CANON AND CORPUS: THE MAKING OF AMERICAN POETRY

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that certain iconic poems have shaped the canon of American poetry. Not merely "canonical" in the usual sense, iconic poems enjoy a special cultural sanction and influence; they have become discourses themselves, generating our notions about American poetry. By "iconic" I mean extraordinarily famous works like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," and Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," that do not merely reside in the national memory but that have determined each poet's reception and thus have shaped the history of American poetry. Through case studies, I examine longstanding assumptions about these poets and the literary histories and myths surrounding their legendary texts. In carefully historicized readings of these and other iconic poems, I elucidate the pressure a single poem can exert on a poet's reputation and on American poetry broadly. I study the iconic poem in the context of the poet's corpus to demonstrate its role within the poet's oeuvre and the role assigned to it by canon makers. By tracing a poem's reception, I aim to identify the national, periodic, political, and formal boundaries these poems enforce and the distortions they create.

Because iconic poems often direct and justify our inclusions and exclusions, they

are of particular use in clarifying persistent obstacles to the canon reformation work of the last thirty years. While anthologies have become more inclusive in their selections and self-conscious about their ideological motives, many of the practices regarding individual poets and poems have remained unchanged over the last fifty years. Even as we include more poets in the canon, we often ironically do so by isolating a particular portion of the career, impulse in the work, or even a single poem, narrowing rather than expanding the horizon of our national literature. Through close readings situated in historical and cultural contexts, I illustrate the varying effects of iconic poems on the poet, other poems, and literary history.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: CANONS AND ICONS IN AMERICAN POETRY

During a 1983 reading, Gwendolyn Brooks recited her most famous poem, "We Real Cool." And yet, in her introduction to reading it, she complained that its popularity had eclipsed her other work: "I guess I'd better offer you 'We Real Cool.' (applause) Most young people know me *only* by *that* poem. I don't mean that I dislike it, but I would prefer it if the textbook compilers and the anthologists would assume that I'd written a few other poems" ("Introduction to 'We Real Cool'"). Brooks' reproach to anthologists raises a question that will concern me here: what effect do iconic poems have on a poet's corpus and on the larger story of American poetry? By "iconic" I mean extraordinarily famous and popular works like Brooks' "We Real Cool," Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," Whitman's "Song of Myself," and McKay's "If We Must Die," that do not merely reside in the national memory (many common readers can recite lines from these poems) but that have determined each poet's reception and thus have shaped the history of American poetry.

Brooks is exemplary of all the poets in my study because, as she was well aware, she has been virtually defined by one poem, a decidedly uncharacteristic poem she published in 1960, several years before her legendary shift from what she considered a white to a black aesthetic during the Black Liberation movement.[1] After her 1967 awakening to black cultural nationalism, Brooks attempted to align her poetics with her politics and claimed that her pre-1967 poems reflected her wrongheaded belief in

integrationist values, both social and literary. Yet though the poem predates her radicalization by almost a decade, critics have made it the signature piece of her Black Arts period—and, even more paradoxically, so has she. The head notes of most teaching anthologies valorize her post-1967 radical career, noting her repudiation of her earlier work as assimilationist and her suspicion of European verse forms. However, these same anthologies select her early poems despite promising an emphasis on her later career in their head notes.[2] "We Real Cool" helps them mediate the contradiction of Brooks' two "periods." On the one hand, they praise the poem for its apparent conformity to the goals of the black aesthetic, with its depiction of urban, lower-class black speakers and supposed vernacular voice, creating a portrayal, as Brooks defines her object after 1967, of and for an African American audience. On the other hand, they laud the poem for a formal complexity that would estrange it from a general audience: its syncopated rhythms, enjambment, alliteration, rhyme, ellipsis, caesura, irony, and complex metaphoric language. Thus, anthologists often read "We Real Cool" as a poem that unites Brooks' technical virtuosity with her more accessible black speech. Anthologizers want a real black poem and a real good poem, and their treatment of Brooks suggests they consider these mutually exclusive goods.

Ironically, while Brooks expresses a similar ambivalence regarding her early work, which she concluded was "white writing" (*Report* 177), she nevertheless invariably named early poems when asked what her new radical writing would be like. Regarding her work after 1967, Brooks asserted, "There *is* something different that I want to do. I want to write poems that will be non-compromising. I don't want to stop a concern with words doing good jobs, which has always been a concern of mine, but I want to write

poems that will be meaningful" to average black people in any setting (152). And for decades after 1967 Brooks would refer to "We Real Cool" as a poem that accomplished such a goal. The iconic status of "We Real Cool" in anthologies that largely acknowledge Brooks for her Black Arts movement poetry and the simultaneous resistance to including her work associated with that movement raise questions about canonization, evaluation, and national identity, particularly in the wake of attempts to reform the canon of American poetry, a project that has been underway for almost as long as the established canon ostensibly existed without serious challenge. Iconic poems like "We Real Cool" have created the canon, directing and justifying our inclusions and exclusions. Iconic poems are not merely canonical; they have become discourses themselves, generating the notions about and features of our national poetry and identity.

The history of American poetry, like that of any national literature, is a *story* that has as much to do with the reception of poems as with their production. We maintain a particular version of American poetry not only by reading and including poets and poems in our account but also by misreading and excluding them. In the last 30 or 40 years, critics have expanded and revised the canon of American poetry, an effort that has included the work of poets we have always remembered as well as those we have recently recovered, and asked us to question our investments in the poems. In many cases, we have canonized a poet by isolating a particular portion of the career, impulse in the work, or even a single poem. If we were to acknowledge the full range of a poet's work, we would often have to alter our understanding of the poet, the poems, and ultimately of American poetry. Since the canon reformation work in the 1980s, literary anthologies have become much more inclusive in their content and self-conscious about

their ideological motives and assumptions. Still, many of the practices regarding individual poets and selections of poems, as we can see from Brooks' case, have remained unchanged over the last fifty years. Examining our assumptions about poets and their work and taking into account the full range of their careers will inevitably illuminate how critics and poets manage questions of national identity.

During the social liberation movements of the 1960s, critics began to question the established literary canon, which excluded women, people of color, and working class writers among others. In fact, few standard American anthologies included works by these groups until the mid-1970s. Such exclusions foregrounded the relationship of literary canons to social, political, and economic power, challenging the authority of the Tradition, revealing canon-makers' investments in the works they chose and suggesting the constraints within which these works were valued. Thus attuned to the pressures that influence canon formation, scholars, editors, and teachers began to investigate how canons' "political functions account for their origins and limit their utility" (Von Hallberg 2-3). Many concluded that canons distort literary history by promoting "social norms and values" and by "virtue of [their] cultural standing" invest these exclusive norms and values with "force and continuity" (Lauter, "Race and Gender" 435). The primary way critics, editors, and teachers have attempted to correct these inaccuracies is to expand the canon to include more writers to reflect the diversity of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the US. The logic behind this effort is that more writers representing more identities and experiences would increase the scope of American literature, if not of national identity itself, a scope that the received canon had limited to middle-class white men: "Fundamental alteration of the canon to include significant numbers of minority and

white female writers will both reflect and help spur a widening revaluation of the significance of the experiences with which such writers are often concerned" (436).

A variety of factors had long controlled access to the canon of American literature, and powerful traditional structures resisted the reformation movement: aesthetics, professionalization, and historiographic frameworks all functioned to limit representation. Each of these discourses marginalized the values, experiences, and interests of traditionally excluded groups. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, immigrants, minorities, and women began to demand more civil rights and social power. Within the literary establishment, their demands were met with repression and skepticism, and institutional processes of professionalization that promoted a "male-centered culture and values for the college-educated leadership" were mobilized against change (444). Along with larger social efforts simultaneously to control and assimilate these groups, aesthetic systems arose to justify literature that conformed to the dominant culture's concerns. One aesthetic scheme valued literature for its example of "living in the world not domestic scenes" as a model to guide national and geo-political aspirations in the masculine, action-oriented world (444). The other aesthetic program, largely a result of the professionalization of literary studies, esteemed complexity in literature, which both required and justified specialized training to apprehend (451). Periodization reinforced social and political boundaries created by professionalization and aesthetics. Although periodic definitions like "Puritan Mind" or "Romanticism" come into and out of fashion, they retained their influence even during the canon reformation movement because they "shap[ed] significantly the ways in which we think about culture, emphasizing works that fit given frameworks, obscuring those which do not" (452). The

combined social, political, economic, and ideological power of these factors allowed privileged, mostly white and mostly male, scholars and critics to "dismiss lives and art beyond their experience, concentrating instead on scrutinizing with considerable ingenuity a narrow range of work," resulting in a narrow canon (452). The literary establishment was forced, however, to acknowledge the interestedness of any configuration of literary history. Thus, Cary Nelson argued in 1989 that "The full range of modern poetries is so great that it can't be narrativized in any unitary way. The textual field of modern poetry is a countervailing force to any consistent, uncontradictory presentation of its development" (*Repression* 7).

Scholars, critics, editors, and teachers continue to struggle with reforming the canon of American literature, particularly its presentation in anthologies, the most accessible and ubiquitous representations of the literary canon. Paul Lauter proposes several possibilities, arguing that "the major issue is not assimilating some long-forgotten works or authors into the existing categories; rather, it is reconstructing historical understanding to make it inclusive and explanatory instead of narrowing and arbitrary" ("Race and Gender" 456). Lauter attributes the distortions of American literary history to a mainstream and tributary model of American literature that cannot grant the diversity of American society. According to the normative model, women and minorities comprise the "marginal" in American literature, whereas in reality they constitute the majority of people in the US. To correct this error, Lauter advocates a comparative approach to American literary studies, asking scholars to be aware of multiple audiences, conventions, functions, histories, and subjects ("Literatures" 32). Timothy Morris, like Lauter and Nelson, argues that American poetry cannot be taught as a continuous or

unified field. Therefore, to avoid replicating a literary tradition that marginalizes the majority, he privileges the reader's "present," the actual context of reception, an approach that emphasizes texts over "authors' overall styles, reified . . . poetic genres, or constructions of periods, or movements" (20-21). Such efforts to rectify the faults of canon formation favor a discontinuity that can encompass the multiplicity of American society. Morris embraces this work and concludes that American literary studies are "evolving toward such a discontinuity, if slowly; newer anthologies like the evolving *Norton* and the *Heath* contain progressively more poets and fewer poems by each, with more anonymous, traditional and 'folk' verse of all periods, challenging the trend begun in 1950 . . . of including fewer poets but more of each one. Teaching will gradually follow this course away from the major-author approach, but not without a struggle" (20-21). Certainly, many general anthologies have followed this model, yet the narrowing effects of canon formation continue.

Including fewer poems by more poets has not adequately reformed the canon, nor has it addressed problems of periodization or evaluative standards. In fact, this apparently inclusive practice contributes to the very narrowing it is meant to counteract. If fewer poems must represent a poet, it is likely that a particular portion of the career or impulse in a poet's work will be isolated. In fact, critics have alerted us to continued distortions even as the canon has expanded, largely the result of prioritizing single features of a poet's corpus in the service of a more or less unifying narrative, even the new narratives of reform. Betsy Erkkila argues in *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* that "recent feminist representations of women's literary history have tended to romanticize, maternalize, essentialize, and eternalize women writers and the

relationships among them in ways that have worked to reconstitute the very gender stereotypes and polarities that have been historically the ground of women's oppression" (3-4). Constructing a coherent and progressive tradition of women's writing can effectively universalize poets' work, diminishing the variety of poetry by writers as distinct as Emily Dickinson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Muriel Rukeyser, Elizabeth Bishop, and Adrienne Rich. Moreover, Aldon Lynn Nielsen argues in *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* that American literary studies remains committed to a poetics of "authentic marginality" in the form of a "requisite 'realism' of language practice [that] must be adhered to by black authors if they are to be canonized as proper literary representations of the experiences of social marginality" (8). Efforts to ascribe a stable marginal identity and politics suppress "poetic practices that might disrupt totalizing theories of what constitutes black vernacular" (9-10). Nielson, too, cautions against including fewer works by more poets to correct the canon. He claims that though "we have vastly expanded the course and print space dedicated to examinations of black literature," this has been "accompanied by a strict narrowing of attention to a few select works by black poets," resulting in the "same texts of black poetry appear[ing] on syllabus after syllabus . . . ensuring the continued presence of a few texts in our newly reformed canons while also ensuring the invisibility of others" (10). This obscures not only the range of many poets but also the participation of African American poets in avant-garde movements before the Black Arts movement (40-41). Gwendolyn Brooks' "We Real Cool" is a case study in this process.

Over time, single poems can become standards of inclusion themselves. Timothy Morris argues that the canon reformation of the last decades has "by no means effected a

complete or clear break with the received canon and the motives for its assembly" (x). This is the case because those who seek to expand the canon often justify their revisions by referring to the received tradition of canonical writers, "smoothing the rupture with the past and continuing to confirm the preferences of senior scholars" (x), concealing instances of discontinuity. In other words, we preserve the same texts and writers, albeit for different reasons, resulting in the continuation of our received canonical works to operate as standards of inclusion. Morris points out that this process creates, specifically for American poetry, a system by which to judge works canonical or valuable. Its system of values is comprised of "originality, organicism, and monologic language" or the "poetics of presence" (xi). Those works that "most directly and immediately present the writer as a living voice, came to be a guarantee of the nationalism of canonical texts" (xi). Morris identifies Walt Whitman as the "greatest exemplar" of this national poetics by which all "post-Whitmanic poets were valued" to the extent that they embraced or rejected these values. Morris contends that the "poetics of presence," which has "so directed the course of American literary history that most canonical poets have been valued for a personally identifiable voice in their poetry," finally serves the purposes of obscuring differences of class, culture, gender, sexuality, and historical facts (25). If we acknowledge that a single poem, "Song of Myself," has come to represent Whitman's entire poetics, we can begin to recognize the power of an iconic poem to stand not just for a poet but also for a national poetry.

The distortions created by canon formation and iconic poems, even without the conventional apparatuses of anthologies or literary history (periods, movements, or other categorizations), are particularly resilient because, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith has

pointed out, all literary works "bear the marks and signs of their prior valuing and evaluations" and so are "always to some extent pre-evaluated for us" ("Value / Evaluation" 182). Evaluative frames shape our experience of a poem's value, "often foregrounding certain of their possible effects and operating as signs . . . of their performance of certain functions" (182). This fact should give us pause to reflect on our processes of inclusion and expansion that rely on limited or "representative" notions of poets. Further, we must investigate our canonical texts in both in the context of a poet's corpus and in the context of the canon itself. Though many scholars propose theoretical approaches that acknowledge the historically contingent nature of canon formation and reveal its misrepresentations, treating literary history and canonization as cultural constructs devised by particular people and groups in particular contexts to reflect their particular values, few include the "marks and signs" of prior evaluation in their own efforts to move beyond persistent fictions; these fictions, after all, are the *facts* of our literary history and have had tremendous effects on the reception of poems, poets, and the story of American poetry. Even more serious, they have had a significant impact on the composition of poems since poets have responded to the American poetic tradition in their work. Incorporating these narratives into our consideration of poets contributes to our efforts to present an inclusive picture of our national poetry.

Widely known and available to both readers and non-readers alike far beyond the specialized reading and evaluative practices of college graduates and specialists, iconic poems and the myths and debates surrounding them are recited and rehearsed in popular culture through television, movies, plays, various internet media such as YouTube, and print media. The culture is steeped in these poems, and these poems are steeped in the

culture. By their very ubiquity, then, they require a response from artists, critics, common readers, and even non-readers. This response gives them vast power to shape social narratives, particularly notions of poetry—what constitutes poetry, who is a poet, and to whom is poetry available. These myths organize experience and make meaning. For example, the myth of Longfellow is integral to reading a poem like Marianne Moore's "Silence" in which the speaker invokes Longfellow to signify class and generational boundaries: "My father used to say, / 'Superior people never make long visits, / have to be shown Longfellow's grave / or the glass flowers at Harvard" (1-4). Longfellow here stands (with graves and artificial flowers) for poor breeding, sentimentality, and cliché. Indeed, the distortions created by iconic poems cannot be discarded even as we attempt to move beyond them because they adhere not just in the poems themselves but in other poems, in biographies, and in our national literary history.

And yet precisely because their public reach is so extensive, iconic poems are particularly helpful in revealing the impact of the processes of canon formation and our commitments to various critical paradigms. Their popularity both contributes to and resists canon stabilization. Though their effects on a poet's corpus are similar, not all iconic poems are canonical. Indeed, their fame persists despite the professional considerations that support and harmonize critical methods and texts, offering insight into the motives for including and excluding poets and poems. In fact, just as often as a poem's iconic status is ground for inclusion in the canon, it is ground for expulsion, as in the case of "Paul Revere's Ride," which was banished from the canon because of its popularity despite its iconic power in the early twentieth century. Whereas canons exemplify institutionally sanctioned values, iconic poems can either conform to or

challenge these values—often performing both jobs over time—exposing the inconsistencies that canons would obscure.

Iconic poems have governed the reception of poets and shaped the history of American poetry. Popular poems influence literary history as a poet's biography and corpus inevitably become closely associated with the iconic poem, especially when we read poems in isolation. They form the parameters of what is understandable and acceptable about a poet. Thus, our critical discussions often repeat tired truisms about a poem and poet, forcing her or his entire career into conformity with a single poem or portion of the career, often casting a work beyond the famous text as immature, derivative, weak, or a diminished poetic vision, charges that have been aimed at each poet in my study. Such commonplaces inform the master narrative of American poetry, obscuring shifts of value and evaluation and concealing discontinuities in a poet's career. Moreover, many poems enter or exit the canon as representatives of particular features, impulses, or periods of American poetry such as modernism, postmodernism, the "Puritan mind" or the "frontier spirit," rubrics that emphasize various stereotypes and privilege certain experiences and critical methods (Lauter, "Race and Gender" 453). Yet even as categories are replaced or challenged, they cling to poems that entered the canon to represent them. Acknowledging poems' specificity allows critics to address the formal, thematic, and political multiplicity of the poem and the poet. Additionally, an emphasis on close reading of iconic poems—as opposed to simply invoking the title as if that says it all—challenges the stereotypes they have come to embody. For example, even reading "Paul Revere's Ride" out of context, if we read it carefully, should challenge our clichés

about it. Yet reading a text in isolation can only dispute stubborn narratives so far. We must also contextualize iconic poems within a poet's body of work and the canon itself.

