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# USEFUL ANTAGONISTS: TRANSATLANTIC INFLUENCE, SECTIONALISM, AND WHITMAN'S NATIONALIST PROJECT

SAMUEL GRABER

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IN OCTOBER OF 1855 an anonymous American reviewer of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Tennyson's *Maud* predicted the emergence of national poetry within the broader arena of English letters:

The poetry of England, by the many rich geniuses of that wonderful little island, has grown out of the facts of the English race, the monarchy and aristocracy prominent over the rest, and conforms to the spirit of them. No nation ever did or ever will receive with national affection any poets except those born of its national blood. . . . Thus what very properly fits a subject of the British crown may fit very ill an American freeman.<sup>1</sup>

Published in the *American Phrenological Journal* under the title "An English and an American Poet," this early nationalization of Anglophone poetry was penned by Walt Whitman—a virtual unknown who, though he was desperate for recognition, used the guise of a disinterested observer to separate himself from one of the era's premier poets.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* had generated abysmal sales upon its release a few months before, and it seems odd that Whitman would try to remedy the situation by insisting he differed fundamentally from the popular Tennyson. Yet Whitman did not typically shy away from negative or quizzical responses to his work so long as they were predicated on his distinctiveness. Rather, both *Leaves of Grass* and "An English and an American Poet" explain Whitman's formal divergence from traditional English verse as the outcome of a nationalist division between British and American society. Whitman framed his work as a literary revolution dedicated to emancipating the American reader from the feudal tradition that Tennyson, as royalty's pet and a purveyor of well-disciplined poetry, could not help but uphold. In this sense Whitman's self-review targeted not Tennyson but rather the continued relevance on the American scene of British traditionalism: that nationalistic conformity of the British reader to Britain's past that left the island's literature as well as its politics subservient to the ancient spirit of "monarchy and aristocracy." To a modern American "freeman" drawn to a new country's expansive vistas, exhilarating present,

and wide-open future, the best of British literature ought to seem both “wonderful” and as “little” as the place that had birthed it.

Such half-veiled nationalist hostility to both Britain and the authority of tradition is familiar to Whitman scholars. “An English and an American Poet” reinforces Whitman’s core determination to exchange conventional aesthetic values for an independent national literature, inaugurated by a work of free verse that utterly abandoned the well-worn terrain of British letters. Similarly, his characterization of Tennyson as typically and exclusively English presented a mirror image of Whitman’s dramatic stance as “one of the roughs,” standing in his workman’s shirt at the center of a uniquely American poetic project.<sup>2</sup> Readers have recognized the Americanism at the heart of Whitman’s conception of his work since *Leaves of Grass* was first published, and Kenneth Price’s study of Whitman’s relationship to British tradition has highlighted the Anglophobic commitments that underwrite Whitman’s nationalist persona.<sup>3</sup> Less well understood, however, is the fundamental connection between Whitman’s transatlantic hostility and the sectional tensions that surrounded the nationalist literary agenda of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was making his case for an independent national literature at a time when his nation was becoming increasingly divided over slavery and states’ rights, when rumblings of Southern secessionists were growing from a whisper to a roar. In the context of this intensifying sectional conflict, Whitman’s focus on the international scene and his decision to publish a book dedicated to the national unity of his American readership seem remarkably naïve. Yet Whitman’s attacks on the transatlantic threat of a feudal literature emerged partly out of his need to minimize the domestic strife that threatened the national union’s continued existence.

One of Whitman’s ingenious strategies to reframe the sectional divide as an international concern was his refusal to note significant divisions between slave and free states. Whitman was keenly sensitive to how the increasing friction between North and South might obstruct the development of a cohesive national literature. That consciousness, however, manifests itself primarily in the poet’s antagonism toward the transatlantic masters of English letters. Faced with a splintering American nation and the possibility of a militarized Mason-Dixon line, the antebellum Whitman conceived of the Atlantic as the single relevant national border. This essay shows how, refining his poetic persona under pressures foreign and domestic, Whitman attacked the obstacles of sectionalism and transatlantic influence by treating them as part of the same problem, building his reputation as an authentically American writer through a strategic conflation of sectional and transatlantic pressures. This strategy took shape in poetic engagements

with the antislavery cause prior to the initial publication of *Leaves of Grass*, which determined the arc of the three antebellum editions of Whitman's masterwork and eventually laid the foundation for his post Civil War writing.<sup>4</sup>

*Anglophobic Anxiety and the Anti-slavery Impetus*

Whitman's improbable bid to exchange sectionalism for Anglophobia becomes more understandable if one considers just how enervated American national culture could seem to mid-nineteenth-century observers on both sides of the Atlantic. As Robert Weisbuch has observed, the continuing transatlantic dominance of British culture suggested the nagging possibility that the American nation itself was a kind of sham, merely a fleeting political innovation doomed to fail upon its first substantial test. This paranoid intuition was reinforced constantly by inevitable and mostly invidious comparisons to Britain's more ancient and developed culture. Americans' covert anxieties about their own nation's authenticity help explain what Weisbuch accurately identified as "the savagery characterizing the American debunking of imported British wisdoms."<sup>5</sup> Whitman fancied and fashioned himself chief of the American savages, rejecting a civilized English poetic tradition to clear the ground for his self-construction as America's national bard.<sup>6</sup> As Price has convincingly argued, "[w]hereas other [antebellum] American poets deferred to the English tradition, Whitman challenged virtually all his 'foreign' predecessors" in favor of a uniquely American language inspired by his example.<sup>7</sup>

British barbs and books were hardly the greatest threats to American national integrity at a time when the nation was lunging headlong into a war with itself. Nevertheless, the virulent American sectionalism that preceded the Civil War proved particularly problematic for Whitman's advocacy of literary nationalism in the face of British pressure. After all, how could America claim a national culture distinct from Britain when it could not even maintain its internal cohesiveness? More to the point, how could Whitman champion a single unified American literature as a political inevitability when his early career coincided with the American union's most extreme episode of political fragmentation? While the need to re-declare American independence from Britain set the task for *Leaves of Grass*, the necessity of maintaining national unity in an era of fissiparous sectional divisions made that task urgent.

