Related to the symbiotic relationship of nation consuming poet, and poet consuming nation, as well as Whitman’s stance on non-factions, is his position on binaries. He denounces and embraces binaries and categorization. When one considers the holist approach Whitman demands, it is no surprise that binaries serve only as a means to define the whole, rather than the many parts. “Not in him but off from him things are grotesque or eccentric or fail of their sanity” (8). The poet, then, generates these terms, creates these labels, and appropriates distinctions. He or she is a maestro of language, the creator. To complicate it, Whitman also says that “nothing out of its place is good and nothing in its place is bad” (8). Morality is abstracted more so by placement as well as by what it lacks—a curious complication. The distinction is not entirely clear.

The poet, he says, “he bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions neither more nor less. He is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key” (8-9). The poet unlocks something hidden or heretofore unknowable. Poetry is a tool to discovery, and the poet is its ultimate explorer. The mystically archaeological aspect to this excerpt is reminiscent of Emerson’s own fossil language concept. Moreover, defining the poet as an
arbiter gives the authority of judgment. In this case, he is the arbiter or judge of diversity.
The poet gives counsel to everything that moves, which is a large umbrella to oversee.
The poet is omnipresent, which explains Whitman’s desire for the poet to transcend binaries.

Whitman continues to define the poet’s authority as judge:

His brain is the ultimate brain. He is no arguer . . . he is judgment. He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing. As he sees the farthest he has the most faith. His thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things (9).

Whitman’s poet is one who sees and understands all due to his or her deeply perceptive vision. The poet brightens that which is otherwise darkened, like “the sun falling” (9).

The movement away from the poet as a judge that judges, toward a stationary star shedding light (as an entity who judges the diverse) is powerfully non-human, non-earthly, and yet still resonant of all that is earthly and human, as the sun is what we involuntarily gravitate to. Humanity is helpless. Whitman does not indicate that the words of the poet are an aid to humanity, though it does appear that the poet is indirectly responsible to and for all that exists, much as the sun is.

Whitman suggests that poet relays not only that which is beautiful, but also that which is historically evident. We begin to see a communication between Whitman, Emerson and Hesiod, as the three define a sacred history. “Great genius and the people of these states must never be demeaned to romances. As soon as histories are properly told there is no more need of romances” (19). Whitman indicates that the poet’s advance “through all interpositions and coverings and turmoils and stratagems to first principles” is where the magic happens (18). This also might recall the oral poetry of Hesiod. Just as the Muses breathe their song into Hesiod, so too do history and real life breathe song into
Whitman and his poets. “As they emit themselves facts are showered over with light” (18). All seems to burn and shine with more truthful intensity. “The daylight is lit with more volatile light . . .” (18). And the reason for this intense truthfulness is related to the perfect candor of the poet, a quality which magnifies truth, even at moments of fault. Reminiscent of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, discussed earlier, Whitman lifts up the painfulness of knowledge’s luminosity, and yet its absolute goodness.14

Whitman describes the future-leaning poet as prescient; this is not a new way of describing the poet—that is, as a visionary, a mystic, or a prophet. The poet’s divinity is partly in his or her forward motion. The poet “projects himself centuries ahead and judges performer or performance after the changes of time” (24). Similar to Lord’s singer, Whitman’s poet, though a visionary of present day, is only truly visionary if his song retains its value over time. Lord’s singer and Whitman’s poet are both future-savvy, prescient mystics of what is to come. We are reminded of Emerson’s defiantly abolition of time, with his claim that the true poet is eternal and able to remain relevant throughout time.

Whitman suggests that the poet has these qualities, and values before birth, and even before his or her mother’s birth. Of these qualities he says, “these are called up of the float of the brain of the world to be parts of the greatest poet from his birth out of his mother’s womb and from her birth out of her mother’s” (20). In Whitman’s vision, the poetic function is inherent to the poet. He or she is born with it. It is his or her nature. It is, perhaps, God-given destiny, but it is certainly not of the poet’s choosing to be a poet.

14 “Anyway, it’s my opinion that the last thing to be seen—and it isn’t easy to see either—in the realm of knowledge is goodness; and the sight of the character of goodness leads one to deduce that it is responsible for everything that is right and fine, whatever the circumstances . . .” (Plato 244).
It is prefigured. This is similar to how it was for Hesiod when the Muses bestowed upon him the breath of their song. He had no choice but to relay their story. For Whitman’s poet, however, the duty is understood as transgenerational, a concept similar to that found among the singers in *Singer of Tales*. The singers emphasize in their tradition the concept of preservation, “the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it. The ideal is a true story well and truly retold” (29). They focused not on originality in their work. Singers of epics are instead considered “guardian of legend” (28). They are the excavators of ancient tradition and fossil poetry.