Reading an iconic poem in the context of a poet's corpus can illuminate our investments in the poem and the poet as well as exposes continuities and discontinuities within a poet's work. The reception history of each poem in my study illustrates the different consequences of the reception of each poet. My first chapter, "Falling by the Wayside: National Myths in Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn*," investigates the tenacity of our narrative of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as a nationalist schoolroom poet, largely the result of reading "Paul Revere's Ride" out of context. In our received understanding of Longfellow, we have traditionally put him in the service of a particular narrative of national identity, misrepresenting both Longfellow and the story of American poetry. The still-echoing "Listen, my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere" (1-2) conditions our sense of Longfellow as a persona and a poet. Angela Sorby points out that "Paul Revere's Ride" was linked to the rise of the public school system in postbellum America, a time when the nation sought to strengthen institutions and solidify a national identity "unfettered by sectional, ethnic, or racial conflict" (3-4) in the wake of the divisions of the Civil War (1). Indeed, Sorby's reading of the poem suggests how it "narrativizes and produces a national spirit that underwrites national history" (23). However, she risks repeating this national myth herself by largely ignoring Longfellow's own deployment of the poem, specifically in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863). Disregarding the poem's final context is the only way to maintain a simplified story of both Longfellow and his life work. We will continually read Longfellow as a

nationalist poet seeking to discipline citizens and imbue them with a common history unless we come to terms with his remarkable variety and complexity.

Reading beyond an iconic poem to understand its role within a poet's oeuvre often confirms that what is important to a poet is less important to critics. Additionally, a more carefully historicized reading can bring to light the pressure a single poem can exert not just on a poet's reputation but also on American poetry itself. Like Longfellow, Whitman addressed a nation struggling to come to terms with divisions that threatened the young republic's existence prior to and after the Civil War. Hoping to unify the nation, Whitman initially proposed a democratic model for society based on (national) diversity, exemplified by "Song of Myself," believing that the interaction of differences could "generate" a progressive and dynamic culture: "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world. / Out of the dimness opposite equals advance" (43-35). It is this Whitman we are most familiar with. Moreover, it is this one poem that has come to define not only Whitman but American poetry. My second chapter, "Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' and the Definition of American Poetry," investigates Whitman's sharply contrasting models of national unity. This chapter compares the heterogeneous program of "Song of Myself" to Whitman's later, homogenous model of political identity that would unite the country through the bonds of duty and love rather than through (sexual) difference as the nation was torn apart by the Civil War. Our valued image of Whitman comprises but a small portion of his career. In fact, by 1860, he had abandoned his famous inclusiveness in favor of exclusiveness, and by the end of the war he promoted a culture based on martial unity.

While reading beyond an iconic poem can reveal much about our valuation of a poem and a poet, acknowledging the distortions it creates can also illuminate a poet's attempts to intervene and manage its reception. My fourth chapter, "'If We Must Die': Icon and Myth of Claude McKay's Poetry," examines the received account of McKay and "If We Must Die," which enforces clearly demarcated national, periodic, political, and formal boundaries. Moving past these parameters to examine his other poetry uncovers the importance of his Jamaican poetry to American literary history. Additionally, examining McKay's changing attitudes toward his famous poem over the course of his career demonstrates the complex ways it affected his later aesthetic goals. McKay's place in the story of American poetry is assured by his influential work during the early part of the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance. While it makes some sense that the critical discussion of McKay as an American voice would begin with his most influential writing in the United States, the ways his earlier work is characterized (or often ignored) points to our desire for a radical poet who is American through and through, a poet to star in our story of American poetry as social protest. Critics often attribute McKay's protest poetry to his experiences with racism in the United States, most evident in the popular sonnet "If We Must Die" (1919), and read his work as part of an American tradition of political protest. Because of the fame of "If We Must Die," and the myriad uses the poem has been put to, the one-dimensional notion of McKay as a protest sonneteer has played a part in forming American poetry. The focus on this McKay allows us to place him firmly within the context of the Harlem Renaissance to tell a story of African American resistance to racial violence in the United States in the 1920s. But our compulsive interest

in McKay's protest sonnets limits our reading of his work and diminishes the diversity of American poetry.

The trend toward the poetry anthology as the authority on American poetic history has only accelerated in the age of canon reformation. Thus the conditions that result from and create iconic poems, the practice of including a single work to represent a poet's career or period of literary history, will certainly continue. Anne Ferry argues that this situation, in the past and today, conditions the way we read and encounter poetry: "anthologies have become part of the experience of anyone who reads poetry at all" (1). We cannot disregard canons in our efforts to reform them because they play an integral role in understanding and creating American poetry. The distortions that result from the processes and effects of canonization create narratives that often stand in stark contrast to the actual work of poets and thus impoverish our understanding of American poetry. Reading beyond an iconic poem challenges these misrepresentations, destabilizing our calcified notions of periods, movements, nationality, the careers of poets, and poetry itself. However, we will inevitably create our own distortions, and these must be incorporated into our study of poetry even as we attempt to correct them. In the case studies that follow, I hope to consider what other inclusions might be possible in American poetry and to question familiar characterizations of our national poetic canon.

According to Cary Nelson, "Our taxonomies are unavoidably political" (*Repression* 180). Our traditional categorizations act as interpretive frameworks that suppress relationships between disparate materials, aesthetics, identities, and politics even as they facilitate our understanding and cultural preservation. Acknowledging a greater range of the works of these poets and the processes of their canonization compels critics

to consider new ways to engage a poet's career, ways that contest a coherent story of American poetry, a coherent national identity. By reading and thinking beyond the signature poems of American literature, we can enrich our understanding of poets, poems, and national identity.

Notes

[1] The 1967 Fisk University Writers' Conference in Nashville was transformational for Brooks. It was there that she first encountered the meeting of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. In *Report from Part One* she recounts the "blood-boiling surprise . . . in store" for her at the conference as she perceived the confidence and sense of purpose of the young black activist artists and scholars: " I was in some inscrutable and uncomfortable wonderland. I didn't know what to make of what surrounded me, of what with hot sureness began almost immediately to invade me" (85). She expressed her newfound consciousness in a hopefulness and resolve toward her own life: "I—who have 'gone the gamut' from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new black sun—am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress" (86). The impact of her new awareness on her poetry was her conclusion that her work before 1967 was "white writing" and that her work after that year would keep her community in mind, focusing on black experience: "Today I am conscious of the fact that—my people are black people; it is to them that I appeal for understanding" (177).

[2] Paul Lauter and his fellow editors of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1998) include six of Brooks' poems, five of which predate her radicalization. Carey Nelson's *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000) divides his Brooks selections between her two periods, devoting equal space to each. However, he includes Brooks' sonnet sequence as a single entry, "Gay Chaps at the Bar" (1945), which consists of twelve poems. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair's *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003) includes eleven poems of which eight predate her radicalization. Finally, Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke's *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004) includes nine of Brooks' poems, two of which are from her radical period. The selections in these anthologies focus on her career before 1968 and all include "We Real Cool."

CHAPTER II

FALLING BY THE WAYSIDE: NATIONAL MYTHS IN LONGFELLOW'S *TALES OF A WAYSIDE INN*

"Listen my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere": even today, 150 years after its publication and 50 years since dropping out of the canon, many know the opening lines of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride."[1] The poem recounts Paul Revere's ride to "every Middlesex village and farm" (13), warning of a British invasion that would ultimately launch the American colonies toward political independence. Written to remind nineteenth-century Americans of their revolutionary past on the eve of the Civil War, the narrative poem offered citizens a tale of common origins and identity, and a watchword that, if remembered "In the hour of darkness and peril and need" (127), would bolster the patriotic spirit. Indeed, the poem creates an analogy between the dark eve of the Revolutionary War and contemporary crises and aims to reassure citizens of continued union. Originally published in *The Atlantic* in 1863 and included as the Landlord's inaugural story of *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, the poem has provided such an enduring chronicle of heroism and nationhood that it is no longer just a poem but a national myth.

The poem's opening lines establish the importance of the date, hero, and history for a younger generation. The story begins with our hero and his fellow patriot planning to warn the people of an immanent British attack. The poem's opening fixation on the darkness and stillness of the night creates a sense of foreboding, emphasizing the

compatriots' peril. The moon bathes the scene in an eerie glow as it rises behind the "Somerset, British man-of-war," shaping its silhouette in a suggestion of the ship's menace and of British tyranny over a land and people that would be free: "A phantom ship, with each mast and spar / Across the moon like a prison bar" (20-21). The silence of Boston increases the giddy tension as Revere's nameless partner wanders the streets listening for signs of enemy mobilization, climbs the church tower, and, before communicating the discovery of his reconnaissance, pauses to gaze at the churchyard graves below, figured as a bivouac and thus literalizing the dead of night but also anticipating the national martyrdom ahead:

> In their night-encampment on the hill,
> Wrapped in silence so deep and still
> That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,
> The watchful night-wind, as it went
> Creeping along from tent to tent,
> And seeming to whisper, "All is well!" (42-48)

And yet in spite of the dreariness of the graveyard and the dreadful uncertainty of the moment, the wind carries a reassuring word. Revere and his famed steed restively await the signal on the other shore in a similar silence. The signal appears, Revere hesitates only long enough to confirm, and then rides into the night and into national myth.

"Paul Revere's Ride" is a poem of striking movement, and its memorable cadences enhance its mythic force. Everything about the poem's structure calls up Revere's ride through the countryside and its inescapable familiarity. Composed in tetrameter and filled with rising anapests and iambs, the poem's rhythm imitates the

prancing gallop of Revere's steed through the villages. Repeated sounds strengthen the poem's regular rhythms. End-stopped lines with almost entirely exact rhymes support the argument of historical predictability. The repeated words and sound effects create echoes, intensifying the tempo and the aural imagery of the steed's gallop through country lanes and across the landscape, melding sound and sense, reality and myth:

> And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
> Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet:
> That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light
> The fate of a nation was riding that night;
> And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,
> Kindled the land into flame with its heat. (75-80)

The combination of sound and rhythm gives the poem a familiar and inevitable character worthy of its historical content. The unabating gallop and echoes drive toward the story's well-known end, the Battles of Lexington and Concord. Indeed, the fusion of sound and sense, form and content gives the impression of Revere (and the nation) riding through time and space toward fate rather than toward history.

In fact, the narrator interrupts the tale—"You know the rest" (111)—offering only a brief summary of the climactic battle. The persistent rhythms and rhymes suggest that we do not need myriad historical details leading to victory. The very existence of the Americans reading the poem makes the battle's outcome manifest. Thus, the Landlord assumes that we know the story. And because we know the story, we know our national roots and responsibilities. Just as on April 18, 1775, America's future was uncertain until

Paul Revere mustered patriots to defend the nation, so too will patriots save us in our 1860s uncertainty:

> Through all our history, to the last,
> In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
> The people waken and listen to hear
> The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
> And the midnight message of Paul Revere. (126-30)

What the poem gives us, then, is a national catechism to convince us that we know the "midnight message of Paul Revere" and assure us of the country's preservation (130). We have the certainty of fated victory, a statement of national faith that emboldens us to look beyond contemporary divisions toward certain triumph.

Like the Landlord's presumption of his listeners' familiarity with the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the poem's fame has eclipsed its context and preempted the full story of Longfellow's work, ironically, leading us to disregard the poem and the poet because we think we "know the rest"—creating yet another national myth: the myth of Longfellow. Charles C. Calhoun speaks to the poem's iconic status, noting that Longfellow's "sprightliest work" overshadows not just his corpus but *Tales* itself: "Few readers today know more than its opening charge—the resounding verbal hoof-beats of 'Paul Revere's Ride.' Doubtless, they would be surprised to discover that the most famous of his poems is merely the first of twenty-two linked narratives in a great variety of meter and tone, several of them delightfully comic" (230). Alfred Kreymborg acknowledges the poem's fame but, incredibly, attributes it to a turn *away* from politics: "It was due to this escape from the war that the poem owed its popularity. The first ballad

[of *Tales*] is at once the most popular and least important" (109). Newton Arvin, however, celebrates the poem's oddness and virility, qualities he thinks are overlooked because of its popularity: "'Paul Revere's Ride,' which might also have been a short story . . . is of course a tale of vigorous action and movement, a patriotic ballad; and its extreme familiarity ought not to blind us to the admirable impetus with which its galloping lines in sprung rhythm tell the tale of this celebrated ride . . . or to the . . . strangeness and ghostliness that give it another dimension than the strenuous" (216). Calling the poem a national icon, Dana Gioia argues that its ubiquitousness in American culture makes any list of its adaptations or uses prohibitive (66).

This popularity was taken up by the emerging public school system in postbellum America, a time when the U.S. sought to strengthen institutions and solidify a national identity "unfettered by sectional, ethnic, or racial conflict" (Sorby 3-4) in the wake of the divisions of the Civil War (1). Angela Sorby argues that the poem "circulated easily through the American public school system because it seemed to offer patriotism cleansed of politics," a suitable work "in the context of a secular classroom with a mandate to strengthen the Union" through assimilation (16). The poem is well suited to the local schoolroom because of its instructional frame ("Listen my children and you shall hear"), precise history ("On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five" [3]), and memorable rhythm. It viscerally connects readers to key historical events (14-23). Sorby concludes that the poem "works as a blueprint for the nation as an imagined community, mapping out the space and time of the nation, giving readers access to a version of American history that they can all experience together, simultaneously" as an "affective, mysterious experience" across time (24).[2] Many thousands of Americans were introduced

to the poem and to Longfellow in this setting. The poem has been regarded as both an anodyne to national crisis and a foundational national myth.

Indeed, the still-echoing "Listen, my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere" conditions our reading of Longfellow. Throughout the last century of reading his work, writers and critics have caricatured him in their efforts to revitalize poetry. Differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of modern life and poetics initially inspired the dismissal of Longfellow. Modernists seeking to distinguish their poetry from that of an earlier generation argued that his verse emblematized the worn-out poetry of the turn of the century—sentimental, clichéd, European, prosaic. For example, in 1915 Van Wyck Brooks decried Longfellow's well-known themes: "Longfellow is to poetry what the barrel-organ is to music" (qtd. Arvin 320). So banal was the poet thought to be by the 1920s that Lewis Mumford suggested "[o]ne might remove Longfellow [from American poetry] without changing a single possibility of American life; had Whitman died in the cradle, however, the possibilities of American life would have been definitely impoverished" (qtd. in Arvin 321). Though Kreymborg insists on Longfellow's centrality in American literature, he attributes this to cultural immaturity among the masses: "Never before or since has an American poet been endowed by Nature with so genial a faculty for catching the fancy of the children of all ages. The supreme ease through which he wooed the popular heart was only equaled by the ease through which that organ succumbed" (97). Further, Kreymborg charges that the public's credulity and taste for conformity rewarded the poet's "extremely childish" ballads for their metrical regularity, which promoted "regular thought and action" and little intellectual effort: "Naïveté was also the qualifying factor he addressed in his

countrymen. He fed their ignorance on European books felt through his own, and the childlike public devoured him devotedly" (99). By the 1930s, this childlike public became literally children according to Ludwig Lewisohn: "Who, except wretched school-children, now reads Longfellow? . . . The thing to establish in America . . . is not that Longfellow was a very small poet, but that he did not partake of the poetic character at all" (qtd. in Arvin 321). In the 1950s, George Arms suggested that Longfellow's failings resulted from an unquestioning innocence: "Even if he had conscious purpose, he probably did not have enough of it . . . . Just as Longfellow many times misses that perfection of mood which can have poetic pleasure for us, so his placid faith in mankind and his lack of profundity will leave us with a sense of inadequacy" (217). Such a figure could hardly serve as a model for poets confronting modern life because, according to Arvin, his work lacks the "moral intensities" of Hawthorne and Melville, the "individualism" of Emerson, and the "program of permanent cultural revolution" of Whitman (320). Without originality and depth, then, Longfellow offered little to modernity.

Left-leaning writers felt that his presumed aloofness from the dramatic upheavals of his own time disqualified him as a model for addressing the social challenges of modernity that required intense political commitment in art. V. F. Parrington characterized him as morally weak, "not made for battle . . . and causes commanded an unwilling allegiance" and charged that "[o]ne could scarcely have lived more detached from [nineteenth-century] America, more effectively insulated against the electric currents of the times" (qtd. in Arvin 321). This view of Longfellow prompted V. F. Calverton (George Goetz) to assert that his "Americanisms . . . were of that sentimental

school which derived its impetus from the philosophy of sweetness and light" (qtd. in Arvin 322) rather than social and political realities. Granville Hicks points to Longfellow's late translations as evidence of his withdrawal from American politics in favor of the fireside: "[He] became important chiefly as transmitter and interpreter of other literatures, steadily increasing the distance between him and the realities of contemporary life, meeting his fellow citizens only upon the level of domestic sentimentality." In his 1963 biography, Arvin concluded that Longfellow's "sensitiveness to the intellectual and moral currents of his time was not great. And, given the nadir to which his reputation had now sunk, one can understand the disdain for him and his work of the Marxist critics of the thirties" (322).

Similarly, critical practices of the twentieth century were antipathetic to Longfellow. Changing literary inclinations and professional approaches to literature combined in what Arvin calls the "revolution of taste" associated with T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and others, who dismissed nineteenth-century romanticism in favor of a seventeenth-century poetry that they prized as condensed, "intellectually intense," and "paradoxical" (323). According to Arvin, critical tastes had changed so completely in favor of "such qualities as ambiguity, tension, and irony" and "indirectness, indefiniteness, obliqueness" that romantic poetry was cast aside (323). Finally, Longfellow's supposed political disengagement, childishness, and tepid moralizing made him a tool of the conservative forces of the schoolroom, encouraging present-day critics to read later institutional objectives into the poems themselves. This added a nationalist aspect to Longfellow, leaving unquestioned the congruence of the moral authority of the poet and the curriculum, supporting the dismissive claims of

modernist poets, New Critics, and Marxists. For instance, Joan Shelley Rubin asserts that the "appropriation of New England schoolroom poetry . . . to foster moral sense in schoolchildren . . . was consonant with the ethical purposes the poets themselves conferred on their work" (114). According to Rubin, Longfellow's prosy didacticism enforced the Protestant moral prescriptions of "self-sacrifice, cheerfulness, and service to the community" (113). However, though certainly diffuse through his work, these elements in their original contexts often resist the nationalist discipline of the *fin-de-siècle* American classroom.

Tales of a Wayside Inn, the work in which "Paul Revere's Ride" finds its final home, has had a somewhat different reception history from his other poetry. Critics laud *Tales* for its originality and breadth, only then to fit it into the larger narrative of Longfellow's docility, sentimentality, and detachment from American culture and political life. In contrast to his largely unenthusiastic estimation of Longfellow, Kreymborg praises *Tales* as the poet's "most enduring work" because of its biographical characters, "aura of humor," and "masculinity," qualities that give the stories "dramatic fire" and, in at least one poem, "psychological searchings," in spite of his "didacticism, sentimental taints and derivative strains" (110-11). Though the book breaks new ground for Longfellow, according to Kreymborg, there is still evidence of "the gentle lover of lovely things" removing himself "as always, from the life nearest at hand" (102).[3] Arvin approved of the work's "mild romantic charm" and the variety of sources, tones, and verse forms that demonstrate a surprising versatility in such a minor poet. Yet the book suffers from the "easiness of intercourse" among the largely middle class group of characters (206-07) and because Longfellow's "mind seems to have turned more eagerly

than ever to Italy and Italian literature" (211) than to America. Gioia commends it above the poet's other work because it "makes the most convincing case for Longfellow's narrative mastery" and the diversity of the storytellers who draw on their ethnic traditions for literary sources (89). Though the "narrative framework is a bit rickety," the stories are "generally splendid," presenting, for Gioia, the poet "at his most endearingly human": "One senses here as in none of the other long poems his famous personal charm, warmth, and humor."[4] Gioia says he avoids listing Longfellow's weaknesses because they are "too well known to belabor" (81).