Whitman first engaged the sectional divide as a strong opponent of Southern slavery's Northern allies in the wake of the soon-to-be-notorious Compromise of 1850. Contemptuous of what he saw as the Whig party's acquiescence to slave power, Walter Whitman published

poems in March of 1850 in two New York newspapers critical of the compromise: William Cullen Bryant's *Evening Post* and Horace Greeley's *Tribune*. The first anti-slavery poem, "Song for a Certain Congressman," sarcastically attacked any "dough-faced politician" feckless enough to try to "pacify slave-breeding wrath" by "yielding all the matter."<sup>8</sup> The second, "Blood-Money," implicitly cast Daniel Webster, the powerful Northern Senator who had helped broker the compromise, as Judas Iscariot.<sup>9</sup> Whitman contributed two more political poems to the *Tribune* the following June. The first again castigated pusillanimous Northern collaborators. The second, "Resurgemus," eventually re-titled "Europe, the 72<sup>d</sup> and 73<sup>d</sup> Year of These States," appeared in subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*. This poem, which honored the democratic impulses behind the European revolutions of 1848, simultaneously urged Whitman's fellow citizens not to despair of liberty even when their own government was violently suppressing it. Significantly, "Resurgemus" adopts a transatlantic angle of vision that implicitly but clearly identified American slave power with repressive European regimes.<sup>10</sup> As a body, this anti-slavery work demonstrates two characteristics central to Whitman's future dealings with secession and eventually war: the poems pass over the South as the primary object of criticism, and they draw the transatlantic scene from the periphery to the center of the narrative of American slavery.

*Leaves of Grass* combined and developed these tendencies into a full-blown strategy that announced itself in an opening proclamation to the Anglophonic globe that, while America did not "repel the past," that past was no longer binding. Having "served its requirements" the old life of Europe "passed into the new life of the new forms," relinquishing its proud place to "the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches." This heir, of course, was a mature American nation that claimed as a birthright anything useful that preceded it, while refusing to allow the past to prescribe its present movements. For the author of the preface, the dawning modernity of the mid-nineteenth century belonged by rights to the new world and to a new sort of nation defined by its ability to balance its present diversity rather than by its rootedness in an ancient legacy, a country that was "not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations" (*LG* 1855, iii).

On the one hand, such confidence in national unity amounted to whistling in the dark, for the teeming nature of the American nation was about to tear it in two. Yet the existential denial of Anglo-American community that accompanied this affirmation lent it additional weight. It allowed Whitman to redirect America's rebellious instincts—currently engaged in prying the South free of the North—against a transatlantic union based on the United States' mostly British bloodlines. As Price

has noted, many antebellum poets excused American writers' present deficiencies by heralding a future greatness vouchsafed by, in Whittier's phrase, "the proud blood of England's mightiest [coursing] through their veins." Price points out that while other American writers "might reassure themselves with thoughts of their English blood, Whitman scorned the very idea" as yet another sign of American dependency.<sup>11</sup>

Whitman intended his determined rejection of British bloodlines and traditions to deflect the surging sectionalism that was complicating his attempt to become the bard of a unified nation in the 1850s. Faced with two obvious obstacles to the development of a national literature, transatlantic influence and domestic sectionalism, Whitman subsumed the latter within the former. By focusing on the British threat, Whitman addressed the struggle over slavery and sectionalism without allowing it to overwhelm his devotion to a union that included the South. Whitman encouraged his readers to meet apparent internal division not with the compromise advocated by the likes of Daniel Webster, but rather through an intersectional reprise of the War of Independence, a collective reclamation of the revolutionary Spirit of '76 in every arena of American life.

*Bones of King George: Whitman Internationalizes  
the National Crisis*

This transatlantic strategy reveals itself most clearly in a typically overlooked poem from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman later called "A Boston Ballad." The poem was inspired by the recent case of Anthony Burns who gained fame as a captured runaway. When Burns was arrested and tried in Boston in 1854, he quickly became a *cause célèbre*. Compliance with the Fugitive Slave Law forced the court to return Burns to Virginia under federal pressure, and newspapers detailed the fugitive's procession under guard past a mortified Boston populace. The poignancy of this sad parade arose from Boston's coerced complicity in this sudden appearance of slavery's power, and the dramatic confirmation that slavery could stain the streets of any town in the free states horrified Northern witnesses far and wide. The Burns Affair showed that the "nation-saving" Compromise of 1850 had cost Northerners control over their local communities; under its terms, the national union required free states to submit to a federal government still controlled by slavery's defenders. Little wonder then that many Northern observers saw the Burns case as an ominous incursion of a slave power they had previously associated with the distant South.

Whitman saw things differently. Whereas other Northerners identified the enforcement of the fugitive slave acts in Boston as a sign

of insidious Southern power, Whitman saw the hand of transatlantic influence. The publicity surrounding Burns's story enflamed Northern fury against the South, converting the abstractions of sectional strife into a specific shared concern among legions of new Northern readers. As a dedicated unionist, Whitman sought to redirect those passions away from Southerners and towards an English antagonist who was at once more distant and more intimate than the Southern slave power. Strange as it seems, Whitman interpreted the Burns sentence as evidence that many Northerners were still losing the old battle against British aristocratic and monarchical traditions—the same traditions he would assert were typical of British poetry and anathema to the American literary ear. Thus *Leaves of Grass* frames the Burns incident as an international struggle against British power and memory, rather than as a conflict with the South. "A Boston Ballad" expresses Whitman's yearning for a transatlantic struggle to replace the civil conflict that was dividing the very national readership *Leaves of Grass* hoped to cultivate.<sup>12</sup>

Jerome Loving, whose biography mines Whitman's early newspaper poems for insights into his antislavery beliefs, points out that the sensational account of the Burns case had become such a familiar news story by the time "A Boston Ballad" appeared that Whitman did not have to mention the case's details (174). Yet his audience's familiarity with the story also allowed Whitman to discuss the event without noting the primary cause of its fame: its revelation that Southern power, enforced by the federal government under the Compromise of 1850, had stretched into Northern territory and provoked a widespread Northern reaction. For Whitman, that very notoriety presented a major threat to the Union, and his poem attempted to reshape the powerful anti-Southern response to the case. In today's parlance, "A Boston Ballad" was an exercise in political "spin"; it tried to counter the potential for a sensationalized media event to widen the sectional divide by reinterpreting it as a sign of the need to renew America's independence from British values and traditions.