Whitman describes a deep in which the poet dwells, something reminiscent of the depths of Genesis and Chaos, and the deep that Emerson briefly mentions in his essay “The Poet.” For Whitman, however, the depths are associated with knowledge. “Great is the faith of the flush of knowledge and of the investigation of the depths of qualities of things. . . . The depths are fathomless and therefore calm” (15). For Whitman, there is a calm in the unknown of chaos. This is reminiscent of Hesiod’s gods, who are born from chaos—in Whitman’s calm deep we can find divinity. There is a hushed wisdom in plundering the deep. In Genesis, “darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). God and the deep are intertwined. Whitman appears to take the idea of the deep and place humanity alongside its mystery, the assumption being that we are also intertwined with God, a notion he

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15 If Whitman inherited anything from Emerson, it was his affinity for paradox. As noted in his excellent criticism of Whitman, Price notes that while he supported the notion that poetry was inherent, he refused to acknowledge his English heirs: “Whitman called instead for writers ‘essentially different from the old poets, and from the modern successions of jinglers and snivellers and fops’” (Price 15).
mentions earlier. This is very different from Emerson’s suggestion, which is that the poet hovers over the deep with religious regard. Whitman’s poet plunges in.

Catherine Keller writes extensively of chaos and “the deep” in her monograph *Face of the Deep* in a way complimentary to Whitman’s own thoughts. She “proposes a *creation ex profundis*—creation out of the watery depths” (i). Keller examines the deep and chaos in traditional Christian theology, and the attempt to erase the deep from its relevance. She writes:

This interstitial darkness refuses to disappear. It refuses to appear as nothing, as vacuum, as mere absence highlighting the Presence of the Creator, as nonentity limning all the created entities. It gapes open in the text. . . . This void evinces fullness, its waters, viscosity. It is no wonder that this verse got systematically forgotten, its own flood drowned out by the amplification of the first verse (9).

Whitman would have agreed with Keller as he, too, describes the fullness of chaos in his own work. Indeed, Keller later claims, “Chaos—under pressure from the Roman sense of order—has taken on the persona of a frightful mess, an abortive birth; but certainly not of nothing. Poets ever after will ambivalently crave this sexy chaos of beginnings” (15). For Keller, the important piece is that chaos does not come from nothing. It suggests infinity and potential, in which Whitman finds a peaceful wisdom.

Whitman sees liberty as the great motivating factor and benefactor to all poets through every age: “. . . to them it is confided and they must sustain it. Nothing has precedence of it and nothing can warp or degrade it. The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots” (17). Though the terms “liberty” and “freedom” are largely synonymous, liberty suggests, too, that freedom exists even under the duress of oppression. Whitman also describes a horrific war scene full of prisoners and martyrs, and goes on to describe a country of poor moral judgment, full of citizens who “are elated
with noble joy at the sight of slaves” (18). Even in such scenes, he suggests, does liberty exist. Only when all men and women “are discharged from any part of the earth” would liberty, too, evacuate.

Honesty, or more specifically candor, is an important trait for the poet. Whitman tells of this by discussing a lack of something: “the great poets are also to be known by the absence in them of tricks” (19). Confronted by this open honesty, the poet’s audience realizes that its import easily outweighs that of deceit. Though this seems self-evident, the elaboration found in a list gives one pause:

. . . and there never grew up in any of the continents of the globe nor upon any planet or satellite or star, nor upon the asteroids, nor in any part of ethereal space, nor in the midst of density, nor under the fluid wet of the sea, nor in that condition which precedes the birth of babes, nor at any time during the changes of life, nor in that condition that follows what we term death, nor in any stretch of abeyance or action afterward of vitality, nor in any process of formation or reformation anywhere, a being whose instinct hated the truth (20).

In this list, Whitman sets out to describe the many who do not “hate the truth,” or, more to the point, who love the truth. He mentions babes in utero as well as creatures on land, under water, and out in space, as well as anything or anyone who has died. He uses hyperbole to set the audience’s attention upon the importance of candor, especially as a poetic character trait. While I believe Whitman might be offended at my suggestion of hyperbole, I think it is a tool he dispenses wisely, if not often. Regardless, here we see the universality of truth.

Perfection proves thematically important as an aspect found within nature. Though for Whitman, his poetic theory derails from that of his predecessors. Whitman does not deem it necessary to have rhyme or simile, for example, in order to display the perfection that is found within every part of nature, this perfection is “profuse and
impartial . . . This is the reason that about the proper expression of beauty there is precision and balance” (12). Whitman's concept of poetry transcends the bounds of common language or core poetic concepts, “the pleasure of poems is not in them that take the handsomest measure and similes and sound” (12). Poetry, then, reflects the impulses found within nature.