A century's worth of criticism, then, has given us a poet and poem of uninspired didacticism, rife with sentimentality and nationalist pandering, an account that confirms a story of modern American poetry that casts Whitman as its progenitor and first citizen in opposition to mainstream nineteenth-century American poetry. Because popular poems such as "Psalm of Life," *The Song of Hiawatha*, and "Paul Revere's Ride" had quickly become iconic during his lifetime and standard recitation-pieces in American schools after the Civil War" (Sorby xiii), we are inclined to read all Longfellow's work as confirming the ideology of self-reliance, patriotism, and Manifest Destiny associated with his chestnut poems. Such readings have become so much a part of our story of American poetry that we have essentially stopped reading Longfellow. Reeling off poems like "Paul Revere's Ride" in isolation has allowed us to dismiss Longfellow as a poet of light, nationalist verse, concealing his ambivalence about American culture, and distorting our understanding of his work and the larger story of American poetry. In fact, he is politically engaged, skeptical of nationalism, culturally inclusive, and possesses a deep sense of history.

In January of 1864, despairing about his literary fame and posterity, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "You can tell, far better than I, whether there is anything worth having in literary reputation; and whether the best achievements seem to have any substance after they grow cold."[5] Responding to this, Longfellow wrote in his journal: "A letter from Hawthorne. He says he is not well, and is evidently out of spirits" (3: 29). Later that year, as the tide of the Civil War turned in favor of the Union Army, Longfellow's thoughts returned to Hawthorne's concern about the lasting value of literature, and he composed "The Wind Over the Chimney," a poem that questions the importance of culture and literary reputation and the role of poetry in nineteenth-century America.

In "The Wind Over the Chimney," the speaker fearfully hovers over a dying fire, reluctant to leave it even though the hour is late. The hissing of the fading embers inspires nostalgia for his edenic youth and the songs of youth. The insistent noise of the wind interrupts his reverie, as the voices of the fire and the wind debate the value of literature and culture. The sound of the wind recalls the legend of the "trumpets of Iskander," an allusion to Leigh Hunt's poem, "The Trumpets of Doolkarnein" (1852), a favorite of Longfellow. There, the trumpets represent the impermanence of human works in the face of the natural world: "Great was thy cunning, but its wit was small / Compar'd with Nature's least and gentlest courses. / Fears and false creeds may fright the realms awhile; / But Heaven and Earth abide their time, and smile" (67-70). In response to the wind's allusion, the fire in Longfellow's poem "seems to murmur some great name"

encouraging the speaker to "Aspire!" toward eternal renown (18-19). However, the night wind answers that such ambitions are empty. The fire rebuts by casting light on books "of old days, / Written by masters of the art" (26-27), which retain their power to move readers, and claims that the great poets of the past determine the future. Again, the wind replies that within the span of ages, change is inevitable and continual, and poetry, the product of dead cultures and nations, is transitory: "At God's forges incandescent / Mighty hammers beat incessant, / [Books] are but the flying sparks" (39-42). The wind further maintains that both the poets and their ideas are dead, having only lived for a brief time. At this, the fire dies, prompting the wind "louder, wilder," to claim that the value of poetry is dubious.[6] And yet, after these arguments, and the ostensible victory of the wind, the speaker asserts that even if poetry has no lasting worth, "Its reward is in the doing, / And the rapture of pursuing / Is the prize the vanquished gain" (58-60).

This last line might recall the final stanza of another Longfellow chestnut, "A Psalm of Life" ("Let us, then, be up and doing . . . / Still achieving, still pursuing, / Learn to labor and to wait" [33-36]) that has come to exemplify his characteristically American notion of work (and his claim that poetry is work). Although not entirely off the mark, in the context of "The Wind Over the Chimney," the "reward . . . in the doing" strikes a somewhat different note. While the speaker's last lines appear to concede the wind's point, accepting that poetry is ephemeral but that work is its own reward, the poem belies this resolution. In fact, the examples offered by the wind to demonstrate the transitory nature of art are themselves allusions to cultural productions—poetry, myth—and thus the wind contradicts its own argument that cultural work has no lasting value. As the wind makes its argument ever more forcefully, it paradoxically becomes more uncertain

about its position: "And alone the night-wind drear / Clamors louder, wilder, *vaguer*" (italics added, 51-52). In spite of its insistent protests, the wind cannot make its point intelligible without recourse to the poetry and myths of the past, suggesting that culture itself is allusive, built upon the past, even upon defunct nations and dead poets. The fact inadvertently revealed by the wind, that cultural identities and national literatures are the result of multiple histories, stories, and experiences converging and diverging over time, is a key aspect of Longfellow's poetic and political project: his distinctive combination of universalism and American national identity.

When rehearsing Longfellow's notion of American identity, critics rarely discuss poems of supposed light verse like "The Wind Over the Chimney," situated at the hearthside and not overtly declaring their national concerns. Even poems like "Paul Revere's Ride" are domesticated in our reading. For example, even Sorby's meticulous investigation of the schoolroom's use of "Paul Revere's Ride" risks repeating our myth of Longfellow by ignoring his contextualization of the poem in *Tales of a Wayside Inn.* Her reading overlooks what we know of the speaker of "Paul Revere's Ride" and the larger context of the poem, facts that should reshape our reading. Sorby's imagined community of the schoolroom may have its own uses for the poem, but we must not neglect the poem's specific community in *Tales.* The nation Longfellow constructs is ancient and geographically and culturally diverse; it is the very difficulty of figuring a common history in nineteenth-century America that he depicts, and "Paul Revere's Ride" is only a part of this.

The entirety of *Tales of a Wayside Inn,* and even more particularly the "Preludes" and "Interludes" between the tales, confirms that Longfellow did not wish "Paul Revere's

Ride" to stand as history. It is the very context of "sectional, ethnic," and "racial conflict" that Longfellow emphasizes by placing the poem in *Tales*, a setting where characters who do not share common histories or identities discuss national spirit and history. Instead, the characters in *Tales* recognize "Paul Revere's Ride" as a national myth and voice their opinions about it, demonstrating the impact of such tellings. Longfellow's collection, in fact, acknowledges difference in scenes that debate, if not tolerate, different histories, cultures, religions, and politics. Though Longfellow predictably excludes African Americans, women, and Native Americans from his inn, the more surprising inclusion of multiple cultural identities nevertheless offers the potential for the nation to embrace a wide range of experiences rather than deny them. For Longfellow, the negotiation of difference creates new forms of identity, a view that he continued to articulate even after the Civil War when other poets undertaking a project of national inclusiveness, like Walt Whitman, sought to overcome rather than confront difference.

Also tempting us to read the poem in isolation is the vexing task of identifying a coherent structure to the remarkably eclectic *Tales*. The stories' provenances span the globe. The characters are often churlish, creating long, uncomfortable silences, and they reveal little fellowship considering the bucolic setting and fireside scenes. In short, their reactions to the stories (and to each other) range from outright condemnation to glib praise to pleasure. At times, they attempt to stave off dissent; at others, they give vent to their hostile feelings. Longfellow allows both conflict and accord and persistently undermines consensus with each succeeding story. The relationship among the tales seems obvious at times and opaque at others. Often functioning comparatively, stories follow associations on a theme, place, figure, or other point of contact, but just as

frequently, they change the subject. The tellings and discussions can exhaust the group and make them grouchy, inspiring sufferance rather than harmony. In spite of the ostensible inclusiveness of Longfellow's inn, the preludes and interludes betray an anxiety over such a gathering that even the authoritative framing of the Landlord's nationalistic tales cannot reconcile. The frame, it turns out, is only indicative of the Landlord's ethnocentrism.

The assembly's discord, in fact, recalls nothing so much as the historical context of "Paul Revere's Ride," appearing at a time of intense sectional strife on the eve of the Civil War. In *Tales* the nation is far from imaginatively unified. Longfellow began writing the separate poems for *Tales of a Wayside Inn* as early as 1859 and continued to add to the work until 1873. The fact that he turned his attention to the project over such a long span of time suggests that there was something unfinished in these tales of a national literature.[7] Moodiness, ambiguity, and a concern over cultural death, not sentimental national myths, ultimately characterize the collection, providing a logic to the otherwise contradictory volume. The nation itself is at issue throughout *Tales*: the nation's history appears incomplete, and this goes to the heart of Longfellow's vision of American poetry. Crucial to understanding this complex book and the rest of his corpus are Longfellow's essays, speeches, and fictional accounts of national literature: these speak to his hope for American letters to reflect the nation's diversity and his fear that national conflicts will remove the nation from history altogether.

Involved since 1825 in the debates over the value and direction of American literature, Longfellow did not suffer from doubts about the "substance" of his work like Hawthorne; in fact, his vision of the progress of a national literature was an argument for

the inherent value of his own writing. Some 30 years before the publication of *Tales*, in his review of a new edition of Sidney's "Defence of Poesey," he asserted the value of all literary work to the nation no matter its scope: "A thousand little rills, springing up on the retired walks of life, go to swell the rushing tide of national glory and prosperity; and whoever in the solitude of his chamber, and by even a single effort of his mind, has added to the intellectual pre-eminence of his country, has not lived in vain, nor to himself alone" ("Defence" 61). A scholar and translator, he adhered to a long and cosmopolitan view of literary history, which greatly informed his conception of literature and identity. He held that a nation's lasting value and identity reside in its literature even more than in its public and economic institutions:

> Every book written by a citizen of a country belongs to its national literature. But the term has also a more peculiar and appropriate definition; for when we say that the literature of a country is *national*, we mean that it bears upon it the stamp of national character. We refer to those distinguishing features, which literature receives from the spirit of a nation,—from its scenery and climate, its historic peculiarities, which are the result of no positive institutions, and, in a word, from the thousand external circumstances, which either directly or indirectly exert an influence upon the literature of a nation, and give it a marked and individual character, distinct from that of the literature of other nations. (69-70)

In other words, nationality reflects much more than the political organization of a particular state; region, history, contemporary events, personal attitudes, comprise the "spirit of a nation" reflected in its literature. Therefore, any literary work produced by any citizen contributes to the cultural life of the nation, making concerns over the merit of

one's work with regard to a national literature beside the point. Nationality in literature is a given, whereas a nation's literary impulse is not.

He began to articulate his concerns over the country's fixation on national identity at the expense of a national literature early in his career and elaborated them throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century in an effort to manage his anxiety over his society's estimation of literature and scholarship, the problems of nationalism and sectarianism, cultural diversity, and ultimately cultural survival. From the 1820s to the late 1840s, Longfellow outlined and revised his thoughts about American literature in various prose works: "The Literary Spirit of Our Country" (1825), originally published in *The United States Literary Gazette*; his graduation Address to Bowdoin College, "Our Native Writers" (1825); "Defence of Poetry" (1832), published in the *North American Review*; and his novel, *Kavanagh* (1849). From his earliest writings, then, he argued that literary work was vital to national progress, identity, and survival but also tenuous and continually evolving.

In "The Literary Spirit of Our Country," Longfellow asserts his distinction between political and cultural revolution to refute the charge that America lacks the history and traditions that give rise to great art. The same impulse toward political freedom "that animated our fathers" and "still directs the popular mind to honorable enterprise" (24-25) will inevitably result in a great literature. Though the popular mind reflects the political and cultural identity of nineteenth-century Americans, he argues a subtle difference between the political and cultural components of national identity, particularly for a youthful country: "Revolutions in letters are, indeed, the most gradual of all revolutions. A single day may decide the fate of an empire . . . but years must

elapse, ere any sensible changes can be introduced in literature." Here Longfellow begins his lifelong struggle to combine and yet, paradoxically, differentiate politics, literature, and culture. While there is certainly a nationality derived from political tradition, it coexists, according to him, with a cultural identity associated with other literatures and customs that changes slowly. Both live in the popular mind, but literature attaches itself to the less ephemeral "reasonings . . . whose subjects are not influenced by individual caprice." In other words, the individual innovator does not change culture; only the "motion of the popular mind" directs cultural changes over the span of generations.

Because of the United States' relative youth, Longfellow argues, its literature does not have established masters. This fact answers the charge that America has not yet produced a great literature, and he offers a democratic rationale for this. Rather than provide a list of significant American poets to disprove accusations of artistic dearth, he changes the terms of the debate, arguing that a literary elite, limited to "the few gifted minds," would be detrimental to the formation of a national literature. Thus, the lack of American masters provides an ideal situation for cultural development:

> I do not say, that this would advance to any great extent our national literature, nor even so far as it would be advanced by a more moderate, but a more universal excellence in our literary men:–for high excellence in one individual brings with it a hopelessness of success to others, and damps for a season the ardour of competition. (25)

A diversity of moderate writers surpasses the distinguished accomplishment of a few in generating a democratic national literature. America would benefit from encouraging the

many to expand the breadth of poetry and allow itself time to develop a stable national character.

And yet arguing the necessity of time to establish literary excellence, he expresses anxiety regarding the succession of civilizations. Responding to the charge "that America is not classic ground . . . not rich in those fine classic allusions, which mould the poetic mind . . . and give to genius the materials for superior exertion" (26-27), he suggests "the lapse of another century will give to us those rich associations . . . and will make America in some degree a classic land" as the ruins of Native America impart "gradual impressions" to poets. Longfellow accepted the popular nineteenth-century theory that the Native American mound-builders were "the people of an ancient race, that has long since ceased to be" who "left 'a record in the desert;' and the tumuli, that hold their mouldering bones." Additionally, he believed that the genocide practiced against the native peoples of the United States was part of a natural succession of races and incorporated this justification of Manifest Destiny into his literary theory: "And when our native Indians, who are fast perishing from the earth, shall have left forever the borders of our wide lakes and rivers . . . the dim light of tradition will rest upon those places, which have seen the glory of their battles, and heard the voice of their eloquence;–and our land will become, indeed, a classic ground." Even in this earliest writing, Longfellow conceived of American literature as the result of centuries of development, of a multitude of authors and traditions, and part of a natural cycle entailing the death and decay of civilizations. In this context, he hoped the richness of American culture would produce a literature that would remain as a survival of a great civilization, America's own "record in the desert." Yet over the following decades rampant nationalism and sectarianism

distressed him because he believed narrow-minded certainty about American identity would inhibit the development of a cultural legacy.

In his Graduation Address, "Our Native Writers," Longfellow begins to make the case for an original American character.[8] While the country "can boast of nothing farther than a first beginning of a national literature" linked to the country's political, cultural, and geographic space, "whatever there is peculiar to us," English influence holds sway over American letters because of the nation's youth: "We cannot yet throw off our literary allegiance to Old England, we cannot yet remove from our shelves every book which is not strictly and truly American" (237-38). Yet there is value to slow growth because "[o]ur very poverty in this respect will have a tendency to give a national character to our literature" (238) since American writers must search their own land and history. His speech, too, registers ambivalence regarding the passing of civilizations, urging that "the tomb of the Indian prophet be as hallowed as the sepulchres of ancient kings," expressing both hope that American poetry will similarly endure and apprehension at the prospect of America's inevitable death. Finally, he affirms his belief that over time American literature, fostered by the "civil and religious freedoms of our country," will become a great world literature: "Our Native Writers . . . foretell that whatever is noble and attractive in our national character will one day be associated with the sweet magic of Poetry" (237). "Our Native Writers" registers Longfellow's deepening view of American intellectual achievement as the result of centuries and part of a cycle of rising and falling civilizations that fashions national character.[9]

"Defence of Poetry" elaborates the crucial role of literature to national survival. It justifies the importance of an intellectual culture to the nation's standing, explaining the

development of literature in the American context, its role in civil life, and its potential contribution to world culture. In the seven years between this essay and his earlier statements about the condition of American letters, Longfellow had gone from being a young college graduate to a well-traveled scholar (he studied languages in Europe from 1826-1829) and had become the professor of Modern Languages at Bowdoin College. His education, scholarship, and experiences in Europe and at Bowdoin shaped his ideas about the social role of literature. He defends the utility of poetry, foregrounding its social function, connection to national identity, and cultural posterity. For him, the country's focus on material abundance rather than its place in history endangered its legacy:

> the true glory of a nation consists not in the extent of its territory, the pomp of its forests . . . but in the extent of its mental power . . . :–not in the circumstances of fortune, but in the attributes of the soul:–not in the corruptible, transitory, and perishable forms of matter, but in the incorruptible, the permanent, the imperishable mind. True greatness is the greatness of the mind;–the true glory of a nation is moral and intellectual pre-eminence. (59)

Accordingly, he insists on the utility of artistic pursuits "which, though more remote in their effects and more imperceptible in their operation, are . . . wider in their influence, more certain in their results, and more intimately connected with the common weal" (60-61). The "ornamental arts of life," he argues, are "not merely ornamental" but useful because they instruct and amuse humanity as well as contribute to national glory.

Longfellow links foreign and bygone literatures to the project of future intellectual preeminence by relating them to American cultural identity. For instance,

cultural productions shape identity over time, connecting the past and the present to the future: "The impressions produced by poetry upon national character at any period, are again re-produced, and give a more pronounced and individual character to the poetry of a subsequent period" (67-68). Such a view defuses contemporary conflicts about American art by deferring a definition of a national literature to the future, discovered by succeeding civilizations. Additionally, because cultural identity is defined through literary effort, poetry surpasses history in explicating nationality to future generations: history "makes known the impulses of the popular mind, through certain events resulting from them; [poetry] displays the more immediate presence of that mind, visible in its action, and presaging those events" (67-68).[10] Events do not necessarily depict identity, and thus history alone cannot demonstrate what makes a nation a nation for Longfellow; hence, poetry achieves an importance unrecognized by nineteenth-century critics. Now fully explaining his concept of the popular mind first expressed in 1825, Longfellow argues for the utility of poetry by demonstrating a process of cultural formation sensitive to the realities of America, one that can shape the future.[11] Thus, American poets cannot dismiss their immigrant heritage because it provides them with access to an aspect of the universal—that which unites them with other times. The nation originated from native sources and from sources around the globe, and they resonate in our literary output. To acknowledge these foundations provides an accurate record of the "popular mind," helping us to understand both our contemporary moment and our influence on future civilizations.[12]

Longfellow's call for literature to move with the popular mind assumes an American milieu distinguished by cultural diversity. In fact, as he was composing

Evangeline, his first extended depiction of America's complex cultural identity, he wrote in his journal on January 6, 1847 about the relationship between national character and the universal:

> Much is said now-a-days of a national literature. Does it mean anything? Such a literature is the expression of national character. We have, or shall have, a composite one, embracing French, Spanish, Irish, English, Scotch, and German peculiarities. Whoever has within himself most of these is our truly national writer. In other words, whoever is most universal is also most national. (2: 73-74)[13]

Such a formulation recalls Longfellow's studies in Germany in the 1820s where he first encountered Weimar Classicism and German Romanticism. Cosmopolitan literary theories like Goethe's *Weltliteratur* and August Wilhelm Schlegel's and Friedrich Schlegel's integrative internationalism appealed to Longfellow because they seemed to reflect the American context and to offer a conception of the country's literature as simultaneously national and universal.[14] Thus, to imbue their writing with "a more national character," American poets need only "write more naturally . . . from their own feelings and impressions, from the influence of what they see around them, and not from any pre-conceived notions of what poetry ought to be" ("Defence" 74-75). He counsels poets to make American poetry "original, characteristic, and national," without resorting to caricatures: "it is not necessary that the war-whoop should ring in every line, and every page be rife with scalps, tomahawks and wampum. Shade of Tecumseh forbid!—The whole secret lies in Sidney's maxim,—'Look in thy heart and write'" (69).