This transatlantic objective helps explain why Whitman chose to include the poem in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Hoping to serve as a national bard of both North and South, Whitman had little reason to once again raise this threatening specter of sectional conflict in 1855. But rather than avoid the Burns Affair, he crafted a poem that resurrected the old revolutionary struggle with Britain as an alternative to sectionalism. "A Boston Ballad" replaces the doughface Congressmen and pusillanimous Northern politicians, who had stood in for Southern villains in Whitman's early antislavery poems, with American Tories—shills for British values of monarchical rule and enforced social order. His earlier approach had presented slavery as an internal problem, an

inadequate commitment to American liberty that infected North as much as South. By 1855, Whitman was reframing the struggle over Southern slavery as a transatlantic conflict. “A Boston Ballad” put a new Anglophobic slant on the poet’s moderate anti-slavery agenda by dramatically refiguring the peculiar American institution as a cadaverous heirloom of Europe’s moldering vaults.

The poetic narrator of “A Boston Ballad” addresses his opening lines to “Jonathan,” a personification of the United States and precursor to “Uncle Sam,” whom nineteenth-century periodicals often paired with Britain’s “John Bull.” Whitman’s 1855 audience was familiar with Jonathan from newspapers, British as well as American, and especially from the cartoons of the illustrated press, where the character helped readers distinguish the United States from its transatlantic counterparts (see figure 1).<sup>13</sup> The narrator’s ironic positioning depends largely on his critical capacity to stand apart from an American “Jonathan” and other national icons in the poem, such as the stars and stripes and Yankee Doodle, in order derisively to measure the distance between the showy display of such symbols and the apparent lack of American commitment to the ideals they represented. This process of separation begins with the poem’s opening demand to “Clear the way there Jonathan! / Way for the President’s marshal! Way for the government cannon!” (LG 1855, 89). Throughout the poem, the narrator increasingly alienates the contemporary Boston scene from the national heritage of the revolution, culminating in a climactic ironic endorsement for the dead British king’s coronation—an act that symbolically repudiates the goals and sacrifices of the first American patriots.

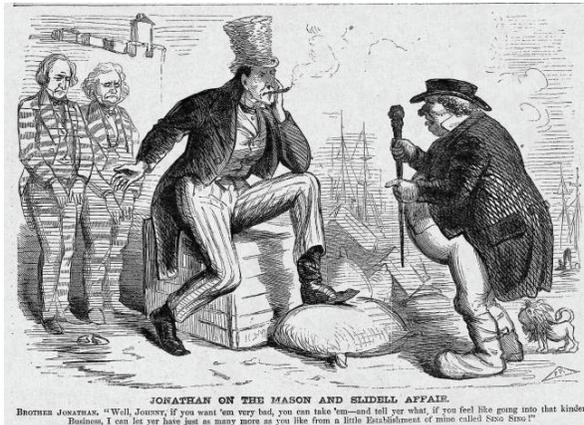


Figure 1. Jonathan and John Bull in *Harper’s Weekly*, January 11, 1862.

As he had in “Resurgemus,” Whitman in “A Boston Ballad” links a monarchical and repressive vision of the Old World to American slavery. Now, though, that foreign element appeared at the heart of Boston in the town’s tacit support of government-sanctioned slave-catchers. Alluding obliquely to the crowds gathered to watch Burns’s forced extradition, the poem’s narrator initially seems to support the government action with commands of his own. When the grief-stricken ghosts of America’s revolutionary heroes appear, he directs these “Yankee phantoms” “back to the hills” around Boston (*LG* 1855, 89). As nearly all of his readers would have been aware, these were the very hills that Daniel Webster, broker of the 1850 compromise, had identified as sacred pillars supporting the union of slave and free states in his famous “Bunker Hill Monument Address,” where he had championed deference to the sepulchers of the fathers as the height of patriotic duty. Webster’s 1825 commemoration speech, heralded throughout the antebellum era as one of the finest examples of American oratory, had been memorized by New England school children for decades as a celebration of the Revolution. Yet numerous scholars beginning with Emerson have pointed out that the address was in fact a staunch defense of traditionalism that set up the father’s tombs as a hedge against any fresh outbreak of revolutionary spirit. As Eduardo Cadava’s analysis has shown, Emerson’s introduction to *Nature* used Webster as a launching point for its own more radical interpretation of the Revolution’s meaning.<sup>14</sup>

Whitman’s figurative description of the ghostly train follows in this Emersonian vein by creatively identifying the fatal flaw in Webster’s unionist rhetoric: namely, the senator’s assumption that America’s revolutionary tradition could accommodate itself to any contemporary political position short of disunion. Burns became a test case for this theory, for it introduced into the streets of Boston an American Toryism every bit as conservative as the regime the revolutionary generation had bled to overthrow. Ultimately Whitman’s narrator unveils a bitterly sardonic critique of such shortsighted unionism, capped by the suggestion that the Boston patriots’ old foe, King George III, would have been perfectly comfortable among liberty’s compromisers, Whitman’s American contemporaries who had betrayed their revolutionary heritage during the Burns Affair.