Few critics have tackled the Preface to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Initially this may have been a result of Whitman’s own second thoughts about the piece. Marki notes, however, that Whitman

. . . continued to elaborate the notions and pronouncements of his essay in his poetry for nearly eleven years, transposing from it whole passages or single lines and phrases, as the case might be, unchanged or with the slightest alterations, into poems which were incorporated by him in what he considered the definitive version of his volume (14).

Though one considers Albert Lord’s singer, and the evolution of a song over time and among various individuals, Whitman’s process sees a sharp turn. Lord’s singers aimed to preserve a tradition, and hoped for as little variety as possible. Whitman, however, elaborated, deleted, and combined. He fearlessly dismantled the old in favor of finding what was, for him, definitive. The preface troubled him, and was always a thread holding together *Leaves of Grass*, even when it later became unrecognizable as snippets throughout the larger poem.

Evoking Emerson’s fossil language, Whitman describes the importance of the English language. “It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible” (25). To Whitman, the American adoption of English was adventurous enough to discover what is new and unknown. Whitman does something Emerson does not: he suggests an American superiority by dint of language. “[The poets] shall arise in America and be
responded to from the remainder of the earth. The English language befriends the grand American expression” (25). The American bard finds new forms in language to “express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage” (25). Whitman creates a new conception of language, which borrows heavily from the long-weathered tradition of English.

Part of Whitman’s aim is to do away with mysticism, and instead focus squarely on a materialist divinity. He hopes to discredit all that is “special and supernatural” as something that “departs as a dream” (16). There is the same specialness in all things, and the same “perfect miracle” applies to every creature and organism. Perhaps as exclamation he then claims, “it is also not consistent with the reality of the soul to admit that there is anything in the known universe more divine than men and women” (16). Here he indicates his perception of human divinity, which departs from the broader materialist divinity common in his work. Though all creatures share the same perfection, it is humanity, moreover the human soul, that is the most divine and holy.

With varying examples, Whitman goes on to describe what is worthy of speculation, for poet and philosopher alike, though the philosopher “speculates ever looking toward the poet, ever regarding the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness never inconsistent with what is clear to the senses and to the soul” (16). All of his examples are of nature, the environment, and people cast in very dull yet corporeal manners. Though he does not avoid speculating on the soul, he relies on natural laws and bodies, in a Hesiodic fashion, to define the order and sacredness of reality. One recalls from Athanassakis: “Parallels from the modern world abound . . . Hesiod sang of primitive, yet very bold physics” (xvii). Whitman’s poet relies on the material world in a
similar fashion. That which is evident to the senses is precisely that which guides the poet.

Whitman goes on to associate America with natural forms. “These American states strong and healthy and accomplished shall receive no pleasure from violations of natural models and must not permit them” (19). He goes on to describe all the places and objects, which “distorts honest shapes” and marks them as objects and places of revolt (19). “Most works are most beautiful without ornament” (19). He sounds more like Emerson here, as he longs for simplicity, and exalts nature.

In the end, Whitman makes an important claim about the poet’s role, and specifically the role of the American bard. “For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more” (8). Whitman sees beyond poetic structure, past rhyming verse, and describes a poetic power to know the future. The poet “sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms” (8). And perhaps more interesting is whence the poet ascends—“here comes one among the wellbeloved stonecutters” (8). The poet is of and among the laypeople. He or she does not appear to have special privilege culturally or economically. The poet’s origins are humble, and yet the ascension is palpably new.

Hyperbolic simplicity gives Whitman space to emphasize the poet’s job as conduit. Whitman writes, “nothing is better than simplicity . . . nothing can make up for excess or for the lack of definiteness” (13). Whitman later insinuates that simplicity is the style that authentic poetry tends to reflect:

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 or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like
curtains (14).

His is a much less conventional stance on the format of poetry than those of his peers.
Emerson, comparatively, does not exactly evade the confines of rhyme and pattern as an
essential component to the most beautiful poetry, “the argument is secondary, the finish
of the verses is primary” (“The Poet” 186). Simplicity, for Whitman, becomes empty and
clean. He incites cleanliness as the path to artistic creation, “the cleanest expression is
that which finds no sphere worthy of itself and makes one” (14). The purest words, then,
are the poet’s words. Plain, natural, profound and new language leads to an unveiling. It
is also important to note that Whitman calls for a loss of the poetic identity in order for
poetic genius to thrive: “what I experience or portray shall go from my composition
without my composition” (14). The poet is a conduit for experience, life, and reflection of
those. Like Emerson’s poet who “hangs his life like an Aeolian harp in a tree,” for
Whitman’s poet, emptiness is a necessity (“The Poet” 357).