But this sudden juxtaposition of "scalps, tomahawks and wampum" and Sidney's maxim creates a distinction between native and Anglo-American culture, a distinction that contradicts what Longfellow is arguing for—a national poetry that is both universal and particular, reflecting the multicultural traditions of the United States and using native subjects to express a people's "thoughts and feelings," "manners, customs, and characters" (67). Moreover, his invocation of clichés about Native Americans in the same breath with chastising the childishness of American writers, "which tends to give an effeminate and unmanly character to our literature" (77), dismisses both such American writers and native America as adolescent. For American writers to use native material is to *play* Indian, a juvenile, effeminate, and inauthentic display that does not build upon a presumably more authentic, masculine, and mature foundation (European literature).[15] Finally, his remarks suggest that indigenous is *not* native, not in the heart of American writers.

Such provisos, however, reveal another contradiction between Longfellow's proscriptions to other writers and his own poetic practice. On the one hand, he clearly marks a difference between the use of American native material (war-whoops, scalps, tomahawks, wampum) and Sidney's maxim ("Look in thy heart and write") for American poets. On the other, he wrote *Hiawatha*, *Evangeline*, and *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, works that use cultural material far removed from his own circumstances. He urges Americans to write "from their own feelings and impressions," from their own culture, and implies that Native American material does not belong to them. Yet it does somehow belong to him. What accounts for this contradiction? Although he encouraged others to write from their own experiences, he also appears to accept as a matter of course that poets'

experiences differ according to class and culture. His knowledge of foreign languages and literatures apparently accorded him a special license with material foreign to him.[16] Yet while giving himself much latitude to construct poems from disparate materials, he goes to some lengths to avoid mere ventriloquism by crediting his sources and foregrounding his additions to them. For example, in a work like *Tales*, characters reveal the stories' origins. In *Hiawatha*, too, Longfellow acknowledges his sources and calls attention to his adaptations in his notes to the first publication.

Seventeen years later, Longfellow recapitulates his concerns about the state of American letters in his novel, *Kavanagh*, his clearest statement about the dangers of nationalism and "pre-conceived notions of what poetry ought to be" to a national literature and the possibilities of a multicultural national identity.[17] Although often dismissed as a shallow romance about small-town New England, the novel is deeply concerned with culture, literature, and nation. The dialogue between Mr. Hathaway, an aspiring editor seeking "to raise the character of American literature" (365), and Mr. Churchill, a clear proxy for Longfellow, a schoolmaster and aspiring poet and romance writer, dramatizes these issues. Mr. Hathaway's intention to cultivate American literature depends upon defining a national literature according to external features of the United States, such as its westward vastness, the grandeur of its scenery, and its technological and economic innovation (366). While both agree that literature reflects a nation, Mr. Churchill argues that "Literature is rather an image of the spiritual world, than of the physical . . . of the internal, rather than the external. Mountains, lakes, and rivers are . . . only its scenery and decorations, not its substance and essence." From this difference of opinion, the characters set about debating the possibilities of American literature.

Longfellow believed that chauvinism would dangerously compromise the potential of America's literature to take its place in history and world culture. For example, in response to Mr. Hathaway's assertion that American literature should be distinctive, "If it is not national, it is nothing" (367), Mr. Churchill argues that a national literature is more than what is overtly characteristic: "Nationality is a good thing to a certain extent, but universality is better." Universality, as we have seen, correlates to Longfellow's notion of the popular mind, the connection of the contemporary moment to the past, a cultural identity that emerges slowly as these elements become integrated with current experiences. To this end, Churchill argues, "[a]ll that is best in the great poets of all countries is not what is national in them, but what is universal. Their roots are in their native soil; but their branches wave in the unpatriotic air, that speaks the same language unto all men."

True nationality results from poets writing about the world around them and uniting this with the universal, the intellectual traditions of their ancestors. Mr. Churchill concedes that nationality is a good thing in moderation (though "Mere nationality is often ridiculous"), the risk of being overly nationalistic is that "it rather limits one's views of truth" (367-68), truth being universal. Cultural and historical differences, not protestations of national distinction, constitute nationality. To wit, he argues that Americans are "very like the English,–are, in fact, English under a different sky,–I do not see how our literature can be very different from theirs." Thus, Longfellow foregrounds the relationship among cultural identity, literature, and language—the natural progress of the popular mind transmitted over time through art: "Westward from hand to hand we pass the lighted torch, but it was lighted at the old domestic fireside of England."

Accordingly, since American literature should be a reflection of cultural identity rather than nationalistic sloganeering, it does not merely ape English styles, subjects, and forms: "It is not an imitation, but . . . a continuation" (368). When attempting to define a cultural identity, of which literature is a part, Mr. Churchill counsels the broadest possible scope: "No literature is complete until the language in which it is written is dead. We may well be proud of our task and of our position. Let us see if we can build in any way worthy of our forefathers." This summarizes Longfellow's anxieties about American literature: sectarianism and nationalism threaten the connection of American writing to history. He believed that through literature, a repository of these histories, we can enrich our own identity; American literature should strive to find its place among these traditions to flourish long after the language it is written in has died. Mr. Churchill expresses Longfellow's desire to leave the construction of American literature and cultural identity open ended. Being overly particular about identity isolates literature, preventing it from incorporating broader traditions that span centuries and geographies. Thus, a definition of American identity, reflected through literature, should be allowed to take shape over time rather than assigning to it uniform features now.

To maintain a connection to tradition, Longfellow continually argued, American poets should avoid resorting to graceless originality to distinguish their work as national. In *Kavanagh*, Mr. Churchill and Mr. Hathaway debate the merits of novelty. Echoing Longfellow's "Defence of Poetry," Mr. Churchill argues, "a national literature is not the growth of a day. Centuries must contribute their dew and sunshine to it" (368). Genius in America exists, but, if it is to be expressed, "it must employ art, for art is the external expression of our thoughts." More to the point, genius without art would render the

nation dumb because the "two must go together," and, for Longfellow, a nation without a voice is no nation at all. For Mr. Churchill the genius of American literature lies in its cultural diversity, its potential universality: "As the blood of all nations is mingling with our own, so will their thoughts and feelings mingle in our literature . . . . And this will give us universality, so much to be desired" (369). Consequently, diversity and form, the commingling of peoples and cultures in nineteenth-century America, held much promise for a national literature and legacy. Only the accumulated works of many writers of diverse backgrounds will reflect the scope of the nation. The idea that American culture is *sui generis* is a myth to both Mr. Churchill and to Longfellow. Surely, his work as a world literature scholar and translator gave him ample evidence for this. *Tales of a Wayside Inn* illustrates Longfellow's view that America's national character would reflect its diversity. But it also reveals his fear that the conflicts over the very essence of the nation could remove that character from history. These are the complex issues at stake in "Paul Revere's Ride."

Longfellow began writing the separate poems for *Tales* as early as 1859, publishing "Paul Revere's Ride," "The Saga of King Olaf," and "The Legend of Rabbi Ben Levi" in the *Atlantic* before completing and publishing "Part First" of the volume in 1863. He would return to the project a decade later, adding "Part Second" in 1872, originally published as *The Second Day* in *Three Books of Song*, and "Part Third," published as *The Third Part* in *Aftermath* in 1873 before collecting all three into the single famous volume. Although *Tales* adheres to the traditional frame of a group of

people "[t]hrown together by a common purpose such as avoiding an epidemic or setting out on a pilgrimage," who tell tales to pass the time (Frank and Maas 77), the separate parts cohere thematically around Longfellow's enduring concerns over a national literature. Armin Paul Frank and Christel-Maria Maas note that such considerations indicate "a significant variation" of the form because the characters' "primary interest is specifically literary, with national literature often a topic of discussion." "Part First" deals explicitly with the perils of extremism to the project of a national literature. "Part Second," the most tension-filled portion of *Tales*, debates the importance of antecedents to American literature and of works from multiple cultures in an American context, specifically folk tales. "Part Third" seeks to reconcile disparate identities in an effort to depict the potential universality of American national character, revealing the inevitable contradictions embedded in such a scheme.[18]

Many critics note the connection of the first part, at least, to the political environment at the time, but argue that the section, and "Paul Revere's Ride" in particular, recalls our colonial heritage to unite the nation in a time of war. Yet if this is true, that heritage appears dilapidated and barren. The darkness of *Tales* is often lost on critics, the traditional view of the poet persuading us that his verse is almost uniformly light. In fact, the bleak and mysterious opening may surprise readers who dismiss the frame narrative of *Tales* and view the work as a light-hearted entertainment of disconnected stories that, at most, playfully suggest a cosmopolitan worldview. For example, Gioia overlooks the political work of *Tales*, claiming that unlike the majority of "American long poems . . . that consciously set out to explore and define both national and personal identities," Longfellow's are "not exploratory but patterned after traditional

genres" and are not "aimed at literary intellectuals nor . . . obsessed with defining national or personal identity" (86). But why would employing traditional forms and genres avoid questions of national identity? *Tales* explicitly deals with these issues, and its multiple forms are crucial to its arguments. Nevertheless, like most critics, Gioia reads the tales separately without considering how they fit into the larger frame narrative and so detects only Longfellow's "famous personal charm, warmth, and humor" in them (89).[19] The initial "Prelude," the dreary, dream-like scene, and the speaker's shadowy character sketches betray this habitual assessment.

"Part One" outlines the dangers of nationalism to the promise of universality and cultural survival. The opening of *Tales* depicts the origins of the United States and the condition of the union at the beginning of the Civil War. Additionally, the geographic and historical setting recalls the country's colonial period, its ideological roots. "Prelude: The Wayside Inn," describes the environment as both bucolic and in decline, evoking the contrast between American ideals and the turbulence of the 1850s and early 1860s. During 1863, the outcome of the Civil War was anything but certain. Union morale was flagging after the bloody battles of 1862 at Shiloh, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, and the chaos of the New York draft riots of 1863. In light of such turmoil, the initial portrait of the Colonial era inn functions as a symbol of a nation already in decline, haunted by the grandeur of the region's (and its own) original promise:

> Built in the old Colonial day,
> When men lived in a grander way,
> With ampler hospitality;
> A kind of old Hobgoblin Hall,

Now somewhat fallen to decay,

With weather-stains upon the wall,

And stairways worn, and crazy doors,

And creaking and uneven floors. (7-16)

The wasted lodge suggests the tenuousness of the republic in the midst of the Civil War, a body politic once strong but now decomposing because of neglect.[20]

The autumn weather and the barren landscape add to the dreariness of the scene. The inn resides far from the hubbub of the city, and the eerie quietude evokes a New England gothicism: "A region of repose it seems, / A place of slumber and of dreams, / Remote among the wooded hills" (18-20). The haunting silence magnifies the lifeless appearance of the setting: "Deep silence reigned, save when a gust / Went rushing down the county road, / And skeletons of leaves, and dust . . . / Shuddered and danced their dance of death, / And through the ancient oaks o'erhead / Mysterious voices moaned and fled" (34-40). Such a graveyard scene, in the midst of civil conflict, registers Longfellow's anxiety over cultural death (a civilization without a story). Yet the fact that the scene exhibits a dream-like quality, dead only in appearance, offers some hope that all is not lost, a suggestion supported by the contrast between the landscape and the activity inside the house.

In spite of the external conflicts wracking the nation and the general appearance of decline, the true health of the nation, for Longfellow, resides in its interior, imaginative capability, the seat of national character. The atmosphere inside the hostel, punctuated by "laughter" and "loud applause" (45), suggests a healthy spiritual life for the nation. In addition to the merriment of the parlor's inhabitants, the house is populated with various

objects that connect it with America's colonial heritage: a portrait of Princess Mary, the Landlord's coat-of-Arms, Revolutionary heirlooms, and "The jovial rhymes, that still remain, / Writ near a century ago, / By the great Major Molineaux." Longfellow here cites Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux," adding, perhaps, an allusion to contemporary American literature as well as to a longer history.

The speaker reveals both the potential and the fragility of such a gathering in the contemporary American context. The diversity of the guests resembles the demographic make-up of the Untied States and, in conformity with Longfellow's notion of a universal American literature, each intends to contribute a part of his cultural identity to the nation: "And, though of different lands and speech, / Each had his tale to tell, and each / Was anxious to be pleased and please" (87-89). However, the gathering also betrays Longfellow's anxiety regarding this course. Though the group promises the universality of American national character, such universality remains unrealized amid the intense sectarian divisions and conflicts of 1860s America. The description of the fireside in terms similar to the inn's exterior accentuates this uncertainty: "Let me in outline sketch them all, / Perchance uncouthly as the blaze / With its uncertain touch portrays / Their shadowy semblance on the wall" (91-94). Despite the lightheartedness in the lodge, the shadowy figures, like the landscape, furnish a doubtful aspect, implying that the easy conviviality of the company exists in appearance only. The gathering and the frame of *Tales* must question our notion of the book as a light-hearted nationalist romp. Geographically and culturally, the group's stories encompass a broad range of narratives from the United States, England, Spain, Denmark, Norway, Albania, Persia, and the Jewish Diaspora. The seven characters span multiple nationalities: there are four New

Englanders (the Landlord, the Student, the Theologian, and the Poet) and three recent immigrants hailing from Norway (the Musician), Spain (the Jew), and Sicily. Additionally, the "Prelude: The Wayside Inn" qualifies in important ways the dominant reading of "Paul Revere's Ride" as a poem sanctioning nineteenth-century American nationalism, a reading that often overlies the entire collection. Rather than an idealized past, Longfellow portrays America's colonial and revolutionary heritage, the nation's founding ideals, as neglected and dying. Also calling the standard reading into question is the Landlord himself, whose tale has so influenced the book's reception. Representing stagnant, headstrong New England chauvinism, the Landlord clings to his family's once-distinguished past: "Grave in his aspect and attire; / A man of ancient pedigree . . . / Proud was he of his name and race" (96-98). He ostentatiously displays his pride in his Anglo-American ancestry by hanging his family's coat of Arms on the wall with his grandfather's saber above it, a family heirloom from the Battle of Concord. Tellingly, the coat of Arms is well polished, but the saber is "no longer bright, / Though glimmering with a latent light" (111-12). The tarnished saber mirrors the state of the inn and the surrounding landscape, once again suggesting dereliction.

The accumulation of figures of neglect conveys not only Longfellow's anxiety about the nation's descent into civil war but also the status of poetry in America and the lack of American themes in literature. The presence of "Paul Revere's Ride" in the collection signals that this account of American history should be represented in poetic form to contribute to the country's national identity, cultural capital, and posterity. Though many critics and historians fret over the historical accuracy of the poem, such concerns are beside Longfellow's point that the general mind exhibited in poetry reveals

national character more completely than does the historical record. The Landlord's tale may be factually inaccurate, but it reflects American aspirations, ideals, and insecurities and so contributes to the country's literature. What is most important for Longfellow is not that the Landlord's tale be accurate but that the Landlord's tale be told.

The "Prelude" and "Interlude" framing "Paul Revere's Ride" connect two of Longfellow's major concerns about American literature that should inform our reading of the poem: the status of poetry in America and the deleterious effects of provincialism on posterity. In the "Prelude," the Landlord's hesitancy to share his story embodies both the Puritan suspicion of art and the New England bashfulness about expressing unmanly sentiment, which Longfellow regarded as a threat to the nation's cultural preeminence. For example, in his "Graduation Address," Longfellow explained the slow growth of American literature as the result of a short-sighted utilitarian view of the arts: "We are a plain people . . . and hence there has sprung up within us a quick-sightedness to the failings of literary men, and an aversion to everything that is not practical, operative, and thorough-going" (238). In this sense, "Paul Revere's Ride" not only remembers a time when the nation was in peril, as it is again in 1863, but also warns of the consequences of national priorities to America's cultural heritage. The company loudly urges the Landlord to tell his story, "The story promised them of old, / They said, but always left untold" (306-07). In spite of the Landlord's shyness and pride, the time to memorialize the country has arrived, and the urgency of the contemporary context demands that the nation's story be told before it is too late.

Our sense of familiarity with "Paul Revere's Ride" and the resulting assumptions ride on the cadences of its galloping opening lines:[21]

Listen, my children, and you shall hear

Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,

On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;

Hardly a man is now alive

Who remembers that famous day and year. (1-5)

We may not remember "that famous day and year," but we certainly remember these lines. Part of the reason for this is the poem's reception, particularly in public schools in the late nineteenth-century when students regularly memorized and recited it along with Revolutionary War history (Sorby 15). The conjunction of a fictional narrative and the history curriculum encouraged the creation of a national myth. So we read the poem as a nationalist anthem: Longfellow's "sprightliest work" is a "rollicking nationalist war poem" (Calhoun 221). True, the poem gives a sense of history by beginning with a specific date and recounting Revere's ride to warn of the British invasion, but it departs from history as it reaches its climax:

And one was safe and asleep in his bed

Who at the bridge would be first to fall,

Who that day would be lying dead,

Pierced by a British musket-ball.

You know the rest. In the books you have read. (107-11)

The speaker withholds the rest of the story; the only things we seem to remember, or rather what we seem to hear, are the "hurrying hoof-beats of that steed." Aside from a tenacious habit of viewing the poem as narrowly nationalist, one of the reasons we continually misread "Paul Revere's Ride" is that we ignore the fact that Longfellow has

given the speaker of the poem a personality in *Tales*—the Landlord to whom history matters less than New England taciturnity. Indeed, the galloping rhythm of the poem that carries quickly through to the end is also a function of the Landlord's hurried delivery, his effort to get the telling over with as soon as possible.

The abbreviated ending of "Paul Revere's Ride" demonstrates a marked anxiety over the Landlord's, and the nation's, inarticulateness at a time when the future appeared uncertain. Such a claim may seem counter-intuitive considering the immense popularity of the poem, but we cannot ignore that the Landlord's story ends abruptly and involves a surprising omission. What the Landlord deems most important in the tale is not the battle or its outcome but Revere's "midnight message," the lone "voice in the darkness" shouting a clarion call to defend the would-be nation. Indeed, the Landlord describes the exhortation as "a word that shall echo forevermore!" (124). Like Longfellow's notion of the influence of a nation's poetry on future generations, the Landlord ends his tale describing the lasting impact of this momentous night:

> For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
> Through all our history, to the last,
> In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
> The people will waken and listen to hear
> The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
> And the midnight message of Paul Revere. (125-30)

Such an outcome would be ideal for American literature. Not only will America's story be told, but also future generations will remember it. Still, we never actually hear the eternal word. The absence of the most important and, for the Landlord, meaningful

element of the story betrays the unfinished state of American literature and underscores the necessity of representing American experience. "Paul Revere's Ride" is not just history, then, but an example of the nation's unrealized literary potential.