By locating the only true patriots among the phantoms of the Revolutionary generation, Whitman hoists Webster on his own petard: by sacrificing liberty for expediency, the compromisers had secured a nominal union and sacrificed a republic founded on principle. Thus the narrator declares that the tearful revolutionaries forced to bring up the parade line at Burns’s extradition no longer “belong” in the streets of Boston. For a true representative of the town’s present spirit, the people

will have to “send a committee to England, / They shall get a grant from the Parliament, and go with a cart to the royal vault, / Dig out King George’s coffin . . . . unwrap him quick from the graveclothes . . . . box up his bones for a journey” (*LG* 1855, 89–90). Having identified Westminster Abbey as the sepulcher of present-day compromisers’ true fathers, Whitman ends the poem with a derisive image of the skeleton of George III reigning over a suddenly monarchical Boston, a once-proud community that had fired the shot heard round the world only a few generations before.

By the poem’s conclusion, Burns’s expulsion from Massachusetts appears as a royal mandate as well as a federal order, and Jonathan’s failure to resist such coercion in the final lines offers more than a symbol of ethical impotence coupled with greed. Like the solution to the 1850 crisis, the appeasers of the Burns Affair commended moral compromise for the sake of commerce and peace. But the poem goes further by equating that avaricious flexibility to a political surrender of the revolutionary separation from Britain and its king: “Stick your hands in your pockets Jonathan,” Whitman’s narrator advises, for “you are a made man from this day, / You are mighty cute . . . . and here is one of your bargains” (*LG* 1855, 90).

“A Boston Ballad” represented a pivot point in the crucial turn for the poet’s political outlook, which now identified transatlantic conflict as a means of mitigating intersectional strife through an anti-slavery poem that never levels an attack on Southern masters. Stripped of all specific reference to the Burns case, the poem’s sole subject now appears to be the evils of British influence. It contains no mention of slavery, or, more to the point, the South. Yet by including the poem within the 1855 volume in which it first appeared, Whitman also tied the American rejection of slavery, a social system fit for a king (George III, in this case), to his larger effort to liberate American poetry from its British precedents. The poem’s framing of Revolutionary memory reveals that Whitman is less interested in standing up to the South than in reinforcing American democracy’s antagonistic relationship to tradition, to the Old World, and especially to Britain. To the extent that Boston’s return of a fugitive to his master mitigated the essential transatlantic distinction upon which the U.S. had been founded, the Burns Affair appears, in *Leaves of Grass*, as a repudiation of the American Revolution and America’s democratic identity.

“A Boston Ballad” also adjusts the internationalism Whitman had adopted in “Resurgemus” four years before, for the new poem refuses to equate the American antislavery movement with a global tradition of liberty. Rather than a potential source of democratic allies, the outside world—“England” and “Parliament” as well as “King

George's coffin"—now appears as the primary danger to a distinctly American liberty. Similarly, while Whitman had at least alluded to the "slave-breeders" in "Song for a Certain Congressman," "A Boston Ballad" ironically decries American hypocrisy without explicitly citing the North's failure to oppose Southern slave power. Instead, the poem introduces an inflammatory British point of view that, without commenting on American slavery, hails the surrender of Anthony Burns as a display of American submissiveness and a refusal to defend American freedom. The poem's rhetoric encourages readers to guard American virtue against alien debauchers and their allies, appealing to Anglophobia rather than merely abolitionism, and thus improbably figures a sensationalized intersectional dispute as a conflict with a foreign power. Exhuming King George, Whitman taps into the distrust antebellum Northerners instinctively felt toward British meddling as well as their militant pride in the Revolutionary War, redirecting his readers' beligerence toward a distant nation and away from the South.

For a poet who would define himself as aesthetically and spiritually committed to the American Union, the intersectional hostility stirred up by the Burns Affair posed an obvious problem that "A Boston Ballad" was intended to ameliorate. The poem's strategic deployment of the old transatlantic foe neatly avoided sectionalism and made American slavery, somewhat counter-intuitively, a foreign-based threat to revolutionary memory. This same note would echo through the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, as Whitman routinely transmuted sectional divisions into a quarrel between the young democracy extolled in his poetry and aristocratic Europe's retrograde politics and invidious literary influence.

### *Kansas-Nebraska and the Promotion of Leaves of Grass*

While Whitman was doing his best to unify America in an ongoing revolution against British cultural pressure, other literary figures were already speaking of the opposing section as if it possessed a separate national culture. About the time Whitman wrote "A Boston Ballad," the Southern editor William Gilmore Simms asked, "Are we to draw our intellectual sustenance from the bosom of a distant and imperious relative, instead of from a mother?" This was precisely the sort of question Whitman would have asked concerning British influence, but the "imperious relative" Simms meant was not Britain but the North.<sup>15</sup> He had posed the question in the *Southern Quarterly Review* a few months after the Burns Affair, and, like Whitman's Burns poem, his concerns reflected the much larger political ferment spurred by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

Coming fast on the heels of the Compromise of 1850 and its attendant upheavals, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its results received unprecedented press coverage, as stories of the violence that erupted in Kansas convinced many Americans that the United States had already split into two distinct peoples. Whitman's attempts to attack slavery indirectly by presenting the Union with a transatlantic foe were originally presented as alternatives to the dominant narratives of sectional conflict that blared from the front pages of the same newspapers that had once published his anti-slavery poems. Given the centrality of the press in fanning the flames of sectional recriminations in the mid-50s, it is hardly surprising that Whitman used the press in 1856 to expand the strategy adopted in "A Boston Ballad." Here again he would introduce transatlantic hostility as a firebreak against the spreading domestic conflagration and an argument for a unified national literature based on unconventional poetry.