Whitman associates the relationship between scientist and poet with procreation.
The scientist begets the poet. “No matter what rises or is uttered they sent the seed of the
conception of it” (15). First, Whitman specifically uses the word “uttered,” which we can
relate back to Albert Lord, who says utterances are the sounds singers understand. They
do not think in words or lines of verse. An utterance is created before a word is.
Utterances are fossil poetry. For Whitman, the scientist comes before the utterance—that
is, the science comes before the utterance. Truth, existence, and the laws of nature are
what give rise to that which is later “uttered.” Whitman also writes, “always of their
fatherstuff must be begotten the sinewy races of bards” (15). In other words, Whitman
declares that science necessarily is followed by poetry. Poets are “the sinewy races,” which is an unusual image—one with which Emerson would likely not agree. Whitman adds sensuality to the poet’s persona that seems out of place, unless imagined metaphorically, or as a heroic archetype. He goes on to describe a bond between the scientist and poet, as a father-son relationship:

If there shall be love and content between the father and the son and if the greatness of the son is the exuding of the greatness of the father there shall be love between the poet and the man of demonstrable science (15).

The relationship between poetry and science is fundamental in understanding Whitman’s perspective because it defines poet’s origins. Whitman writes, “In the beauty of poems are the tuft and final applause of science” (15). Science is the primary and final word for poetry. It provides the descriptions, the purpose, and the life force. Science, above human nature, appears as Whitman’s muse.

Whitman tells the importance of the present moment for the age’s greatest poet. Though the cascading of past moments clearly lead up to the present-day, it is the current age that coalesces in the divinity of the poet’s word.

If he does not flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides . . . and if he does not attract his own land body and soul to himself and hang on its neck with incomparable love . . . and if he be not himself the age transfigured . . . (23).

The depth of present times is notably vast, comparable to “vast oceanic tides” (23). In biblical fashion, Whitman’s poet constantly renews and revisits the concept of “the deep” through poetry and song—his or hers is a refashioning of the old to reflect the transfiguration—not unlike Christ’s transfiguration. The point of the poet is to bring an uplifting change. It should also be noted that Whitman’s poet floods him- or herself “with the immediate age” (23). This idea of flooding oneself suggests surrender, which is
similar to Hesiod’s surrender to the Muses. The poet is sensitive and receptive to taking in the qualities of the universe, and hardwired with some foreign ability to reflect on and respond to it. This is also akin to the Aeolian harp, a metaphor Emerson relies upon in his lecture, when he writes of the poet that “he hangs out his life like an Aeolian harp in a tree” (“The Poet” 357). The poet must be somewhat passive and receptive, so to be breathed into or flooded. It gives the poet an impregnable ability, to be taken over and filled with a force, which is the vastness of the present age.

The only thing fixed in time for Whitman is the soul. All else is subject to the change and passing of time:

Only the soul is of itself . . . all else has reference to what ensues. All that a person does or thinks is of consequence. Not a move can a man or woman make that affects him or her in a day or a month or any part of the direct lifetime or the hour of death but the same affects him or her onward afterward though the indirect lifetime. The indirect is always as great and real as the direct (21).

Whitman comments here upon the cascading of time, the idea that one moment leads to the next. He describes a version of evolution, mentioning both a direct lifetime and an indirect lifetime. Indirect is defined as “not taking the straight or nearest course to the end in view; not going straight to the point” (“Indirect”). The soul, and the soul’s remaining span, which he suggests as infinite, or longer than our present lifetime, is equally connected to and affected by the passage and usage of time. He later describes moments as forever existing through their antecedent and precedent moments, “no result exists now without being from its long antecedent result, and that from its antecedent, and so backward without the farthest mentionable spot coming a bit nearer the beginning than any other spot” (23). At the kernel of rapid and ongoing change, however, is one clear absolute, which is that the soul is fixed.
He goes on to describe that all good actions benefit the universe: “. . . all that a male or female does that is vigorous and benevolent and clean is so much sure profit to him or her in the unshakable order of the universe and through the whole scope of it forever” (22). He relates just before this, however, that all the heinous crimes and follies committed are “duly realized and returned, and that returned in further performances” (22). These are a Whitmanesque version of karma and incarnation.

Whitman sets up the reader to understand his vision: the creating of his poetic religion.

There will soon be no more priests. Their work is done . . . A superior breed shall take their place . . . the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest . . . Through this divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things (25).

For Whitman, the poet is the ultimate and superior truth-teller and messenger. He declares an ending to organized religion. He inverts divinity, a gift not commonly associated with humanity. Whitman gives man and woman a self-perpetuating godliness. As a priest administers the rites and sacraments, Whitman’s men and women become shepherds. It is no longer a quality sought through supreme deities, but through everyone. He writes, “through the divinity of themselves,” the divinity of the poets, “they shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future” (25). Whitman locks us into a materialist view. Though he makes mystics of everyone, he also appears to hull its origins from tangible reality. He sees divinity in holist connection with the physical world.
Chapter VII

Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

It is helpful for the reader to see Whitman’s poetic theory in action. Examining his poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” allows the reader the opportunity to witness Whitman’s poetic thought in action. In the previous chapter, I discussed his expansive version of the poet’s role, which involves his own pointed interest in origination, born from a Hesiodic Chaos. One is reminded of Catherine Keller’s description of poets’ interest in a “sexy chaos of beginnings” (15). The poem was originally titled “Sun-Down Poem,” a title that would have stressed Whitman’s interest in liminality, or in-betweenness. A sunset foretells the darkness to come, just as Whitman the poet foretells of a universal origination. This poem highlights some of Whitman’s most prominent themes, notably those spanning wide spectra: unity in the singular, eternity in the moment, individuality, and loss of identity.