The group receives the Landlord's tale good-naturedly and seeks to identify the universal in it, but his insularity removes Anglo-American history from the plurality of America, inhibiting the growth of American literature. At the end of his tale, the Landlord presents his grandfather's "sword . . . dim with dust, / And cleaving to its sheath with rust" (3-5) to emphasize his family connection to the Battle of Concord. However, his pride in his heritage results in an awkward moment as the Poet takes up the sword and humorously attempts to elevate the Landlord's grandfather to the status of English noblemen: "It is the sword of a good knight, / Though homespun was his coat-of-mail" (7-8). To enforce the universal heroism of the Landlord's ancestor, the Poet exclaims, "To me a grander shape appears / Than old Sir William, or what not, / Clinking about in foreign lands / With iron gauntlets on his hands, / And on his head an iron pot" (17-21). The company laughs at the joke, but the Landlord is nonplussed, believing "those who had been longest dead / Were always greatest" (26-27); he is offended "To see Sir William's plumed head / Brought to a level with the rest, / And made the subject of a jest" (29-31). The Landlord's reaction calls attention to the obstacles parochialism poses to literary progress. He overvalues his Anglo-American heritage and so does not appreciate the elevation of his grandfather's cultural status at the expense of his English ancestor, Sir William. He fails to see the value of American culture compared to England's. Rather than contribute his cultural heritage to a national literature, he wants to revere it like a static object in a museum. Such an attitude toward American history

constitutes a refusal to utilize native themes, leaving a fundamental aspect of national identity unused in literature, "cleaving to its sheath with rust" (4). However, the Poet's intention is not solely to democratize national heroes but also to point out the universality of heroism. America, although a young nation, possesses the native material to forge a classic literature and take its place among other, more established literary traditions.

But constructing a multicultural literature is tense work, and the Landlord's rising temper endangers the group's purpose of exchanging stories "to be pleased and please." Seeking to "appease / The Landlord's wrath, the others' fears" (32-33), the Student introduces a story of chivalric daring, "The Falcon of Ser Federigo," an adventure of the heart. He offers it in an American context to temper the nationalistic, militaristic "Paul Revere's Ride" and to counter the Landlord's squeamishness toward sentiment: "The Landlord's tale was one of Arms, / Only a tale of love is mine" (45-46). Longfellow argues that American poetry should recognize the immense importance of sensibility: "We ought not, in the pursuit of wealth and worldly honor, to forget those embellishments of the mind and the heart, which sweeten social intercourse and improve the condition of society" ("Defence" 60). In light of the failure of the Landlord's tale to delight the company, the Student seeks to "sweeten social intercourse" among the group, increasing the cultural reach and emotional depth of American character. However, even such a sincere attempt to achieve harmony instigates controversy in such a volatile environment. Tension rather than sentimentality pervades *Tales*.

The Theologian objects to the inclusion of Boccocio's story on the grounds of provenance as much as content.[22] The eruption of controversy at the inn recalls the debates about foreign material and its supposed injurious impact on society. Initially, a

member of the group, "over eager to commend" the risqué romance, "Crowned it with injudicious praise," forgetting the sensitivities of some in the group (2-3). The Theologian fears the influence of such stories threaten the nation's virtue and so passionately objects: "the voice of blame found vent, / And fanned the embers of dissent / Into a somewhat lively blaze" (4-6). He dismisses the tale as dangerous and improper:

> "These old Italian tales," he said,
> "From the much-praised Decameron down
> Through all the rabble of the rest,
> Are either trifling, dull, or lewd;
> . . . . . .
> They seem to me a stagnant fen,
> Grown rank with the rushes and with reeds,
> Where a white lily, now and then,
> Blooms in the midst of noxious weeds. (7-19)

By criticizing Boccacio's tale this way, he distances America from its allegedly depraved European foundations. But Longfellow traces such reactions to poetry back to "the early centuries of our era," when "[a]ll the corruption and degeneracy of the Western Empire were associated, in the minds of the Gothic tribes, with a love of letters and the fine arts" ("Defence" 61-62). He argues that this association informed nineteenth-century attitudes toward scholarship and art, which held that "study unfits a man for action; that poetry and nonsense are convertible terms; that literature begets an effeminate and craven spirit" and "will not stand long against the hard knocks of 'the bone and muscle of the state.'" The Theologian's narrow attitude would stunt intellectual achievement by limiting the cultural

resources available to American poets. Longfellow's "Defence of Poetry" suggests that it is not the "old Italian tales" one should be wary of but the stultifying nationalist and sectarian impulses of nineteenth-century America, arguing that poets "should leave the present age" and read widely "the whole body of English classical literature" (76-77). Moreover, instead of seeing ancient and medieval literature as a "stagnant fen," Longfellow considers these literary origins a "stream, whose fabled fountain . . . flowed brightly," opposed to the contemporary moment "whose spirit has so unsparingly leveled to the even surface of utility the bold irregularities of human genius" so that now the "stream has spread itself into stagnant pools, which exhale an unhealthy atmosphere." The Student's reply to the Theologian echoes Longfellow's response to skepticism about poetry and scholarship. The Student argues that the relationship of such stories to literature in English cannot be overvalued: "One should not say, with too much pride, / Fountain, I will not drink of thee! / Nor were it grateful to forget / That from these reservoirs . . . / Even imperial Shakespeare drew" (22-26).[23] By pointing to Italian influence on English literature, the Student reveals the cultural antecedents of American literature beyond an Anglo-American context and the place of European stories in a multicultural society. Like the Landlord's insularity, the Theologian's puritanical suspicion of outside influences threatens to hinder literary progress. What the Student (and it is no coincidence that he is a student) makes clear are the universal aspects of these stories, their potential to provide inspiration to poets and, thus, to aid the development of American character.

The disagreement between the Theologian and the Student once again derails the gathering's intention to tell stories, and the resulting awkward silence raises the specter of

cultural death that, for Longfellow, follows the cessation of art. The "Interlude" elaborates this theme through the interjection of a common colloquialism to reduce the tension of the lull in conversation—"An Angel is flying overhead" (31). The Spanish Jew's grave response, "God grant . . . / It may not be the Angel of Death" (34-35), and his succeeding tale emphasize the relationship between silence and death, which Longfellow continually foregrounds in *Tales*, and through the figure of the Landlord specifically. The association of silence and the Angel of Death reminds the Spanish Jew of "A story in the Talmud" that "never wearies nor grows old" (39, 44), evidence of the enduring nature of a culture's stories. "The Legend of Rabbi Ben Levi," recounts how the Rabbi gets the better of the Angel of Death. The story acknowledges death's inevitability but also proposes that in some small measure human imagination can outwit death, specifically by the survival of stories beyond the teller's death. In the context of *Tales*, the survival of the tale and its telling are a boon to humanity—and to the group particularly—because of its universality, confirmed in the following "Interlude": "His solemn manner and his words / Had touched the deep, mysterious chords / That vibrate in each human breast / Alike, but not alike confessed" (3-6). Not coincidentally, the story's presence in *Tales* brings the ancient Talmudic tradition to the inn, adding to the diversity of the national character. However, this variety dismays the group.

The Spanish Jew's tale begins a succession of stories inspired by "The spiritual world" eventually leading to a troubling clash of histories, attesting to the difficulty of such a diverse gathering. "The Sicilian's Tale: King Robert of Sicily" contributes a lesson in Christian humility based on the *Magnificat*, in which the king is chastised for his earthly pride.[24] Clashing with the theme of Christianity, the Musician offers a Norse

legend from the *Heimskringla*. "The Musician's Tale: The Saga of King Olaf" describes the brutal, forced Christianization of Norway. The Theologian replies to the dismal tale thanking God that "The reign of violence is dead, / Or dying surely from the world" and that "The war and waste of clashing creeds / Now end in words, and not in deeds" (5-13). The Theologian's claim, while meant to praise liberal nineteenth-century Christianity, comes across as ironic considering the history surrounding the composition of *Tales* and his ensuing story about the Spanish Inquisition, not to mention the conquest of the Americas. "The Theologian's Tale: Torquemada" relates the story of an Hidalgo in the days of the Grand Inquisitor of Spain, Tomás de Torquemada, known best for his vicious persecution of Jews during the fifteenth century. In this fevered environment of sectarian violence, the Hidalgo reveled "When Jews were burned, or banished from the land," and he cried out "Kill! kill! and let the Lord find out his own" (36).[25] Like the other stories, this tragedy silences the group. However, the subsequent "Interlude" suggests that even such troubling stories and histories must be acknowledged and incorporated into American literature. The entire company is disturbed by the Theologian's tale but particularly the Spanish Jew who, "thoughtful and distressed," remembers "The persecution of his race, / Their wrongs and sufferings and disgrace" (7-8) and sheds bitter tears: "And from his eyes alternate came / Flashes of wrath and tears of shame" (10-11). Thus, the story of religious persecution qualifies the Theologian's earlier acclaim for Christianity and reminds the party of the multiple histories represented at the inn.[26]

Such disturbing tales must play a role in America's emerging complex and contradictory national identity. In fact, the characters themselves embody the backgrounds that contribute to Longfellow's vision of a universal American literature and

character. No light-hearted, politically aloof poet, he does not shy away from the difficulties of conflicting histories. Telling such horrific chronicles forces us to remember them, however painful they may be. Further, in this setting, ostensibly incompatible histories that inflame national divisions appear necessary to Longfellow despite their propensity to upset the fragile amity at the inn. First, they represent the diversity that he believes will contribute to American universality. Second, they deny the nationalist urge to repress historical and cultural difference. Without question, these stories keep us cognizant of the past and serve as illustrations of contemporary struggles, dramatizing the challenges of a multicultural society. To achieve a universal literature that reflects the composition of the nation, these troubling stories, too, must be incorporated into America's cultural fabric, even at the expense of the easily unified identity offered by an anemic nationalism that suppress such obstacles. Through their inclusion, *Tales* dispenses with a provincialism that would limit the sources available to poets and distort America's heritage, offering instead a more accurate portrayal of the peculiarities of national character. To stress the dangers of insularity, the Poet ends the squabble with a story of American provenance that "[h]as meaning, if not mirth," the allegorical "The Birds of Killingworth."

"The Birds of Killingworth" synthesizes the relationship Longfellow posits between poetry, New England parochialism, American materialism, a universal literature, and cultural identity and posterity. It is an allegory of ideas, making the case for the value of poetry in nineteenth-century America, and a multinational poetry at that. Throughout his career, Longfellow, like many poets, used birds as a figure for poets and poetry (for instance, he titled his 1858 collection of miscellaneous poems *Birds of Passage*). The

poem includes native birds such as the mavis and merle, the robin, bluebird, sparrow, and the crow, each bringing with it a host of figurative associations expounding the diversity of native poets and their connections to other cultural traditions. For example, the speaker associates these birds with Anglo-Saxon psalms and the Bible, ancient texts that maintained their cultural resonance in nineteenth-century America, pointing to the importance of literature of the past to any contemporary vision of a national culture.[27] Descriptions here of inspired poet-birds resemble both Longfellow's ideal of a universal literary milieu and his anxiety over such an environment as native and foreign species interact with one another in sometimes easy and sometimes difficult ways: "Across the Sound the birds of passage sailed, / Speaking some unknown language strange and sweet" and "hailed / The village with the cheers of all their fleet; / Or quarrelling together . . . with outlandish noise / Of oaths and gibberish frightening girls and boys" (17-24). This dissonance echoes that of the inn. Set in the Colonial era, the poem recounts the rash decision by the town council to destroy all birds, which they see as nuisances to their crops. Their debate recalls Longfellow's argument in "Defence of Poetry" that "the pursuit of wealth and worldly honor" diminishes an equally important human commerce satisfied by the arts and scholarship (60). Not surprisingly, the Preceptor, another stand-in for Longfellow, defends the birds, motivated by love and his occupation as a scholar and teacher.

The Preceptor's defense of the birds offers a glimpse of the ultimate, unintended consequence of betraying the arts in favor of worldly gain. The Preceptor's comparison of the expulsion of poets from Plato's Republic to the council's proposal again links the birds to poetry and its diminished place in practical nineteenth-century America: "From

his Republic banished without pity / The Poets; in this little town of yours, / You put to death, by means of a committee, / The ballad-singers and the Troubadours" (90-93). He also argues that the Council's avidity, the gain of "a scant handful more or less of wheat," reveals an ethical dilemma: the town's blind pursuit of wealth and preoccupation with worldly concerns ("your laws, your actions, and your speech") denigrate art and undermine the moral foundations of society such as "gentleness," "mercy to the weak," respect for life and death, the signs of "God's omnipotence" (158-65). In addition to the aesthetic enjoyments of song, poetry reflects cultural values, and to deny this aspect of literature endangers future generations' correct moral behavior and flattens social intercourse. However, the Precept's warnings go unheeded—with disastrous consequences.[28]

After the massacre of the birds, insects overrun the town, destroying the land and rending the social fabric of the community. The farmers realize their mistake and rescind the law, but it is too late. Life becomes so dismal in the absence of the birds that the falling autumn leaves are pictured as suicides: "A few lost leaves blushed crimson with their shame, / And drowned themselves despairing in the brook" (218-19). Such a figure embodies Longfellow's anxiety over cultural death; to disavow art is to commit cultural suicide. Ignoring or trivializing a country's artistic legacy by pursuing short-term financial gain often leads to long-term ethical, aesthetic, and national loss. The tale's ending underscores the dangers of extremism and reasserts the value of a diverse literature as the town imports birds "From all the country round" to restore balance to the community. As a response to all of "Part First," the poem argues for the utility of poetry, whether foreign or native, to reflect cultural values and to rectify the distortions of

American materialism and extremism to the national character.[29] Rather than simply an effort to escape the war by turning to founding myths or foreign literatures, "Part First" explores national anxieties and engages directly with sectarian conflict, American identity, and cultural survival at a time of great political and moral uncertainty.

In the decade between the publication of "Part First" (1863) and "Part Second" (1872), America experienced dramatic social changes and struggles: the divisions of Reconstruction, the expansion of federal power, unchecked corporate capitalism and industrialization.[30] Whitman responded to these social crises in *Democratic Vistas* published the previous year, 1871. Yet, while Whitman called for perpetual cultural revolution, Longfellow retained his antebellum concerns: the acceleration of American materialism would lead to an ill-informed homogenization of American culture and history, distorting the national character. Like the tone of the original 1863 publication, the tone of "Part Second" registers the social crises of the 1860s and early 1870s, and renews the themes of sectarianism, national identity, and cultural survival.[31] "Part Second," the most troubled book in the collection, explores the disconcerting effects of literary nationalism. The poet's long-held literary ideals appear to be at issue throughout the book: there are vigorous debates among the group members about the merits of international and native sources, folklore, and cultural antecedents. The tales do not please the listeners, and they chafe at the prospect of keeping company with one another for a second day. Exhausted and bored, they are eager to leave the inn; feelings of confinement and confusion prevail. For example, though folk stories are the focus of this part, the characters, oddly, fail to understand their homely morals, and there is disagreement about their literary value. Such contentiousness exacerbates the anxiety

over cultural death permeating the volume reflecting an apprehension over the nation's ability to transcend cultural differences and achieve the universality Longfellow felt was so important to American literature.

After the intensity of the first day of tales, the "Prelude" to "Part Second" reflects this unease and the post-war disorientation over the rapid rise of American political and material power and national identity. The "Prelude" describes an even drearier day than the first, with a "Cold, uninterrupted rain" (1) accompanied by a dense mist that seems to transform the landscape into "phantom ships" (8), recalling the menace posed by the British "phantom ship" in "Paul Revere's Ride." Unlike "Part First," however, the joyless landscape now invades the inn as both the morning and the company are reluctant to rise and begin a new day; the day is "cold and colorless and gray" "As if reluctant to begin" (12, 14), and the occupants of the inn ignore the rooster's call and sleep late, lazily drifting down to the fireside. Like the "Prelude" to "Part First," the "Prelude" to "Part Second" emphasizes the vagueness, silence, and mystery of the scene, echoing Longfellow's anxieties about culture passing into obscurity. The caged robins, the "fateful cawings of the crow," the "jaded horse," and the discourse between the Student and the Musician on the origin "Of all the legendary lore" emphasize the part's misgivings about literary, and thus national, dereliction (85-86, 105, 110). The Theologian's perspective on the caged robins, accused of being "Vagrants and pilferers" (the same charges that doomed the birds of Killingworth) summarizes the state of poetry and the skepticism of foreign sources of poetry in the latter decades of the nineteenth century: "Two poets of the Golden Age, / Heirs of a boundless heritage / . . . east and west / . . . . / Though outlawed now and dispossessed" (78-82). This description of the

birds, again, associates them with poets and poetry and to a global, though neglected, cultural heritage as the stories in "Part Second" traverse many cultures and geographies encompassing Iran, Germany, France, and New England. The Theologian's sentiments, then, link this inheritance to America, the heir to these rich traditions. Yet the metaphor of confined birds connotes the danger to a universal American character if a nationalist impulse prevents artists from using foreign models.

Although the "Prelude" exhibits a pronounced cynicism regarding nineteenth-century attitudes toward poetry, it also points out the fallacy of any sort of nationalist literature. The Student and the Musician discuss the universal nature of all literature, making clear that nationalist claims of originality are themselves myths. The two believe that "all the legendary lore / Among the nations, scattered wide" (86-87) shares a forgotten common source revealed by comparing stories: "The tale repeated o'er and o'er, / With change of place and change of name, / Disguised, transformed, and yet the same" (90-92). As Longfellow explained in "Defence of Poetry," such an idea acknowledges the universality of the cultural antecedents of all Americans and their impact on national identity. An unbroken thread of "legendary lore" connects the past to the present. But narrowly defined nationalism risks breaking this thread, imperiling American literature's place in that long tradition and its influence on future generations.

The topic of nationality recalls the anxieties over the tendency of historical and cultural difference that arose in "Part First" to derail the intention of the gathering "to be pleased and please." Though sensitive to historical difference, Longfellow and some of his contemporaries challenged the xenophobia that often accompanies encounters with ancient and foreign literatures. For instance, in his essay inspired by Longfellow's

Kavanagh, Lowell makes the case that we construct boundaries around ancient material, usually of uncertain origin, in support of nationalist claims:

> we admit that it is meritorious in an author to seek for a subject in the superstitions, legends, and historical events of his own peculiar country or district, yet these . . . are by nature ephemeral, and a wide tract of intervening years makes them as truly foreign as oceans, mountains, or deserts could. Distance of time passes its silent statute of outlawry and alienage against them, as effectually as distance of space. Indeed, in that strictness with which the martinets of nationality use the term, it would be a hard thing for any people to prove an exclusive title to its myths and legends. (314)

The echoing of stories, themes, and subjects across time and space indicated by the Student and Musician speaks to the notion of universality that both Longfellow and Lowell advance but that literary nationalism denies: "this demand for a nationality bounded historically and geographically by the independent existence and territory of a particular race or fraction of a race, would debar us of our rightful share in the past and the ideal . . . . There is no degradation in such indebtedness" (316). However, the characters in *Tales* are obstinately unable to acknowledge cross-cultural obligation.