In writing "A Boston Ballad" Whitman signaled his determination to subordinate an energetic Northern sectionalism to an Anglophobic reaction against British traditions, and the increasing virulence of anti-Southern feeling throughout 1855 and 1856 did nothing to sway him from this strategy. As he set about publishing the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the poet would continue to present British influence as a greater threat to national identity than any sectarianism then existing within the American union—including that of the slaveholding South. In the poet's visionary future, the United States would transcend its own divisions by finalizing its poetic and political break with Britain, expanding inexorably into a real and figurative West, and eventually, like Israel of old, drawing all nations to itself. But to achieve this the entity that Whitman denominated "The States" would have to be "united."

Whitman later summarized the objectives of *Leaves of Grass* to Horace Traubel by insisting that "[a]bove everything else it stands for unity."<sup>16</sup> Yet this unity was political as much as poetic, and as often as not both forms of it depended on highlighting transatlantic divisions. Thus the antebellum editions of *Leaves of Grass* sought to convert sectional divisions into a quarrel between the young nation of Whitman's new poetry and Old England's abiding political and literary influence. In 1856, by provoking and then publicizing bewildered and hostile critical British responses to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman brought that foreign literary influence into clearer focus as an obstacle to America's emergence as a nation of independent readers.

It is easy to forget how little chance Whitman had of becoming particularly relevant to any nation when "An English and an American Poet" was published in October of 1855. *Leaves of Grass* might have slipped quietly off the literary stage but for Whitman's strenuous pub-

licizing that same month of a remarkable thank-you note. A complimentary copy of the first edition had made its way to Emerson, and the dean of transcendentalists had returned a short, but highly appreciative response. Rather than savoring it alone, Whitman sent it to Greeley, who had already publicly championed Whitman's "rare poetic gifts." The letter's appearance in the *Tribune* gave American and British reviewers impetus to plumb the book for the greatness the Sage of Concord had apparently seen in a rough poet from Brooklyn (Loving, 153).

Armed with these reviews, his own self-congratulatory assessments, and Emerson's all-important imprimatur, Whitman set himself the task of overcoming *Leaves of Grass's* initial commercial failure by making its first update impossible to overlook. Barely more than pocket-sized, the 1856 edition appended twenty new poems to the original twelve of the quarto-sized first edition. Brazenly drawing on an already overtaxed endorsement, Whitman in gold letters emblazoned the volume's spine with Emerson's generous salutation: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Whitman excised his original 1855 prose preface, replacing it with material that echoed the preface's prophecy that the United States required a new form of poetry and was itself a new kind of poem. That sentiment, along with many of the original preface's key passages, were reiterated in a celebration of American unity titled "Poem of Many In One" that began "A nation announcing itself" (*LG* 1856, 181) and insisted, "Mighty bards have done their work, and passed to other spheres, / One work forever remains, the work of surpassing all they have done" (182). In a telling revision of the first words of the first edition, "America does not repel the past," the poetic update offers a list of seeming qualifications that are in fact clarifications:

*America, curious toward foreign characters, stands sternly by its own,  
Stands removed, spacious, composite, sound,  
Sees itself promulger of men and women, initiates the true use of precedents,  
Does not repel them or the past . . .* (183) [italics mine]

"Poem of the Many in One," as a nationalist defense of diversity, clearly rebuked those who assumed the United States' pressing internal conflict would cause it to divide itself permanently. A crucial component of this proposition, however, lay in the sections' common ability to absorb or if necessary reject an alienated old world. If Whitman's America did not repel the past, it nevertheless entirely rejected the notion of an authoritative foreign tradition. It perceived its identity in the true men and women of the future rather than in any transatlantic heritage and initiated a new form of national memory through the "true use of precedents" by an authoritative present. All that had preceded contemporary America became intimate and potent only by becoming

subservient and “useful” to Whitman’s modern compatriots, the nation’s “own” who must remain merely curious about the “foreign characters” who were linked to “the past,” and who had so often overawed these novice nationalists (*LG* 1856,182-183).

As if to emphasize that this divide between old and new world extended to those who nominally shared the same language, “Leaves-Droppings,” another new addition to the 1856 edition, demonstrated the limited appeal Whitman’s poetry exercised on British readers—“foreign characters”—as well as the full endorsement of an unquestionably American character in Emerson. Essentially a reprise of reviews, “Leaves-Droppings” allowed Whitman to once again trumpet Emerson’s one-page letter and to publish his own thirteen-page response to it, in which the poet estimated “the average annual call for my Poems [at] ten or twenty thousand copies—more, quite likely.” Thus in this afterword did a relatively unknown literary renegade acknowledge the father of transcendentalism as “friend and master,” peer and forbear—and recruit him into further involvement in the author’s public relations campaign (*LG* 1856, 346).

These immoderate acts of self-aggrandizement did not immediately drive up Whitman’s sales, perhaps because they so obviously defied the conventions of polite society to which Emerson, for all his heterodoxy, still belonged. They did, however, make Whitman more difficult to ignore, and today they provide an important insight into the poet’s vision of his relationship to his audience. If, as Ivan Marki suggests, the original 1855 Preface had set up a test to determine whether the poems that followed constituted a new national poetry, the 1856 supplement presented proof that Whitman had passed that exam.<sup>17</sup> He wrote his reply to Emerson from the perspective of a graduated journeyman, and the reviews he reprinted supplied the rationale for his boasting, though not because they were all glowing in their praise. A willing self-promoter, Whitman nevertheless included several harshly dismissive critiques. In doing so he was not exhibiting a heretofore invisible humility, however, inasmuch as both the positive and negative reviews shared a common element that justified their inclusion. With only one exception, Whitman’s handpicked reviews explicitly characterized him as a national poet with a uniquely American and resolutely non-British modern voice. This conclusion is hardly surprising given that the bulk of these observations were offered either by the poet himself or by transatlantic readers. Of the nine reviews represented in “Leaves-Droppings” four are from British journals and two, including “An English and an American Poet,” are by an anonymous Whitman. In sum, Whitman’s British critics, perhaps especially those who condemned him, ratified his self-advertized image as the prototypical American.<sup>18</sup>