First, I will focus on his use of voice throughout the poem. Whitman switches from first person singular to first person plural. The first instance is in section 8, “We understand then do we not? / What I promis’d without mentioning it, have you not / accepted?” (312). The author’s identity begins to blur with that of the audience. The “I” of the poet, and the “you” of his listener become “we.” The two join to share a perspective—Whitman shares with his audience a sense of knowing, unachievable and unfathomable through any institution or “preaching” (312).

This “we” pronoun shifts at the end of the poem in section 9. It is reminiscent of Hesiod and the Muses:
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 (313).

This plural “we” could refer to all the attendants on the ferry with Whitman. Perhaps he is enlisting his own Whitman brotherhood, or his own “many in the one.” He desires union, or that which “fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you” (312). This, too, reminds one of Hesiod’s Muses. For Hesiod, however, the Muses breathed the word into him—Whitman exhales his own “meaning” into his listener. This is a paradoxical reversal of what Whitman wants from the poet as described in his Preface. The bard is one who “responds to his country’s spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes” (7). In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” however, the pouring of one into another seems to go more than one way. The poet is not simply an empty vessel waiting to be filled by his or her surroundings—he or she also fills the other. In experiencing his or her surroundings, the poet must be quiet and be filled. In announcing his or her song, the poet must then exchange and fill the listener. The reciprocity is egalitarian. Furthermore, in this fusing Whitman intends to rid poetry of boundaries, limitations, separation, and otherness—he unites. “What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman / or man that looks in my face?” (312). Again, Whitman cites the opening of Genesis, looking into the image of God. The primordial countenance is a key that unlocks meaning and connection.

After Whitman’s Edenic opening of the poem with chaos, light, then humanity, he opens section 2 of the poem, mystified by the “crowds of men and women” (308). “The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of / the day, / The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme, myself disintegrated, / every one disintegrated yet part of
the scheme . . .” (308). His use of “scheme” could mean a few things. It could allude to a universal scheme, or predestination. Although, unlike the original Catholic meaning of predestination, for Whitman it might mean that everyone has an implied special salvation simply by rote of living on the planet. He could be relaying something new, however. The disintegration of beings into a “compact scheme” is a holist attempt to lose a sense of identifying boundaries, and conjoin with the whole of human nature.

It would be unusual for Whitman’s narrator to evoke an old sense of predestination. Whitman himself describes the American bard thus, “For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new” (Preface 8). This concept of newness is of great importance to Whitman, as it departs from the old poetic structures and anticipations passed down from the Transatlantic Romantics, a mode he altogether abolishes in his own work in favor of discovery, asymmetry, boldness, and sensuality. Back to the point about the simple scheme, however, it appears that Whitman perceived the world to be intimately interconnected, past with present with future. The narrator of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” gives a clear sense of kinship with those who have yet to come. The poet, then, has remarkable foresight. Whitman goes beyond the prophetic poet’s telling of the future, and connects and shares with its citizens.

Whitman often refers to the light of the sun and the shadows it creates. He says of his own shadow, “Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams, / Look’d at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of / my head in the sunlit water” (309). He connects himself viscerally to the sun, to its affects, and to his own affects. It is his shadow, just as it is the sun’s rays, which create this image. There is a degree of separation between the two. Whitman also writes of the shadow created on a seagull,
“Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies / and left the rest in strong shadow” (309). Within the one body are contrasts, opposites, and polarities, and yet it does nothing to separate the one body from the many parts.

Similarly, Whitman plays what he calls “contrariety,” an opposition between things. In other words, he displays his own paradox. He writes that he “had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak, / Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant, / The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me . . .” (311). Perhaps as a way of displaying his own return to innocence, in the opening lines of Section 6 he says, “I am he who knew what it was to be evil” (311). This brings us back to Hesiod’s Muses, and their own knowing of truth, “we know how to tell many lies that pass for truth, / and when we wish, we know to tell the truth itself” (Hesiod 11). The Muses know what it is to lie, just as Whitman knows what it is to be evil. This opposition between things, or “contrariety,” allows the poet to embrace his or subject universally.