The "Prelude" also conveys the urgency of Longfellow's anxieties about cultural death as the Poet hears the "fateful cawings of the crow." Fatigue, melancholy, and desperation characterize the Poet's meditation on the bleak landscape. The sun appears "discrowned, / And haggard with a pale despair" (96-97), while the "fateful cawings of the crow" (105) remind him of the "voices of distress and pain, / That haunt the thoughts of men insane" (103-04). The crow's incessant cries reflect the morose, sickly

environment. Traditionally associated with death, the crow's presence and "fateful" cry signals inevitable demise; Longfellow remains fatalistic about the disregard of art. While the Poet muses, the speaker notes the presence of a mud-spattered, rain-soaked "jaded horse" disconsolately limping past the inn, recalling that other horse in *Tales*, Paul Revere's steed "fearless and fleet" upon which the "fate of a nation was riding." This contrast measures the nation's neglect of its inspired beginnings and stories. The jaded horse literalizes the fears of forgetting the past and discarding American poetry, put to pasture before its time. The Sicilian expresses indignation at avarice and indifference: "Alas for human greed, / That with cold hand and stony eye / Thus turns an old friend out to die" (125-27). In "Defence of Poetry," Longfellow had blamed the neglect of poetry and stories from the past on materialism: "We are too apt to think that nothing can be useful, but what is done with a noise, at noonday, and at the corners of the streets; as if action and utility were synonymous, and it were not as useless to act without thinking, as it is to think without acting" (60-61). The succeeding tale chronicles another "spavined steed" in an obscure, ancient Italian town that brings the scandal of neglect to the community's attention, the apathy toward poetry and its cultural antecedents in the context of *Tales*.

"The Sicilian's Tale: The Bell of Atri" avows the worth of time-worn sources, however old-fashioned and useless they may seem in the literary marketplace, by making the case that we have a responsibility to maintain them after they have served their initial purpose. Atri, a town committed to resolving inequity, hung a bell only to be rung "whenever wrong / Was done to any man" that justice might be served (14–15). So serene was the village that the bell had fallen into disuse until a knight in the town,

having grown old and weary of the "prodigalities of camps and courts" (34), became ever more materialistic ("His only passion was the love of gold") and spent his time "[d]evising plans how best to hoard and spare" (42). To save money, he eventually turns his "old steed" out into the streets. The horse wanders the town and, hungry, begins to gnaw the bell's rope, causing the bell to ring—and signify a wrong. The Syndic and the townspeople gather and see the "poor steed dejected and forlorn" (70) and call the knight to answer. He defensively replies "[t]hat he should do what pleased him with his own" (88). The Syndic decries the knight's pride and cautions that to treat his horse in this way jeopardizes his reputation: "What fair renown, what honor, what repute / Can come to you from starving this poor brute?" (97-98). Finally, the Syndic forces the knight to care for his horse in its dotage out of respect for the service it once provided: "as this steed / Served you in youth, henceforth you shall take heed / To comfort his old age, and to provide / Shelter in stall, and food and field beside" (101-04). Even as we have left the realm of medieval romances for the concerns of commerce and industry, these stories continue to have value. The "Bell of Atri" survives because of its moral utility. More to the point, it announces that old tales should be preserved; they should be told. Yet in spite of the story's agreeable moral, Longfellow does not allow such universal sentiments to go unassailed by the single-minded force of nationalism, which refuses to admit the ethical consistency of old and new stories, a perennial concern throughout *Tales*, and "Part Second" in particular.

The Poet's response to "The Sicilian's Tale" typifies the divisive mood of the second day. Strangely, the Poet misses the moral of the tale in an important way. Instead of seeing the implications of the tale with regard to the value of poetry, he seems to

believe that the tale ignores poetry altogether, all the more surprising because of the obvious resonances with his own, "The Birds of Killingworth." Such a misunderstanding is emblematic of "Part Second." The moral compatibility of the stories demonstrates that although they come from diverse cultures, encompassing a wide range of time and space, they apply to current circumstances. Including these tales seems an apt strategy to demonstrate cross-cultural correspondences as a way to unite the nation through traditional tales from multiple cultures. So why the confusion? That the characters misunderstand these alien stories indicates that provincialism clouds their ability to see the universal even in simple folk tales. In fact, each character seeks to differentiate his tale from the others even though the similarities are patently obvious. The Poet becomes a much more vociferous ethnocentric nationalist in "Part Second" than in "Part First." Although Longfellow goes to considerable effort to point out the universal aspects of literatures around the globe and across time, he goes to equal effort to represent the difficulty of transcending difference in the present.

"Part Second" renews the debate over cultural identity, but the argument remains unsettled, resulting in a shift from public figures of neglect to a private figure of domestic sustenance, bread. Domesticity connotes the spiritual nourishment of national culture. However, the domestic firesides in *Tales* span time and space, making a moral center difficult to locate especially if the national obstructs the universal. After the Musician's "Ballad of Carmilhan," of Northern European origin, the Poet dismisses old tales as "Flowers gathered from a crumbling wall, / Dead leaves that rustle as they fall" (9-10) and tells a light-hearted native story about social mobility set in New England, "Lady Wentworth." He appeals to native domesticity to authorize newer American tales,

comparing his story to "A sweetness as of home-made bread" (16). The Student extends the metaphor to argue in favor of universalism that good bread is good bread no matter its provenance, and repudiating the old to seek the new is short sighted: "people nowadays / To what is old give little praise; / All must be new in prose and verse . . . / The wholesome bread of yesterday, / Too stale for them, is thrown away, / Nor is their thirst with water slaked" (25-32). In spite of the tension, the Poet's native tale is well received, but the Theologian turns the telling back to ancient lore "not less sweet and not less fresh" (8) than contemporary American stories, contributing "The Legend Beautiful," a tale of Christian charity and deference. This story, like the rest in "Part Second," receives inconclusive praise, increasing the strained conviviality. The group debates the merits of the tale in comparison to other "legends of the past" without reaching agreement: "All praised the Legend more or less; / Some liked the moral, some the verse; / Some thought it better, and some worse" (1-3). Irritated by the continual complaining, the Theologian, scarcely repressing his anger, quotes a proverb to describe the carryings-on: "Consult your friends on what you do, / And one will say that it is white, / And others say that it is red" (9-11). To this, the company agrees. The inability to agree on the value of foreign and older sources leaves the future of American literature in doubt.

The absence of the famous Landlord, the teller of "Paul Revere's Ride," the poem so crucial to our national myth and our understanding of Longfellow, from "Part Second" underscores the author's anxiety over cultural death. Without the Landlord's voice, an aspect of the American character vanishes from history. Seeking another tale, the Sicilian looks for the Landlord, who is nowhere to be found, and so offers a chilling dictum to remark his absence: "Well, our bashful host / Hath surely given up the ghost. / Another

proverb says the dead / Can tell no tales; and that is true" (28-31). Considering the repeated connection between silence and death throughout *Tales*, the intimation that the Landlord cannot contribute a tale because he has died is ominous. With his strong connection to the founding of the United States and the fact that his first tale remains unfinished, the Landlord's absence points up the consequences of America's literary deficiency—the conceivable disappearance of American character and culture from posterity. The group's ultimate decision to continue without the Landlord emphasizes that time stops for no man.[32]

The "Finale" emphasizes the discomfort of the gathering and the failure of the tales to please the group. Freed by the weather from further interaction, the torment of "Part Second" ends for the lodgers: "Like prisoners from their dungeon gloom, / Like birds escaping from a snare, ... / All left at once the pent-up room" (36-39). Throughout "Part Second," the characters' reactions to the stories contradict their earlier assertions of the universality of all tales. They agree that old stories are of value but cannot agree on what value to ascribe to each tale. Their confusion echoes the radical changes rupturing America's connection to the past and conveys the difficulties of a social milieu with multiple histories and cultural backgrounds. Such a confusing part touching on so many important themes for Longfellow implies that to ignore poetry of the past renders communication and understanding tedious. Yet the continuing effort is worth the discomfort. To be silent removes American stories from the company, and thus from traditions of literature, and makes the possibility of understanding remote. The misunderstandings of the second day bespeak Longfellow's apprehension regarding a

universal American literature after the Civil War. Still, the continuation of *Tales* admits ambivalence, suggested by the simile of escaping birds; the songs *were* sung.

Published a year after the second installment, the final part of *Tales* seeks to overcome the company's previous divisions and depict the potential universality of American national character. As with the initial sections, "Part Third" focuses on the enduring life of stories. Set in the evening of the second day, the "Prelude" presents a much calmer and more inviting scene than the gloomy morning: "But brighter than the afternoon / That followed the dark day of rain" (9-10). The shift in mood is so complete even the inn's dilapidated sign seems to come to life again in the moonlight, its prancing Red Horse countering the "jaded horse" and the neglected horse of Atri and reviving the spark of Paul Revere's steed: "with flowing mane, / Upon the sign the Red Horse pranced, / And galloped forth into the night" (6-8). "Part Third" retains the haunted aspect, but rather than connoting uncertainty, it suggests that the company has accomplished their difficult task of recovering the past as "airy hosts" join the fireside. After two days of bygone tales, the fireside itself "chanted low / The homely songs of long ago" (22-23). Yet even though the scene appears to resolve previous tensions, the songs imbue the final gathering with a foreboding sense of death as "Amid the hospitable glow" resounds the "voice that Ossian heard of yore, . . . / A ghostly and appealing call, / A sound of days that are no more!" (19; 24-27). The allusion to Ossian serves as both inspiration and exhortation, evoking an Ossianic melancholy that accepted the inevitable collapse of nations but understood poetry as a way to overcome death. Moreover, reverence for the poetry of the past establishes the value of American stories for the future.[33]

A second allusion in the "Prelude" further promotes the idea of a culture's stories as an enduring legacy, a life beyond the grave. The Sicilian asks the Spanish Jew about his silent prayer at dinner and learns that the "silent grace" was "the Manichæan's prayer." The Jew describes the philosophy behind it in terms Longfellow might have used for the enduring and universal nature of poetry:

> It was his faith, —perhaps is mine, —
> That life in all its forms is one,
> And that its secret conduits run
> Unseen, but in unbroken line,
> From the great fountain-head divine
> Through man and beast, through grain and grass.
> Howe'er we struggle, strive, and cry,
> From death there can be no escape,
> And no escape from life, alas!
> Because we cannot die, but pass
> From one into another shape:
> It is but into life we die. (44-55)

His explication of the prayer recalls both Longfellow's arguments about the utility of poetry and its influence on succeeding generations and the discussion in the "Prelude" to "Part Second" about the homologousness of all nations' "legendary lore" (87-92). Nevertheless, Longfellow's ambivalence about such a concept persists as the characters disagree with such sentiments out of self-interest. For example, the Poet concedes that birds, "the minor poets of the air," and flowers may have souls, but inanimate objects do

not. Unlike in "Part Second," such bickering quickly ends as the group demands additional stories and the characters begin to see connections between tales of various origins.[34]

In spite of the revived amity of the scene and a willingness to acknowledge universal themes, the Landlord's lack of participation continues to worry the gathering. After his much-discussed disappearance in "Part Second," he reappears, and the group asks for a story, but he declines; once more, his bashfulness impedes an addition to the collection of tales. The clock portentously chimes, bringing to mind the march of time and inevitable death. The Theologian remarks upon this, quoting "Horace, where he sings / The dire Necessity of things" (76-77), alluding to inescapable death and the vanity of worldly possessions.[35] Such an interruption foregrounds Longfellow's anxiety over the demise of American civilization and the urgent necessity to bequeath our stories, a reminder of the "important transit of the hour" (83). Perhaps to ease the intensity of the moment, Longfellow juxtaposes it with transient newspaper verse.

The Theologian's contribution of "Elizabeth," a story by Lydia Maria Child, a popular author, abolitionist, and Indian rights activist, makes the case for the inclusion of popular literature, expanding the concept of American cultural and literary identity. In 1855, Hawthorne notoriously demeaned women's fiction and the country's literary tastes in a letter to William D. Ticknor: "America is now wholly given over to a d—d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash . . . . What is the mystery of these innumerable editions?" (75). The prevalence of such a condescending attitude toward women writers among the male literati of the time only makes the endorsement of such work in *Tales* more striking.

Although Longfellow does not depart from conventional portrayals of women's fiction as modest and domestic, the characters believe that these stories contain universal truth and are worth preserving and reading. If the Student dismisses the tale as "pleasant and . . . winsome" and "somewhat pale / And quiet" (1-3), the Theologian responds with a surprising defense of nineteenth-century popular women's literature. He adds that though found in the ephemeral pages of popular periodicals, such stories nevertheless leave a lasting impression. This estimation of popular literature echoes both Longfellow's poem "The Day is Done," which values songs "from some humbler poet," and his endorsement of a widely democratic literature in "Defence of Poetry."

And yet, after the tolling clock suggests the urgency of contributing to American literature, the Landlord's silent trepidation remains. In fact, Longfellow figures the Landlord's disquiet as the sword of Damocles, a choice between life and death with national consequences, according to the logic of *Tales*. The Landlord's silence results in the telling of two more foreign stories, one martial, and the other domestic.[36] The group unanimously lauds the heroic theme of the former and the simplicity of the latter, similar to the homely tales of "Part Second," thus resuming the debate over native stories. The Theologian promotes homespun stories by humble poets—"From looms of their own native town, / Which they were not ashamed to wear" (8-9)—over foreign or lofty sources. But wary of literary nativism, the Student makes the case that poets should draw upon a wide range of sources regardless of nationality: "Poets—the best of them—are birds / Of passage; where their instinct leads / They range abroad for thoughts and words, / And from all climes bring home the seeds / That germinate in flowers or weeds" (18-22). The explicit mention of *Birds of Passage* (and oblique reference to *Outre-Mer*,

another of Longfellow's titles) registers Longfellow's own disagreement with the Theologian. Like a bird of passage, poetry is cosmopolitan, particularly for a young immigrant nation. And if American poetry is to contribute to the tradition of world literature, it, too, must seek the universal. Finally, perhaps because of the Theologian's defense of native tales, the Landlord gives in and tells the concluding story, "The Rhyme of Sir Christopher," a decidedly xenophobic tale, reflecting the Landlord's New World chauvinism and Longfellow's persistent concern over the future of American letters.

The tale declares the incompatibility of European values with those of a nascent America and reveals a mean-spirited insularity, deepening the shades of hostility in *Tales*. The Puritan community scapegoats Sir Christopher for his putative inability to conform to their ways. He is plagued by innuendo because of his "superior manners now obsolete" (14), his European dress, association with community members of ill repute, supposed cohabitation with an unrelated woman, and "the vague surmise, / Though none could vouch for it or aver, / That the Knight of the Holy Sepulchre / Was only a Papist in disguise" (50-53). To make matters worse, letters surface from "two other wives." In light of such charges, the governor decides to arrest him. Sir Christopher fruitlessly pleads his innocence before the magistrate: "In vain he strove with wonted ease / To modify and extenuate / His evil deeds in church and state" (138-40). The governor deports him to England, "unmeet to inhabit here." The tale ends, portraying Sir Christopher as a satanic figure: "The first who furnished this barren land / With apples of Sodom and ropes of sand" (152-53). Thus ends the Landlord's tale, his parochial attitudes intact; he rejects European influences as depraved and dangerous to the community. Even so, the Landlord is only one voice. The revival of the horse at the beginning of "Part

Third," and the addition of a complete tale by the Landlord links the unfinished work of contemporary American literature to the traditions of the past, assuring the survival of both.

The "Finale" of *Tales* evokes Longfellow's ambivalence over the ability of American literature to achieve universality and so stave off cultural death. Both eager to go home and reluctant to part, the group retires for the night. After the tales cease, the inn seems to die, the speaker noting the "gloom" (28) and "senseless and unlistening ears" (35). Yet time continues: "The only live thing in the room" (29), the clock, marks the "unconscious hours of night" (34). In the morning, the company departs unmindful that they will never meet again. The weight of death and time oppresses the elegaic "Finale":

> Where are they now? What lands and skies
>
> Paint pictures in their friendly eyes?
>
> What hope deludes, what promise cheers,
>
> What pleasant voices fill their ears?
>
> Two are beyond the salt sea waves,
>
> And three already in their graves.
>
> Perchance the living still may look
>
> Into the pages of this book,
>
> And see the days of long ago
>
> Floating and fleeting to and fro,
>
> As in the well-remembered brook
>
> They saw the inverted landscape gleam,

And their own faces like a dream

Look up upon them from below. (52-65)

The *ubi sunt* motif recalls the book's continual emphasis on the transitory nature of nations as a critique of the current age's preoccupation with nationality. The allusion to the Narcissus myth exemplifies this concern, pointing out the dangerous solipsism of the nineteenth century: ethnocentrism, nationalism, and materialism, *idées fixes* that separate a culture from the course of human intellectual history just as Narcissus' self-obsession leads to his isolation and death. However, as we learned in "The Wind Over the Chimney," even to make such claims we are beholden to allusions, perhaps defeating death: "Because we cannot die, but pass / From one into another shape: / It is but into life we die." New literatures are continual acts of recovery.

Because of Longfellow's expansive view of history and his anxiety over cultural death, national divisions in nineteenth-century America caused him alarm. As both encouragement and augury, *Tales* makes a case for American exceptionalism but cautions against narrow or premature definitions of identity. The volume argues that America is exceptional through its multicultural demography, offering a universality that in the nineteenth century was still only prospective. As a scholar, a reader of the past, Longfellow believed he could sense both the promise and the problem that lay ahead. America held potential to be a great nation with a great literature or to be a reactionary, insular, and ignorant country. With regard to its literature, the problem was not that America imitated Europe or that there were no worthy national writers but that there were not enough writers over a long enough span of time. He feared that the opportunity to

demonstrate nationality would continue to elude America because of its repudiation of literature by a hard-nosed practicality that did not recognize the usefulness of art.

The creation of a national literature would be the result of centuries, and the young American society remained tenuous amid national discord. Yet Longfellow saw in the affirmation of a diverse literature a way to bind the nation: if Americans acknowledged their multiple literary antecedents and other contemporary literatures, they could forge a universal national character through literary effort. And yet, as we see in *Tales*, he could not overlook the difficulty of such an undertaking. Although he advocated for a civic literary culture, he saw such a community as a living entity always resisting definition: "No literature is complete until the language in which it is written is dead" (*Kavanagh* 368). A literary record of national life is the sign of a worthy civilization, but only posterity can adequately assess our national character. For Longfellow, all civilizations die, but cultures may live on, a belief expressed throughout his poetry: "Art is long, and Time is fleeting" ("Psalm of Life" 13). If Americans continued to write, future generations might look upon their productions and feel a sense of recognition in spite of the peculiarities of national identity.