Framing his affiliation with Emerson as an alliance against a transatlantic threat represented an important step in Whitman's attempt to craft the original American literature that Emerson had encouraged in his early essays.<sup>19</sup> Though the two American writers disagreed on important points, Whitman was right to see Emerson as an advocate for liberating their native language from stolid British precedents. Indeed, their shared animus toward transatlantic influence helps explain Emerson's brief but effusive response to *Leaves of Grass*, in which he recognized Whitman as the voice of the United States and commended "the solid sense of the book" as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed"—implicitly to the realm of English letters and the Western tradition. Both Emerson and Whitman fused the self-reliance of the poetic prophet to the American revolutionary impulse to break from old Europe. Without question, trumpeting his association with Emerson gave the new poet valuable exposure, but Whitman used his fellow countryman for more than free publicity. By explicitly choosing the American transcendentalist over Tennyson as his master, and by taking up the mission to free American poetry from what he called "that huge English flow" in his self-published reply to Emerson in the 1856 edition's "Leaves-Droppings," Whitman presented his radically democratic chants as an alternative to the hierarchical society perpetuated by the English masters (*LG* 1856, 348). The exacting Tennyson might write well enough for his own little island, but Emerson and Whitman agreed that it would take an extravagant, spacious, unfettered poet of the present moment to write the national literature of the United States. Whitman understood that expressing Anglophobic disdain for British literary dominance was the shortest route to convincing readers in the age of Emerson that *Leaves of Grass* expressed an authentically American identity.

The Emersonian association worked for Whitman in more than one way. While he latched on to Emerson as an indisputably national literary figure, his master's significant transatlantic reputation also inspired the timely appearance of British reviews that reinforced the distinction between Whitman's American originality and the more imitative American poets that had come before. As one British reviewer of *Leaves of Grass* (perhaps ruefully) explained, "what Emerson has pronounced to be good must not be lightly treated" (*LG* 1856, 359). The first edition's Emerson-infused Preface likely encouraged such British readers to view this new "American prodigy" in the light of America's anxiety "that she has no national poet—that each one of her children of song has relied too much on European inspiration, and clung too fervently to the old conventionalities" (374). While some British critics responded more positively than others, all followed Emerson in recognizing Whitman as a uniquely American voice. In the first line of the

opinions section of “Leaves-Droppings,” the London *Weekly Dispatch* declares *Leaves of Grass* “one of the most extraordinary specimens of Yankee intelligence and American eccentricity in authorship, it is possible to conceive” (359).

Other British journals echoed the assessment, with the more negative British reviews identifying the nationalistic peculiarities of *Leaves of Grass* in order to characterize them as indictments of American society at large.<sup>20</sup> But such transatlantic censure of the poems’ lawless forms, moral indiscretions, and refusals of convention as profoundly *American* shortcomings unwittingly provided arrows for the national bard’s quiver. When foreign critics used this strange new poetry to condemn an inherently vulgar American democracy’s failure to honor established social as well as aesthetic systems, they inevitably suggested the essential unity between Whitman’s poetry and America’s democratic distinctiveness—and the unity of American national culture in general. Thus Whitman’s publication within the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* of several shocked and mildly condescending British appraisals helped make his case that America now possessed a poetry commensurate with its unique national identity. Even if *Leaves of Grass* sounded to one obtuse American reviewer like the “soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love,” British ears confirmed that the beast brayed in an American idiom (*LG* 1856, 384).

Such British scorn underscored Whitman’s grandiose attempt to rescue an authentically American literature from British masters, but transatlantic critical rejection also served to address the poet’s more immediate concerns about the 1850’s ongoing sectional crisis. The three antebellum editions encouraged American readers to acknowledge their shared nationalism even as they accepted Whitman as their national poet. This appeal depended on subordinating fractious sectional divisions to the more fundamental quarrel between the democratic nation his poetry represented and Old England’s continuing influence on its erstwhile colonies. Alienating America from British literary precedents reinforced the nationalist foundation of the federal union upon a uniquely American sense of history. Thus when the poet confided in his letter to Emerson that “[h]ere are to be attained results never elsewhere thought possible” (*LG* 1856, 349), he stipulated—in what at first seems a non sequitur—that American literature should not only “withdraw from precedents, and be directed to men and women [but] also to The States in their federalness,” that is, their sovereign commitment to constitutional unity. In the face of real political division, Whitman saw the desired break with Old World precedents as a means to achieve America’s ideal spiritual union of distinct “states”; merging his own favorite bodily metaphors with the familiar language of the Apostle

Paul, Whitman inserted the federal union into the church's traditional role as the mystical body of Christ, insisting to his American master that "the union of the parts of the body is not more necessary to their life than the union of These States is to their life" (350).<sup>21</sup>



Although Whitman's glorification of American nationalism can seem excessively jingoistic in retrospect, it occurred during a period when the Union's survival could not be taken for granted. Even as Whitman published his early paeans to an independent and unified American identity, transatlantic dependencies were becoming more vexing and late antebellum sectional conflicts were dividing the American body politic in two. Whitman was attempting to become the national poet for "The States," just when those states were least united. His evocations of mystical union responded to the threat of real disunion, and they were seldom more necessary than in August of 1856—the month when he claimed to have written his response to Emerson even though it was more than a year after he had received the original note of congratulations. In the intervening period the nation's sectional tensions had exploded in the Kansas territory. The newspapers that summer had gorged themselves on the violence as the conflict between free-soilers and pro-slavery forces spread from the western territory onto the floor of the U.S. Senate, where Preston Brooks had caned Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner senseless in May of that same year.

Several weeks after the September publication of the 1856 edition, threats that a Republican victory in the fall election would doom the Union helped give Democrat James Buchanan the presidency. While some celebrated the election of 1856 as an averted disaster, it signaled to many just how deeply the nation was divided and how volatile sectional hostilities had become. The Republicans quickly regrouped, taking a stronger line against the expansion of slave power.<sup>22</sup> Four years later, the very same week Whitman finished typesetting on the last pre-war edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the new party nominated Abraham Lincoln for president, setting in motion the decisive national break-up that Whitman had worked so hard to suppress.