More interesting about Section 6 is that this loss of boundaries signals one of the important constructs of Whitman’s poet. The poet is like an empty vessel, as Whitman describes in the 1855 Preface, “to him enter the essences of the real things and past and present events” (7). For Whitman, the poet embodies all of his or her surroundings. “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is no exception, as the narrator hopes to blend together with his fellow passengers aboard the ferry, while also connecting with those who have yet to be. Whitman’s blurring of distinctions directly reflects the blurry liminal stage into which he is literally riding the ferryboat. This narrator is intimately involved with both those aboard the boat and those who have yet to be aboard the boat, “Closer yet I approach you, / What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you - / I laid in my stores in
advance, / I consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born” (311).

Whitman’s narrator disassembles time, while also reminding his reader of the prophetic vision the poet can have.

Thus, Whitman makes himself available and connected with pending generations. He feels a bond despite time, and despite lack of existence. He says, “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” (308). And later he writes, “What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? / Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails / not” (310). For Whitman, time is a construct that cannot keep him from connection with the residents of the future. Indeed, in much of the poem he seems to be reciting for those who have yet to come, as he describes what has happened to him in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and on the ferry, as things that “also” happen to his reader, both current and future (311). The narrator acts as a bridge between past and future, his own present tense guiding him in this literal time travel. It is a more direct way of connecting the poet to prophetic stature. Just as Hesiod’s singing the song of the Muses keeps them immortal, so too does Whitman’s singing the song of the ferry immortalize a vast, intergenerational human connection.

An aspect of this poem that makes it powerful is its liminality, worth discussing explicitly. Whitman is between shores on the water in a boat, and is traveling from one place to another. He is not quite in the ocean, but nearly so. He is able to reflect on both the land and the water—the land tamed by the bricks of society, and the water well traveled, ancient and timeless all at once, and yet quite wild. The water gives the narrator
something large to reflect upon—just as the universe is reflected in the river’s depths, “saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water” (309).

Consider also Whitman’s environs within the poem. The first thing to inspire his poetry writing was a vision at the shoreline. “[Whitman] said that the first time he ever wanted to write anything enduring was ‘when [he] saw a ship under full sail, and had the desire to describe it exactly as it seemed to [him]’” (Kaplan 79). The river accentuates Whitman’s passing beyond boundaries via unknown depths, and incites the Bible. “Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!” (307). This immediately evokes the voice of Genesis: “the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). Whitman appears to be enmeshing his identity with this classic Christian concept of the primordial God. In the beginning was God and Chaos. Needless to say, this also reminds one of Hesiod’s insistence that all was created from Chaos. Whitman looks over Chaos in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” He does not claim to “be God,” nor a voice of the Muses, though he is identifying and communing with a large, powerful force—a body of water. Through his ferry vessel atop the river, Whitman senses unity. This use of water also illustrates Whitman’s sense of time passing—as well as a collection of moments residing in one body, intermingling chaotically.

Just as God created lightness and darkness on the first day, Whitman also notices the “clouds of the west” and the “sun there half an hour high,” which is similar to his opening where he looks over the depths of the river (307). Though Whitman claims no creation of such things, and is not a God, he does witness and observe them, and reflects a wondrous majesty in the noticing. If there is a direct connection between Genesis and
this opening, Whitman’s position is not one of omniscience, but one of egalitarian sentiment, “I see you / also face to face” (307). One of the poet’s purposes is to notice one’s surroundings and recount them. It is from this starting point of Chaos, then daytime, which is turning toward evening—another point of liminality—that Whitman sees boundaries beginning to seep, to bleed. He notices the strangeness of those around him: “How curious you are to me!” (308). Yet he goes on to announce that the sights and emotions from those sights “were to me the same as they are to you . . . The men and women I saw were all near to me, / Others the same—others who look back on me because I / look’d forward to them” (310). There seems to be a spiral effect for Whitman: first, he witnesses the face of Chaos on the river; second, he witnesses the known world and its splendor; third, he witnesses his fellow human; fourth, he feels kinship with his fellow human; and finally this kinship turns to an enmeshing of spirits. The kinship is reflected back to Chaos. Just as he looks face to face like a mirror with those on the ferry, and sees his likeness in them—he also senses himself in Chaos. In the active yet seemingly passive “seeing,” Whitman eventually sees himself through the same mechanism of viewing: the whole world and others. It is through these that he finally sees he too is in all of this.