Tales of a Wayside Inn reflects the complexities of nineteenth-century American life, registering both the possibilities and reservations contained in such a vibrant cultural milieu. *Tales* balances many concerns: preserving foreign and ancient stories for the young country, promoting American tales, establishing a multicultural identity. Yet the volume despairs that political and social realities rendered moot such efforts. During the nineteenth century, the United States was a tumultuous political and cultural experiment. In this context, it is easy to see Longfellow's valuation of the past as nostalgia, as a way

to evade and criticize the complications of the present. Other writers sought to overcome these difficulties by promoting sectarian interests or limited national identities. He saw a critical engagement with cultural history through a cosmopolitan literary tradition as necessary to establishing cross-cultural understanding in a diverse society where fear, suspicion, and sectarianism strained union. In this sense, his sentimentality aspires to an urgent national task to overcome division through diversity. The issue is two-fold for Longfellow. First, acknowledging the past as both inspiration and exhortation serves national aims. Americans must tell their stories and temper their enthusiasm for ephemeral material pursuits. Second, the dissensions that threaten America's political existence, which had already led to war, make such a task difficult. But, if it could be achieved, an inclusive literature would be an enduring testament to a democratic culture and a way to understand or, perhaps, even overcome division in the present. Still, he remained ambivalent.

Our standing account of Longfellow as a timid, if talented, poet of light verse, a sentimental romantic nationalist mining hackneyed themes and styles, does not grant him or his poetry sufficient complexity. In fact, his views on history, culture, and national identity comprise a bold aesthetic and political project. He saw the creation of American national literature and identity as unfinished during the nineteenth century, much like the incomplete "Paul Revere's Ride." Nevertheless, his America was transnational and transhistorical, encompassing many traditions across space and time. In this vision of American poetry, the culture would thrive long after the United States ceased to exist as a political entity. Paradoxically, this same vision was the source of his anxiety, accounting for the elegiac qualities in his work.

Considering these aspects of Longfellow's aesthetic, political, and literary principles, we can start to see a new beginning to American literature. Reading beyond rather than through his iconic poems forces us to reconsider our notions of sentiment, popular literature, the boundaries of period and nation, and American identity and literary history. Longfellow's canon making reveals a humanism complicated by history and culture and represents the controversies of inclusion. For example, the Theologian's tale, "Torquemada," in "Part First," broaches the guilt, shame, and anger over the history of Jewish persecution. Though the Theologian attempts to make amends over the next two books, the tale remains told, the amity of the inn brittle. This suggests that, however painful it is to include these stories, to exclude them would impoverish our understanding of our literary and national identity. The wide-ranging and inclusive American poet revealed in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* much more closely resembles our canonical account of Walt Whitman—expansive, democratic, containing multitudes—than our caricature of Longfellow. What would American poetry be if Longfellow were its radical progenitor?

Notes

[1] Quotations from the poems included in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* are from *The Writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* and will be cited parenthetically in my text by page number for titles and line numbers for passages. "Paul Revere's Ride" appears on pages 25-29 of volume six; these are lines 1-2.

[2] Sorby refers to Benedict Anderson's conception of imagined communities. For Anderson, the nation is an imagined political community "inherently limited and sovereign" in which members share an "image of their communion" in spite of the fact that they will never meet most of their compatriots (Anderson 6).

[3] It was well known at the time that Longfellow based the characters in *Tales* on personal acquaintances, all of whom had a connection to the Red Horse Tavern, in Sudbury, Massachusetts, the ancestral home of the Howe family whose family history closely resembles that of the Landlord. Lyman Howe, the Landlord, inherited the inn, and the sword of Colonel Ezekiel Howe represented in *Tales* did hang over the fireplace (Van Schaick 22). Luigi Monti, the Sicilian, taught Italian at Harvard and had participated in the 1848 revolution in Italy (Calhoun 232). Henry Ware Wales, the Student, died young in 1856. Like Longfellow, Wales "had broad views of the relationship of races and nations" (Van Schaick 34). Other than his friendship with Longfellow and some of the other historical personages that inhabit the Inn, not much is known about Wales. He studied medicine and, according to the Harvard Medical School book, he "[d]id not practice; traveler and scholar" (qtd. in Van Schaick 30). Daniel Treadwell, the Theologian, was not actually a theologian but a physicist at Harvard and friend of Longfellow. Thomas W. Parsons, the Poet, was a celebrated poet and translator of Dante, though he produced little work. Ole Bull, the Musician, was a famed violinist from Norway and friend of Longfellow. Isaac Edrehi, the Spanish Jew, was born in Morocco and lived variously in Jerusalem, Amsterdam, London, and the United States (39). His father, Moses, was a famous scholar, and Isaac published his books in Boston. However, little is known of his actual connection to Longfellow other than naming him as the source of his character. For more biographical details about the historical persons in *Tales*, see Van Schaick.

[4] What Gioia terms the "rickety framework" of *Tales* has perplexed critics, encouraging them to read the stories in isolation as light entertainment. While most point out Longfellow's stylistic complexity and variety, cultural diversity, and the significant fact that *Tales* consists of more than "Paul Revere's Ride," none examines the relationship of the stories to the larger frame narrative over three volumes, omitting the stories' very important context. Calhoun argues that "the only real weakness of *Tales of a Wayside Inn* . . . is the shapelessness of the project as a whole. As with *Hiawatha*, Longfellow could have gone on adding tale after tale, given the open-endedness of the work" (233). What many dismiss as a weakness in *Tales* overlooks the thematic concerns of the various books. Further, the open-endedness of the work appears to have been an important feature for Longfellow—to represent the evolving state of American national character and the open-endedness of the project of creating an American literature.

[5] This letter appears on page 29 of volume three of Samuel Longfellow's *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: With Extracts from his Journals and Correspondence. Vols.* 1-3. Quotations from this volume of Longfellow's letters are from these volumes and will be cited parenthetically with the volume number followed by the page.

[6] This portion of Longfellow's poem refers to the myth of Meleager, whose life only extended as far as fate had allotted, until a brand upon the hearth had been consumed by fire: " ''T is the brand of Meleager / Dying on the hearth-stone here!'" (53-54).

[7] Longfellow's journals offer little illumination regarding his decision to resume *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. A representative example of the five entries that attend to the second and third installments is his final entry for January 21, 1873: "I have now three tales finished of the Third Part of the Wayside Inn, with Prelude and Interludes" (3: 216).

[8] Richard Ruland notes that "Longfellow's call for intellectual independence preceded Emerson's 'American Scholar Address' by five years" (237). However, Longfellow's conception of intellectual independence was less an act of national will than the necessary result of the passage of time and political independence.

[9] In "Our Native Writers," Longfellow also links his view of Native Americans' "perishing" to literature by noting that, like other civilizations, "the works of art must grow old and perish away from the earth" (239). He would qualify this idea by asserting that art need not perish if it is universal.

[10] In other words, rather than observing a record of events, poetry illuminates the causes of the historical record, the cultural mindset that determined reactions to events or even brought them about: "the poetry of a nation sometimes throws so strong a light upon the page of its history, and renders luminous those obscure passages, which often baffle the long-searching eye of studious erudition" ("Defence" 67-68):

> The great advantage drawn from the study of history is not to treasure up on the mind a multitude of disconnected facts, but from these facts to derive some conclusions, tending to illustrate the movements of the general mind, the progress of society, the manners, customs, and institutions, the moral and intellectual character of mankind in different nations, at different times, and under the operation of different circumstances. Historic facts are chiefly valuable, as exhibiting intellectual phenomena. And so far as poetry exhibits these phenomena more perfectly and distinctly than history does, so far it is superior to history.

National character resides in a people's "thoughts and feelings . . . their manners, [and] customs," and poetry is "national" to the extent that it reflects them.

[11] "The Wind Over the Chimney" echoes the idea that poetry gives shape to historical events when the fire says of past poets, "These are prophets, bards, and seers; / In the horoscope of nations, / Like ascendant constellations, / They control the coming years" (39-42).

[12] For Longfellow, the popular mind represented in poetry supersedes a historical record by depicting the "spirit of the age." Myths and folktales, poetry of forgotten times, impart the culture and history of earlier peoples:

> Besides, there are epochs, which have no contemporaneous history; but have left in their popular poetry pretty ample materials for estimating the character of the times. The events, indeed, therein recorded, may be exaggerated facts, or vague traditions, or inventions entirely apocryphal; yet they faithfully represent the spirit of the ages which produced them; they contain indirect allusions and incidental circumstances, too insignificant in themselves to have been fictitious, and yet on

that very account the most important parts of the poem, in a historical point of view. ("Defence" 68-69).

[13] The destruction of the Acadian homeland provides a strong example of Longfellow's notion of the creation and survival of cultural identity, and his ambivalence about such a prospect. For example, in the prologue of *Evangeline* as the narrator describes the desolation of Acadian culture in Canada the culture survives the death of the nation: "Naught but tradition remains of the beautiful village of Grand-Pré" (15). Furthermore, the forced migration of Acadians to the American south makes *Evangeline* a peculiarly American tale, reflecting Longfellow's integrative internationalism. Acadian history is American history, and both survive beyond geographic and temporal boundaries. Indeed, one can read *Evangeline* as a meditation on, and a contemporary example of, cultural and national survival.

[14] Dana Gioia asserts that Longfellow's "turn toward European models" to assimilate the Western literary tradition was a "nationalistic assertion" "derived from a visionary sympathy" with Goethe's idea of a national literature as a world literature (*Weltliteratur*), "the dialectic by which national literatures would gradually merge into a universal concert" (Gioia 76). Additionally, Armin Paul Frank and Christel-Maria Maas contend that Longfellow turned to the Schlegel brothers to "[produce] new aesthetic shapes and patterns and literary meanings by the integrative reworking of an international variety of correlatives" (Frank 9). Longfellow first cites Friedrich Schlegel in "Defence of Poetry" in his discussion of the ability of popular poetry to reflect the character and the possibilities of American poetry: "If we consider literature in its widest sense, as the voice which gives expression to human intellect,—as the aggregate mass of symbols, in which the spirit of an age or the character of a nation is shadowed forth, then indeed a great and various literature is, without doubt, the most valuable possession of which any nation can boast" (qtd. in "Defence" 68-69). The appeal of such a statement to Longfellow is clear in light of his desire for American poetry to reflect the diversity of the nation's citizenry, democratic institutions, and promise of universality.

[15] In this essay, Longfellow also dismisses "modern English poetry" for its "degenerate spirit," but his distinction between indigenous material and American material that is "original, characteristic, and national" contradicts the idea of a universal cosmopolitan literature. Here, again, both American writers and Native America appear adolescent. By dismissing American writers' use of indigenous material as effeminate, adolescent, and inauthentic, he simultaneously applies this logic to indigenous America. For Longfellow, American Indian cultures are dead or dying, and he regards this literature as inauthentic in some way, though he nevertheless would go on to write *Hiawatha* and continued to laud Native stories. This attitude is further complicated by his use of the last words of "the Choctaw Chief, who died at Washington in the year 1824," Pushmata:

> I shall die, but you will return to your brethren. As you go along the paths, you will see the flowers, and hear the birds; but Pushmataha will see them and hear them no more. When you come to your home, they will ask you, where is

> Pushmataha? And you will say to them, He is no more. *They will hear the tidings like the sound of the fall of a mighty oak in the stillness of the wood.* ("Defence" 74-75, emphasis in original)

Citing Pushmata to illustrate the importance of using native subjects (native trees like the oak), reveals his paradoxical choice to dismiss the use of indigenous culture by American writers while still referring to that culture himself to emphasize his points about making American poetry more "characteristic," more national.

[16] According to Gioia, Longfellow's debut, *Voices of the Night*, "created an influential and new archetype in American culture—the poet professor" and "marked a shift in the poet's cultural role from literary amateur to professional artist; poetry was no longer a pastime but an occupation requiring a lifetime of study" (76). For Gioia, "Longfellow was the first American poet both to define his literary identity and to build its authority by systematically assimilating European literature," thus "[shifting] the poet's frame of cultural reference from Anglo-American to European literature" (76). In this regard, Gioia sees Longfellow's vision of the American poet as clearly linked to "the poet's education, especially the importance of learning poetry in foreign languages and mastering verse technique" (75-76).

[17] In fact, James Russell Lowell shared Longfellow's interest in the relationship of nationality to literature. In his 1849 essay for the *North American Review*, Lowell wrote of *Kavanagh*, "Mr. Longfellow has very good-naturedly and pointedly satirized the rigid sticklers for nationality" (320). Lowell's essay adheres closely to Longfellow's arguments in Chapter XX, asserting the wisdom of writing directly from personal experience:

> Let [American literature] give a true reflection of our social, political, and household life . . . . The mistake of our imaginative writers generally is that, though they may take an American subject, they *costume* it in a foreign or antique fashion. The consequence is a painful vagueness and unreality . . . . The old masters did exactly the opposite of this. They took ancient or foreign subjects, but selected their models from their own immediate neighborhood . . . . Here we arrive at the truth which is wrapped up and concealed in the demand for nationality in literature. It is neither more nor less than this, that authors should use their own eyes and ears, and not those of other people . . . . The error of our advocates of nationality lies in their assigning geographical limits to the poet's range of historical characters as well as his natural scenery. There is no time or place in human nature . . . . Let an American author make a living character, even if it be antediluvian, and nationality will take care of itself. (318-19)

Again, there is a concern with American writers' ventriloquism of cultures that do not belong to them as well as a concern with being overly particular with regard to time and place. Like Longfellow, Lowell argues that our national peculiarities will present themselves without conscious effort, through writers' own experiences and social milieu.

[18] "Part First": "Landlord's Tale: Paul Revere's Ride," "The Student's Tale: The Falcon," "The Spanish Jew's Tale: The Legend of Rabbi Ben Levi," "The Sicilian's Tale:

King Robert of Sicily," "The Musician's Tale: The Saga of King Olaf," "The Theologian's Tale: Torquemada," "The Poet's Tale: The Birds of Killingworth."

"Part Second": "The Sicilian's Tale: The Bell of Atri," "The Spanish Jew's Tale: Kambalu," "The Student's Tale: The Cobbler of Hagenau," "The Musician's Tale: The Ballad of Carmilhan," "The Poet's Tale: Lady Wentworth," "The Theologian's Tale: the Legend Beautiful," "The Student's Second Tale: The Baron of St. Castine."

"Part Third": "The Spanish Jew's Tale: Azrael," "The Poet's Tale: Charlemagne," "The Student's Tale: Emma and Eginhard," "The Theologian's Tale: Elizabeth," "The Sicilian's Tale: The Monk of Casal-Maggiore," "The Spanish Jew's Second Tale: Scanderbeg," "The Musician's Tale: The Mother's Ghost," "The Landlord's Tale: The Rhyme of Sir Christopher."

[19] What Gioia terms the "rickety framework" of *Tales* does not receive critical attention, and thus the tales, in isolation, seem to be amusing and light. Other critics view *Tales* similarly. While many point out Longfellow's stylistic complexity and variety, cultural diversity, and the significant fact that *Tales* consists of more than "Paul Revere's Ride," none examines the relationship of the stories to the larger frame narrative over three volumes, omitting the stories' very important context. Calhoun argues that "the only real weakness of *Tales of a Wayside Inn* . . . is the shapelessness of the project as a whole. As with *Hiawatha*, Longfellow could have gone on adding tale after tale, given the open-endedness of the work" (233). Considering Longfellow's prose writings about a national literature, what many dismiss as a weakness in *Tales* may be its strategy: the open-endedness of the work accords with Longfellow's view of the evolving state of American national character and the open-endedness of the project of creating an American literature.

[20] In addition to figuring the inn as a place of disrepair and site upon which to project his fears about cultural death and national divisions, Longfellow uses the figure of a "wayside inn" as a metaphor for death in the poem "Weariness," published in *Birds of Passage* in 1863. In "Weariness," the speaker anticipates the painful vicissitudes of life that the addressed youth can expect, remarking "I, nearer to the wayside inn / Where toil shall cease and rest begin, / Am weary, thinking of your road" (4-6). In both instances, the figure is a repository for culture and the development, if not culmination, of identity and experience—a point that always signals ambivalence for Longfellow.

[21] For example, Calhoun recapitulates the traditional reception of the poem, noting both its rhythm and opening lines: "Few readers today know more than its opening charge—the resounding verbal hoof-beats of 'Paul Revere's Ride'" (230). In spite of the fact that he sees it as a "nationalist war poem," Calhoun argues that the internecine conflicts of the day "failed to stir [Longfellow's] poetic imagination" even though his journals demonstrate his personal concern over the events of the day (221). And, like many critics, Calhoun recounts the biography of the "real" Paul Revere to demonstrate the poem's myth making. Finally, Calhoun (and Matthew Gartner) note that the popularity of the poem and Revere himself, "did not take place until well after the Civil

War, when Revere's story became a central myth in the Colonial Revivalism of the late 1870s and afterwards" (231).

[22] "The Falcon of Ser Federigo," a tale of courtly love, relates the story of the title character's unrequited love for Monna Giovanna and their fateful reunion and marriage after the death of her husband and young son. However, Longfellow alters the more controversial aspects of the courtly romance to conform to nineteenth-century mores but retains the traditional element of an ennobling passion (Frank 92). For example, Ser Federigo only woos Monna Giovanna when she is unmarried and sacrifices his most prized possession (his falcon) in order to please her.

[23] In "Defence," Longfellow wrote that those who argued against the utility of poetry felt that "it is injurious both to the mind and the heart; that it incapacitates us for the severer discipline of professional study; and that, by exciting the feelings and misdirecting the imagination, it unfits us for the common duties of life" (62). However, like the Student's rejoinder to the Theologian in *Tales*, he puts forward Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton as examples of artists of intellect who contributed greatly to their own times:

> [They were] poets and scholars, whose minds were bathed in song, and yet not weakened; men who severally carried forward the spirit of their age, who soared upward on the wings of poetry, and yet were not unfitted to penetrate the deepest recesses of the human soul, and search out the hidden treasures of wisdom, and the secret springs of thought, feeling, and action. (62)

[24] The only portion of the canticle the king hears chanted are the lines "*Deposuit potentes / De sede, et exaltavit humiles*" ("He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly") (9-10). The phase is from the *Magnificat*, taken from the Gospel of Luke: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (1. 52). The moral of the tale also resonates with Longfellow's criticism of America's pursuit of earthly gain at the expense of poetry.

[25] In the end, the Hidalgo even consigns his daughters to the stake as heretics.