Up until the last convention ballot was cast, the de facto leader of the Republican Party and favorite for the nomination had been William Henry Seward, the most powerful and prominent politician from Whitman's home state of New York, and one of the foremost opponents of British power. Although Whitman's transatlantic solution to sectionalism seems eccentric today, Seward had already legitimated the general thrust of the poet's agenda as governor and senator, and he would expand upon it as the most powerful member of Lincoln's cabinet. From the

1840s through 1860s Seward sought to dampen domestic tensions by railing against European monarchies and even occasionally beating a drum for a transatlantic war. In the run-up to the Civil War Seward had publically predicted Canada's eventual annexation, crusaded against political repression by the British establishment, and provoked British leaders and diplomats. As Lincoln's Secretary of State, Seward's public statements and private letters during the first months of the secession crisis would present transatlantic conflict as a common cause that could unite the sections, and once the war began he would foment transatlantic hostility to bolster Unionism at home. Although it was sometimes disingenuous, Seward's animosity toward Britain became legendary, prompting one observer to describe the secretary as "an ogre fully resolved to eat all Englishmen raw." Seward's transatlantic belligerence in the name of national unity validated Whitman's own determination to regard the primary threats to the Union as fundamentally external, despite all the countervailing evidence supplied by sectional partisanship and ultimately civil war.<sup>23</sup>

When such antagonism was returned in kind from abroad, Whitman would celebrate it as a spur to greater independence and increased dedication to a uniquely American identity taking shape in poetry as well as politics. At the height of internecine war with the South, the poet was still scanning the Eastern horizon for signs of foreign hostility. When he surmised around 1864 that it was Europe's "ardent prayer that the United States may be effectually split, crippled, and dismember'd by [the war]," he welcomed such animosity in much the same spirit in which he had embraced his first negative British reviews. In notes that later resurfaced in *Memoranda During the War* (1876), the poet reflected:

We are all too prone to wander from ourselves, to affect Europe, and watch her frowns and smiles. We need the hot lesson of general hatred, and henceforth must never forget it. Never again will we trust the moral sense nor abstract friendliness of a single government of the old world. (*MDW*, 63)

Thus the would-be national bard reiterated the central concerns of his poetic quest for American originality, giving voice to his hope that misplaced sectional aggression could be redirected abroad, issuing in an era of more confident nationalism in which the claims of both the American Union and American literature would be underwritten by the universally acknowledged fact of transatlantic distance.

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## NOTES

- 1 Whitman, "An English and an American Poet" [review of Alfred Tennyson, *Maud, and other Poems and Leaves of Grass*], *American Phrenological Journal* 22 (October 1855), 90-91. See Kenneth M. Price, *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23-26. The review was reprinted in Horace Traubel, Richard Maurice Bucke, and Thomas B. Harned, eds., *In Re Walt Whitman* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1893), 27-32, where it was officially revealed as having been written by Whitman. See also page 13 of the same volume.
- 2 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1855, 29; facsimiles of the first and second editions of *Leaves of Grass*, cited hereafter as *LG*, 1855 and *LG*, 1856, are available online at the *Walt Whitman Archive* (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org>).
- 3 Price, *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 4 Whitman's extension of this transatlantic approach to sectionalism through his war writings is the subject of an unpublished article and two chapters of my dissertation, "Twice-Divided Nation: The Civil War and National Memory in the Transatlantic World," The University of Iowa, 2008.
- 5 Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xvii.
- 6 Ironically, even as he built a body of work that eventually helped put the vexing question of American literary originality to rest, Whitman was gaining a level of international renown that made his early abdication of American poetry's transatlantic relevance appear premature. Paradoxically, the most American of poets would eventually do as much to disprove the exclusivity of American poetry as any other poet. For a survey of Whitman's remarkable international reception, see Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom, eds., *Walt Whitman & the World* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1995).
- 7 Price, *Whitman and Tradition*, 13. According to Price, Whitman set himself apart from other American writers in his willingness to dismiss all such precedents, including Shakespeare. Nevertheless, Whitman's self-review in the *American Phrenological Journal* suggests that British authors such as Tennyson and Shakespeare had also shown him how literature could define national culture by representing uniquely national histories and characters in *popular* poetry. Shakespeare's history plays or Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* explored the meaning of British identity even as they gave an ancient British heritage relevance to nineteenth-century audiences, and their appeal as a form of popular history resonated with Whitman's desire to seek out a popular audience for his own poetry, especially once he became a chronicler of a national war. In notes collected under the title *An American Primer*, Whitman had also explored the goal of constructing a distinctively American lexicon; in it he championed "renovated English speech" that could convert the British traditions into an imminently flexible, non-repressive, "grandly-lawless" form of "free speech" that was also "the body of the whole of the past." Whitman, *An American Primer, with Facsimiles of the Original Manuscript*, ed. Horace Traubel (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Press, 1904), 2; 6-7.

8 “Song for Certain Congressmen,” *New York Evening Post* (March 2, 1850), 2. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

9 “Blood-Money,” *New York Daily Tribune* (March 22, 1850), 1. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

10 “Blood Money” was published in both the *Tribune* and the *Evening Post*. Together with the publication of “Resurgemus,” the appearance of the third poem, “House of Friends,” in the *Tribune* on June 14 meant Greeley’s powerful paper, which was fast becoming the premier disseminator of Northern opinion, had put out three of Whitman’s anti-slavery poems in March and June of 1850. See Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 151-156.

11 Price, *Whitman and Tradition*, 14-15. This was more than a literary argument, for Whitman’s refusal of English bloodlines suggests that his vision of the American nation was not essentially Anglo-Saxon; thus a broadly political and anti-racist assumption laid the foundation for the radically innovative poetic project undertaken in *Leaves of Grass*.