It is substantial when Whitman describes the men and women as “returning home” (308). They return to Brooklyn from Manhattan, which is an everyday occurrence. Yet the return seems more significant in relation to the previous consideration of Chaos, and Whitman’s general association with Genesis in this poem. The way Whitman illustrates it the return is humanity’s return to innocence, or the post-Edenic apocalypse. The original title of this poem, “Sun-Down Poem,” though rather concise and seemingly
ordinary as far as titles go, takes both the reader and the ferry-goer back to a Chaotic
darkness, or to a time before light. Whitman unites us with our Chaotic origins on a
ferryboat ride to Brooklyn. He enhances the present moment through its association with
the divinity of Chaos, which is a clear relic of Hesiod’s poetic lineage.
Chapter VIII

Conclusion

It is worth repeating that there is a good chance Whitman was in attendance at Emerson’s lecture of “The Poet,” which was given in New York in March 1842. In fact, the editors of *Walt Whitman and the New York Aurora* believe Whitman wrote a review of this particular lecture, describing “it as being on the ‘Poetry of the Times’” (Stovall 285). The long foreground, as Emerson called that period which led to Whitman writing *Leaves of Grass*, was likely colored by ingesting Emerson’s poetic thought. Needless to say, when Whitman received words of praise from Emerson upon the first printing of *Leaves of Grass*, he was inspired to publish it as an appendix to the second edition.

Emerson wrote to the young poet:

> I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of ‘Leaves of Grass.’ I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty (Whitman 41).

The two became literary friends, invariably awed by one another, though not necessarily always agreeing. Critics often wonder what drew Emerson to Whitman in the first place. It was not uncommon for Emerson to greet a young poet on his or her journey, but never with as much enthusiasm as with Whitman. It has been posed that “he found the same risk-taker in Whitman” as Emerson found himself to be (Loving 190). The risk-taker persona leads Whitman to describe poet and priest as one in the same—“there will soon

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16 “Most critics depict a Whitman more possessed by than in possession of the Emersonian tradition” (Price 36).
be no more priests”—a leap Emerson did not have the courage to make, but the direction in which he was arguably headed (Preface 24).

Throughout this thesis I have closely analyzed texts by Emerson, Whitman, and Hesiod. By examining their writings intimately, I hoped to show similar and sometimes subtle threads that run among the three poets. I have discussed, among other things, immanence, truth, darkness, limits of language, imagination, genius, impermanence, the importance of the senses, eternality, and poet as guardian of truth and history. Now I would like to lift my gaze from this close exegesis to capture a wider panorama of the three, and their importance in the larger conversation of the role of the poet.

Like Hesiod, both Emerson and Whitman understand that they do not know much about the universe. Neither of them pretends to believe that Genesis fairly represents the beginnings of the world—though they do both acknowledge to varying degrees that the Bible has incredible poetry. They both evoke the mystery and darkness of the unknown as celebratory and unfathomable—they do not shun it or dismiss it. Similarly, Hesiod’s *Theogony* does not describe a world *ex nihilo*, that which comes from nothing. Chaos remains the ultimate, divine contributor to that of creation, as well as to that which the poet attests. The three authors become archaeologists of truth, using imagination, new breath, and images to fill the gaps, and to emphasize the importance of eternity and ongoing change, growth, and decay. While creating new associations through their symbols, the three authors also preserve poetic tradition, as well as the creation of language.

One fundamental thread that runs throughout the works of Emerson, Whitman, and Hesiod is the limitations of the human mind. One’s memory is finite. All the way
back through ancient times, the singers of epic songs have known of this limitation. As Lord points out, “the singer cannot, and does not, remember enough to sing a song” (43). Imagination bridges the gap between the ancient and eternal message and its present day exchange rate. Because of this, “language always bears the stamp of its speaker” (31). Similarly, Emerson talks and writes about the “all-piercing, all-feeding, and ocular air of heaven, that man shall never inhabit” (187). The poet of every age will long to fathom this height and depth, and will never quite reach it. Whitman twists through this barrier. He gives the American bard the voice and vision of all, and the power to transfer his or her own experience as the experience of all. “And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are / more to me, and more in my meditations, than you / might suppose” (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” 308). Whitman escapes the problem of the mind’s limitations by instead embracing and welcoming the unknown. Whitman evades the human memory dilemma by describing time as infinitely ubiquitous:

> But I do not talk of the beginning or the end. / There was never any more inception than there is now, / Nor any more youth or age than there is now; / And will never be any more perfection than there is now, / Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now . . . *(Leaves of Grass* 28).

Whitman sees the same endless growth and opportunity in all moments. The present moment is no exception, but is also perfectly adequate for the poet’s inspiration. In a similar way Lord describes this capacity.

The dialogue between Whitman’s work and Emerson’s work picks up its pace. Emerson’s response to the above quote from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* would have perhaps been this: “. . . if the thing exists, so will its expression follow . . . Nature does not repeat herself, but invents” (“The Poet” 361). Whitman sees life and experience as cyclical, never “any more youth or age than there is now” (28). What has been will
always be. But for Emerson the world of the poet has instead a great spiraling outward, “only what is new delights us, for it is the last communication from God” (360).

Whitman’s vision appears to be more materialist, as he attempts to deconstruct the god-part found in Emerson’s poet. Whitman brings the poet and the poet’s reader deeply into the present moment. The “now” is enough, and is also representative of all that has been and will be.

While it may sound like Emerson and Whitman disagree, they seem to wind up at similar conclusions. I have referred to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave on the question of poetic vision as a luminous source. Emerson’s Muses with whom “we do not very willingly trust ourselves” reminds one of Plato’s mistrustful and enslaved cave-dwellers and their perspective upon those outside the cave (361). They wearily maneuver towards the light. Plato says, “once he’s reached the sunlight, he wouldn’t be able to see a single one of the things which are currently taken to be real, would he, because his eyes would be overwhelmed by the sun’s beams” (242). Though the vision of the real is “new” to the viewer, and somewhat blinding and daunting, that which exists outside the cave has always been. Whitman asks, “does the daylight astonish?” (45). He and Emerson are both right, and emphatically agree that it does.

Emerson puts the cave-dwellers’ fire where it belongs: within. All are “children of the fire, made of it, and only the same divinity transmuted, and at two or three removes when we know least about it” (184). This is one of the transformative pieces in the discussion of the poet. As Emerson and Whitman developed their concept of the poet, the poet became one who delves within him- or herself to uncover the macro in the micro. All are “made of” the fire, which will hopefully lead one to see what is outside the cave.
In relation to Hesiod, language and song, as passed down from the Muses, delivers truth and history. He is the guardian of that which has transpired, as well as that which has yet to be. Truth and history are breathed into him from a metaphysical source—it becomes an immanent and undeniable piece of his being. Emerson brings this breath to his poet through nature. Whitman brings this breath to his poet through experience and humanity. Hesiod’s inherited breath evolves over time. Once it gets to 19th century America, Emerson and Whitman have transformed it into an inherent part of being a human.

I researched and wrote this thesis aware of the vast scholarship already available on Emerson, Whitman, and Hesiod, and in particular on each individual author’s perspective of the poet’s role. My original contribution was to do a close textual examination of the works of this unlikely trio, with the purpose of highlighting an ongoing arc from ancient Greece all the way until Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. The limitations of this thesis lie in its inability to be exhaustive with respect to existing scholarship. That said, an extreme close-up of these particular works by these three poets allows the critic to step outside of the cave.

Toward the end of writing this thesis I discovered a fascinating article about Whitman’s connection to the Ancient Greeks. Whitman was often described as looking Greek, amusingly so. Edgar Lee Masters more seriously and accurately described Whitman: “‘He was never the Homer of America: at best he was our Hesiod, writing *Works and Days* in terms of what America was and meant, and what its rightful destiny was’” (Gummere 264). It is the following comparison that captures more of where my thoughts go: “An offhand jest of Oliver Wendell Holmes (senior) throws some further light. The Good Gray Poet was called by the Boston Brahmin: ‘Half Bowery Boy and
half Emersonian Greek”’ (264). Though the comparison is comic, it does accurately place Whitman directly where I imagine him, especially in writing and researching this thesis: he embodies the voice of the people, and relays a message timeless and foretelling. Emerson and consequently Whitman are the inheritors of the ancient Hesiodic tradition.

Upon the course of this work, I became more deeply aware of the paradoxes found in Emerson’s and Whitman’s works. Emerson’s work is bounteous with paradox—one example is found in his essay “Self-Reliance,” where he asserts that finding harmony within society requires leaving it. He famously sums it up: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” (57). As for Whitman, one of his most well known paradoxical statements is beautifully rendered in “Song of Myself” from *Leaves of Grass*: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . . I contradict myself; / I am large . . . . I contain multitudes” (89). Initially this famous issue of paradox troubled me, and I attempted to manipulate the often-contradictory terms, symbols, and realities. As I became more intimate with the work, however, I discovered a humble honesty in their vast inclusion. I decided not to explain it away. It is a clue to our Chaotic beginnings, those of which Hesiod wisely sang. Though confident of the spirit of their connection, I at times also questioned Hesiod’s position in my work. I grew more attuned with *Theogony*, and the connection of the three messengers became vibrant and clear. They transcend the ages and span of time, through the immanent breath of creativity and imagination. This is a spirit moving through everyone, and is the most primordial component of all of the divine Chaos.
Fundamental to this work is the idea that poetry is the ultimate beginning, as far as any of these three authors can tell. Out of the dark void of chaos and infinity comes imagination, which ignites the immanent spark within the poet to process the chaos and infinite and mysterious. Language emerges at first as utterances or sounds. Eventually these sounds become words, phrases, and melodies. Later these poems become commonplace—they become matter of fact. Poetry becomes symbolic of all that exists in life, and all that will come to be. This poetic ability is universal. Everyone has access to it. Creation leads to an eventual uncovering—the poet leads us to the light, paradoxically by way of an archaeological dig through the past. The poet fuses all of human nature to the infinite. The poet understands that our origins as creative beings are in dark primordial chaos, and that we have had a fire burning and alighting the path all along.


Works Consulted