12 Obviously, Whitman was not alone in considering slavery an aristocratic institution, for a good deal of the North’s free labor rhetoric operated by contrast to both European social hierarchies based on inherited wealth and to an American South that was often accused of reproducing this same sort of feudal system.

13 As Charles Adams observes in his collection of European press reports on America during the Civil War era, “‘Brother Jonathan’ was common in British cartoons” during the war, although the character was gradually superseded by Uncle Sam. Jonathan also became increasingly associated with the Northern war effort and was sometimes depicted in opposition to “Secesh” counterparts. More often, however, he appeared in explicit contrast to John Bull. See Charles Adams, *Slavery, Secession, and the Civil War: Views from the United Kingdom and Europe, 1856–1865* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 316. *Brother Jonathan* was also the title of a New York literary journal that specialized in reprinting the work of British writers for an American audience. Whitman had published poems there in the early 1840s as well as a letter in which he defended Charles Dickens for voicing moral concern for all classes. See “*Brother Jonathan*” in the “Whitman Poems in Periodicals” section of the *Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price ([www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org)).

14 Webster famously described Bunker Hill as a landscape pregnant with political meaning where the post-revolutionary generation stood “among the sepulchers of our fathers . . . on ground distinguished by their valor, their constancy, and the shedding of their blood . . . not to fix an uncertain date in our annals, nor to draw into notice an obscure and unknown spot. If our humble purpose had never been conceived, if we ourselves had never been born, the 17th of June, 1775, would have been a day on which all subsequent history would have poured its light, and the eminence where we stand a point of attraction to the eyes of successive generations.” Daniel Webster, “The First Bunker Hill Monument Oration,” *The World’s Famous Orations*, ed. William Jennings Bryan (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906), 9:25. For an analysis of Emerson’s radical objections to Webster’s genuflection, see Cadava’s *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 91-148.

15 *Southern Quarterly Review* (October 1854).

16 Horace Traubel. *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (London: Gay & Bird, 1906), 1:282.

17 Ivan Marki, "Leaves of Grass, 1855 edition," in J.R. Le Master and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 354-358.

18 Of the reviews reprinted from American periodicals, only those from the *Christian Spiritualist*, *Putnam's Monthly*, and the Boston *Intelligencer* were originally written by someone other than Whitman; they comprise fewer than six of the 25 printed pages of the "Opinions" section of "Leaves-Droppings" and do not detract from the general sense that, as Charles Eliot Norton wrote in *Putnam's* mostly negative review, "aside from America, there is no quarter of the universe where such a production [as *Leaves of Grass*] could have had a genesis" (*LG*, 1856, 369). Whitman had begun self-publishing criticism of his work in 1855 when he bound reviews from the *North American Review*, *Putnam's*, and *London Eclectic Review*—along with three anonymous self-reviews—at the end of the first edition when he bound up copies for a second binding. See Loving, 507n.

19 These included "The American Scholar," "Self-Reliance," "Nature" and "the Poet." Partly because Whitman later claimed Emerson had only a limited influence on *Leaves of Grass*, scholars have worked hard to establish the timing of Whitman's engagement with the older writer's work as well as thematic and structural correlations between Whitman's poetry and Emerson's thought: for an interpretation of this problem that sets Whitman's relationship to Emerson within the broader question of poetic originality and literary influence, see Price, *Whitman and Tradition*, 35-52.

20 The appalled reviewer in London's *The Critic* began, "We had ceased, we imagined to be surprised at anything that America could produce," and went on to argue that "[t]he words 'an American' [which appeared adjacent to the first reference to "Walt Whitman" in "Song of Myself"] are a surplusage" (*LG* 1856, 373). The United States, however, should not mistake *Leaves of Grass* for "the dawn of a thoroughly original literature, now there has arisen a man who scorns the Hellenic deities, who has no belief in, perhaps because he has no knowledge of, Homer and Shakespeare" (374-375). The *Examiner* sarcastically dismissed as signs of American vulgarity both "the new American prodigy" and American critics who dared compare him to Tennyson (378). The London *Leader* argues that "'[l]atter-day poetry' in America is of a very different character from the same manifestation in the old country," while pointing out that Whitman "has been received by a section of his countrymen as a sort of prophet, and by Englishmen as a kind of fool" (381).

21 The use of a rhetoric of the body to inspire political unity in the early Christian church informs many of the New Testament Epistles but is most dramatically preserved in the twelfth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which, like *Leaves of Grass*, describes spiritual unity amid the diversity of individual characteristics through an extended metaphor of the physical form of a human being. See I Corinthians 12:4-6; 12-20; significantly, these are also some of the key biblical passages in which the slavery of the ancient world is mentioned and were commonly cited in debates over American slavery in the 1850s, for Paul here denies that the slave's status can bar

inclusion within the Christian community at Corinth. For other examples of these central Pauline motifs, see Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 1:22-23, 4:15-16, 5:30; Colossians 1:18-24, 2:19, 3:15. The wartime experience intensified the conviction, already evident in Whitman's early appropriation of biblical language, that the American nation's ability to maintain its cohesiveness despite its diverse makeup constituted a kind of spiritual force, "a moral and political unity in variety" that was only made fully manifest in the midst of civil war. See Whitman, *Memoranda During the War* (Bedford, Mass: Applewood Books, 1993), 65. Hereafter, *MDW*.

22 James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 158-161.

23 Observation quoted in Howard Jones, *Union in Peril: The Crisis over British Intervention in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 11. Seward's public positions on many topics, from westward expansion to Canadian annexation to the possibility for transatlantic war, roughly mirrored several of Whitman's poetic pronouncements. See Brian Jenkins, *Britain & The War for the Union*. Vol. 1 (Montreal : McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974-1980), 39-40. See also Dean B. Mahin, *One War at a Time: The International Dimensions of the American Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2000), 4-12; and Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 342.