[26] This occasion also reveals the pettiness of group, particularly in response to criticism of their stories. The Student, still smarting from his earlier confrontation with the Theologian, self-servingly reprimands him for the offensive story "[a]s one who long has lain in wait, / With purpose to retaliate, / And thus he dealt the avenging stroke" (13-15). He argues that such "grim tragedies" oppress the soul and fail to uplift the company, noting that the Italian tales would better delight the group.

[27] Longfellow refers to Cædmon, one of the earliest-known Anglo-Saxon poets who paraphrased portions of the Bible as psalms, particularly *Genesis*: "Those lovely lyrics, written by His hand, / Whom Saxon Cædmon calls the Blithe-heart king" (3-4). Longfellow also alludes to the sparrows in the Gospel According to Matthew, "The Sparrows chirped as if they still were proud / Their race in Holy Writ should mentioned

be" (11-12). The passage in Matthew refers to divine awareness of individual life and human worth: "'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet without your Father's knowledge not one of them can fall to the ground. As for you, even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth more than any number of sparrows" (10. 29-31).

[28] Although unheeded by the village council, "There was another audience out of reach, / Who had no voice nor vote in making laws, / But in the papers read his little speech, / And crowned his modest temples with applause" making known to him that "He still was victor, vanquished in their cause" (174-77). Clearly gendered, this general audience also reflects Longfellow's idea of the popular mind, which is not "influenced by individual caprice" or short-sightedness ("Literary Spirit" 24-25).

[29] Through the figures of native and foreign birds, the poem also signals an anxiety over colonization because of the parallels between the genocide and cultural destruction of Native America and the massacre of the native birds that are replaced by foreign avifauna and songs.

[30] Financial panics were common and particularly disorienting after the war, leading to intense clashes between labor and management. Competition for scarce jobs in America's growing industrial centers exacerbated racial and ethnic tensions. National leaders responded to increased immigration with restrictive, xenophobic policies, fearing the importation of radical ideologies. Aggressive westward expansion, increased by the First Transcontinental Railroad, led to more intense conflicts with Native American tribes as well as policies of forced assimilation. As consumer culture proliferated, aesthetic tastes were transformed—novels and short stories increased in popularity and poetry's fortunes among the mass reading public would soon begin to decline. Finally, a steady rationalization of public life resulted in the institutionalization of areas of life from public health to spectator sports and public schools, which many believed homogenized American culture. Reynolds writes of the postbellum shifts that dramatically changed the social structures of America: "Among the losers of the war were the values of individualism, state autonomy, and local power. Among the winners were federalism, centralized control, technology, and industrialism. Not only did the power of the federal government expand during the war, but several laws passed under Lincoln—particularly the National Banking Act and the chartering of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads—gave huge boosts to business. The Union's victory over the Confederacy set the stage for the passage of other laws that favored national and corporate power" (451).

[31] The publication of the final two installments of *Tales of a Wayside Inn* marked the initiation of Longfellow's last decade of life and literary production; his public status was at its apex. In 1867, he published his translation of Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, and in 1868, he traveled to Europe where he was feted by a host of luminaries (Calhoun 239).

[32] The final story of "Part Second," "The Student's Second Tale: The Baron of St. Castine" attempts to unite America and the Old World through the marriage of a French nobleman and a Native American woman, the daughter of Madocawando, a Tarratine chief. Much of the tale concerns itself with European preconceptions about native peoples. For example, the Baron's father dies of dismay at the news of the marriage. Further, the Curate experiences misgivings and fear at the prospect of meeting the woman because his only experience with Native Americans was through "Jesuit books," which represented the Tarratines as painted, with eagle feathers, and animal hides for clothes. Upon meeting the Baroness, the Curate is shamefaced as she speaks Gascon and presents a model of European femininity. The villagers remain suspicious but relent in light of her European grace and accept the couple. However, the scandal that the couple married "as the Indians wed" (via trade) leads to a crisis for the Curate who demands that they "wed as Christians wed," assuaging fears that the Baron had abandoned European culture for Tarratine culture. Though the story suggests that cultural difference and xenophobia can be overcome through understanding, its ending reinscribes European and Christian values and promotes assimilation. Yet at the same time, the mixed couple adds new life to the old Chateau that was previously haunted by loneliness and memories of the dead. By literalizing the marriage of cultures in the tale and including the discomfort of the Europeans, the text dramatizes Longfellow's ambivalence over his literary theory: where will the commingling of cultures take us?

[33] The allusion to Ossian encapsulates an important element of Longfellow's thinking about American literature and accounts for the ghosts that populate the fireside. By the mid-nineteenth century, James Macpherson's *The Poems of Ossian* had enshrined in popular culture the grandeur of "loss and isolation." William Hazlitt described Ossian's poetry as a portrayal of cultural disintegration: "Ossian is the decay and old age of poetry . . . . There is one impression that he conveys more entirely than all other poets, namely the sense of privation, the loss of all things, of friends, of good name, of country" (qtd. in Stafford vi). To be sure, Longfellow shared an Ossianic melancholy. In "The Songs of Selma," the bard worries over his own death and justifies his role as a singer: "I hear, sometimes, the ghosts of bards, and learn their pleasant song. But memory fails in my mind; I hear the call of years. They say, as they pass along, why does Ossian sing? Soon shall he lie in the narrow house, and no bard shall raise his fame . . . . The sons of song are gone to rest: my voice remains, like a blast, that roars, lonely, on a sea-surrounded rock, after the winds are laid" (170). Even more poignantly, and going to the heart of Longfellow's anxiety over cultural death in the face of poetry's demise in nineteenth-century America, is the conclusion of Ossian's "Calthon and Colmal," which offers a stark portrait of the passing of a civilization and the role of poetry in preserving culture and influencing future generations:

> Why, son of the rock, should Ossian tell how Teutha's warriors died? They are now forgot in their land; and their tombs are not found on the heath.—Years came on with their tempests; and the green mounds mouldered away.—Scarce is the grave of Dunthalmo seen, or the place where he fell by the spear of Ossian.—Some gray warrior, half blind with age, sitting by night at the flaming oak of the hall, tells now my actions to his sons, and the fall of the dark Dunthlamo. The

faces of youth bend sidelong towards his voice; surprize and joy burn in their eyes. (174)

The allusion to the voice that Ossian heard suggests Longfellow's regard for poetry of the past as a way to establish the value of his own culture's stories for the future. Indeed, he answers for his own culture the question, "why does Ossian sing?" Such was Longfellow's desire for American poetry and his fear over the devaluation of poets and poetry in America.

[34] The ever-looming presence of death at the inn inspires grim stories and a surprising period of accord as the characters begin to see connections between tales of various origins. The Spanish Jew offers "Azrael," a tale of the angel of death in both Jewish and Islamic traditions, though one of the group attempts to change the subject from "dismal tales of death." Yet the Poet, insists that they continue and offers a tale of Charlemagne, "my Azrael, / An angel mortal as ourselves" (17-18). "Charlemagne" relates the awful terror inspired by "a Man of Iron" accompanied by a black cloud with a light "more terrible than any darkness" upon Desiderio, King of the Lombards. The subsequent "Interlude" exemplifies the transformation of stories "From one into another shape" to reveal the "secret conduits" of the universal. Though "Charlemagne" concerns an historic figure, the men excitedly relate their awareness of other iron men of legend and myth, illustrating the idea in "Part Second" of tales' archetypal recurrence across time and space. For example, they summon many fictional, historic, and mythical figures such as Hephæstus, Talus of *The Faerie Queene*, and Artaxerxes. The Poet adds that such figures are the product of the human need "for the marvellous. / And thus it filled and satisfied / The imagination of mankind, / And this ideal to the mind / Was truer than historic fact," becoming a projection of human fears (20-24). Longfellow agrees on both counts: mythic figures resonate across time and space and are the result of the combination of history and imagination. In "Defence of Poetry" he argues that the "origin of poetry loses itself in the shades of a remote and fabulous age, of which we have only vague and uncertain traditions" and that, in addition to having some link to lived experience, "[i]t is natural, too, that the imagination" should exaggerate and associate mythic powers to the world and to characters (66-67). Yet the synchronicity does not last; the succeeding story, "Emma and Eginhard," casts a "softer light" on the figure of Charlemagne. A monk's tale, "in English rhyme . . . / Gives as the gossip of his time, / In mediæval Latin prose" the story of Charlemagne's daughter and her lover, a scholar, depicts a kind-hearted father and advocate of a sort of meritocracy. While these Charlemagnes recall the conflicting histories examined in "Part First," they also give balancing accounts to demonstrate Longfellow's view that in addition to their universal elements all literatures reflect the spirit of the age that produced them.

[35] The Theologian alludes to Horace's Ode 2.14 to Postumus, which addresses the inevitability of death and vanity of worldly possessions.

[36] The Spanish Jew's tale, an historical martial narrative, "Scanderberg," recounts the liberation of Croia (Krujë, Albania) from the Ottoman empire, delights the group bringing to mind tales of heroism—except the Landlord who remains fearful: "so full of

care / Was he of his impending fate, / That, like the sword of Damocles, / Above his head hung blank and bare . . . So that he could not sit at ease" (39-44). Such continual unease, again, evokes the debate over the utility of poetry. To illuminate the concept of poetry's meaningful utility in spite of fears over imaginative literature, the Student encourages the Musician to tell a story in keeping with the "marvellous and strange" mood of the night, resulting in an eerie ballad of a ghostly mother's love, "The Mother's Ghost." The Musician offers as preamble the story's impact on him as a child: "In accents tender as the verse; / And sometimes wept, and sometimes smiled / While singing it, to see arise / The look of wonder in my eyes, / And feel my heart with terror beat" (75-79). By turns frightening and tender, the story contains a strong moral message and makes a lasting impression, "Clearly imprinted on my brain" (81).

CHAPTER III

WALT WHITMAN'S "SONG OF MYSELF" AND THE DEFINITION OF AMERICAN POETRY

In 1855, Walt Whitman introduced one of America's most enduring personas–"Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist . . . . no stander above men and women or apart from them"–in the poem that would eventually become "Song of Myself."[1] His inaugural poem introduced one of the most original American voices and a dizzying variety of new subjects, diction, and themes to American poetry. "I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you": Whitman's opening salvo in his poetic juggernaut, perhaps the most read lines in American poetry, reflects our lasting portrait of Whitman, making legendary his optimism and radically sympathetic democratic spirit. The speaker links his fate to the reader's through apostrophe and shared assumptions, beginning a mystical experience that reveals democracy's shared power and responsibility and unconditional acceptance of the ordinary. Supremely representative, the speaker glorifies "you" by glorifying himself. He avoids traditional hierarchies, grounding his claims instead upon the average person, an embodiment of speaker and reader whose likeness is signified by atoms rather than race, sex, or social class. The physicality denoted by atoms points to Whitman's central concerns: corporeal individuality and the individual as a microcosm of the nation.

The poet of the body also announces a distinctive new prosody. His lines, like the speaker, "lean and loafe," not driven by metrical concerns or rhymes. As the figure of summer grass conjures the season's lingering days and the speaker's easygoing contemplation, so, too, do the long lines of free verse evoke the poem's message of informality. Additionally, the lines avoid figurative language, favoring colloquial diction and allowing a more idiomatic expression. Such a diversity of rhythms and expanded lexicon democratize poetry by increasing its possibilities to represent ordinary speech.

So groundbreaking was "Song of Myself" that it defined the poet and his poetry for 150 years—but more, it defined American poetry. By the twenty-first century, to describe Whitman and "Song of Myself" is to describe American poetry—formally innovative, inclusive, idiomatic, contradictory. It has become an article of faith that American poetry begins with, and responds to, Whitman: "Walt Whitman has emerged, over time and through successive generations of criticism, as the central poet of our literature. Indeed, American poetry may be read as a series of reactions to Whitman" (Pease 148). *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003) holds that the poet's example both inspired and epitomized poetry of the twentieth century: "As one reads modern and contemporary American poets, one doesn't so much trace Whitman's influence as locate individual writers by their attitude toward him. . . . In sum, in the history of modern and contemporary poetry, Whitman has been a rallying cry, an inspiration, a battleground" (1). In fact, by the last quarter of the twentieth-century the poet and his poem remained the national touchstone of American poetry. For instance, Donald Barlow Stauffer, attempting to limn American poetry in his *A Short History of American Poetry* (1974) offers "two large generalizations" that both invoke Whitman:

"The first is that American poetry is heterogeneous: it is large, it contains multitudes, as Walt Whitman might say. Like the land itself, America's poets are diverse in attitude and character"; the other is that "American poets are in the main antitraditional, or at least forward looking" (xv). Jay Parini's unifying feature of American poetry, an impulse "to speak for the American people at large—for them and to them . . . a brave and bold assumption that underlies each visionary project" (x-xi), is decidedly Whitmanian. Additionally, he argues that "at the center of American poetry has been the obsession with the long poem: the poem equal in size, power, and scope to the growing power of the nation state as a whole" (xii), evoking both Whitman's legendary poem as well as the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it" (6).

Alan Golding attributes this elevation of Whitman to a general turn away from "explicit" moral and political standards of compilation toward a notion of American poetry as a contrarian literary form, the result of an evaluative division between popular and high culture, a reaction to the popularity of the novel (*Outlaw* 20-21). Edmund Clarence Stedman's praise of Whitman's "revolt against social and literary traditions" in his *An American Anthology* (1900), then, articulates this shift in the estimation of poetic value that would continue with the modernists' reactions against their literary precursors: "after Stedman, editors began increasingly to value the poetically innovative" (20-22). Whitman's stylistic singularity among his nineteenth-century peers, clearly places him at the beginning of this new lineage. Louis Untermeyer affirmed Whitman as a pivotal figure in American poetry. In the fourth edition of his perennial anthology, *Modern American Poetry* (1930), Untermeyer argued that "The influence of Whitman can

scarcely be overestimated. It has touched every shore of letters, quickened every current of contemporary art" (5). And, of course, "Song of Myself" emblematizes the poet and his poetry through its inclusiveness and optimistic celebration of the average: "It is this large naturalism, this affection for all that is homely and of the soil, that sets Whitman apart . . . as our first American poet" (7). In his enthusiasm for Whitman's innovations and celebrations, Untermeyer predictably conflates the poet and his persona: "our great poetic emancipator. He led the way toward a wider aspect of democracy; he took his readers out of fusty, lamp-lit libraries into the course sunlight and the buoyant air" (5-6). By 1950, in spite of the New Critics' disdain of Whitman's influence because of their contempt for his self-conscious nationalism, generic violations, sensuality, and his embrace by the political left, the poet and his poem were ingrained in conceptions of American poetry.[2] Poet and poem have remained the quintessential articulation of American ideals and poetry since.

However, as decisive as "Song of Myself" has been, it does not comprise the entirety of Walt Whitman's work, nor does it reflect the dramatic changes that both he and the nation underwent over the nearly forty years after he began *Leaves of Grass*.[3] Who would our archetypal modern democratic poet be if we looked beyond "Song of Myself"? The Whitman we have come to know through "Song of Myself" is belied by the visions and revisions of his work over the span of his creative life in response to personal experiences and dramatic public events, in particular the Civil War.

It is easy to forget that Whitman did not always enjoy this status. According to Sam Abrams, though initially praised in the nineteenth century, Whitman never rose above minor status during his lifetime because the "reputable literati . . . realized the

intractability of Whitman's radicalism" (12). As evidence of his waning significance in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, Abrams points to the exclusion of Whitman from "three 'major' American poetry anthologies," appearing between 1870 and 1875, "claiming to define the canon of the 'great' and 'best,'" published by William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (13).[4] Though Whitman did return to anthologies in the twentieth century, his poetry did not initially claim the importance it enjoys today; for instance, Bliss Carmen's *Oxford Book of American Verse* (1925) gave "almost twice as much space to Longfellow as to Whitman" (Abrams 9). While Whitman's work found appreciative audiences in England, it was not until F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941) appeared that American scholars began to reconsider Whitman's importance.[5] Today's Whitman is the result of critical revaluation of his work in response to modern American poetry of the twentieth century. In the fifth revised edition of his influential anthology, *Modern American Poetry* (1936), Louis Untermeyer acknowledges a key difference between the fifth and fourth editions of his anthology—the fifth edition begins with Whitman (the fourth began with Dickinson) "with whom modern American poetry may be said to have begun" (v). Identifying Whitman as the progenitor of modern American poetry is indicative of what Golding recognizes as a larger shift in the history of American canon formation, beginning with Stedman's *American Anthology, 1787-1900* (1900). Stedman commended both Whitman and Dickinson as poets who produced works that "revolt[ed] against social and literary traditions," an assessment that Golding argues expressed the separation of popular and "cultivated" taste that came about as a response to fiction's domination of the book market ("History" 294). At least since Stedman's anthology, the "assumption that has

become almost a critical article of faith[,] that the best American poets react against rather than support the poetic and cultural values of their times," has marked a "shift in the principles by which a canon is selected" (295-96). This conception that "the best American poets" are rebels conforms to our favored Whitmanian persona ("one of the roughs . . . Disorderly"), a persona that we now insistently impose on both the poet and his corpus.

But this insubordinate, iconoclastic poet can only endure by ignoring Whitman's more conventional and even reactionary impulses, impulses that often conflict or coexist with his more radical themes and formal innovations. And yet the representative American poet, embodied by "Song of Myself," is still visible in recent teaching anthologies in spite of critical attempts to add nuance to our understanding of Whitman in the last twenty years. Though scholars like David S. Reynolds, Michael Moon, and Betsy Erkkila have recovered much of Whitman's popular roots, his sexuality, and his intense political engagement, these clarifications do not affect our strategies for including anthology selections or, more importantly, how we read Whitman.[6] For example, although Sam Abrams lambastes the academic and publishing establishment for presenting us with a kinder, gentler poet and continually notes the subversive Whitman, his readings support the Whitman (supremely democratic, supremely confident) of "Song of Myself," illustrated by his interpretation of "Respondez!" that ostensibly calls our attention to Whitman's disillusionment with democracy but ultimately confirms his faith in the same institution: "Paradoxically, 'Respondez!' reinforces rather than weakens our perception of Whitman's faith in democracy. Only a profound belief can motivate so profound a disappointment. Whitman rages because he . . . is perfectly certain of his

vision, and of the capability of his fellows to realize that vision" (29). Like others, Abrams attempts to add nuance to Whitman's corpus while simultaneously preserving a familiar version of Whitman. True, much of Whitman's work conforms to our sense of the persona of "Song of Myself," but we cannot gloss over the contradictions that clusters such as "Calamus" and "Drum-Taps" present. Instead of an all-inclusive democratic vision, these clusters dwell upon exclusivity, or the persona's difficulty in attaining the radical sympathy of "Walt," even though they include his familiar democratic announcements. Our rereadings and recoveries should give a different impression of Whitman rather than support our original assumptions that both simplify the biography and render biographical the poetry. Indeed, we typically rediscover Whitman only to find "Song of Myself" again.

Part of the problem is an imprecise notion of Whitman's democracy, resulting in an overly literal interpretation of his representations of the body and sexuality. Whitman's figuration of the body, rooted in the sciences of his day, reflects his evolving democratic ideal.[7] Central to his idea of the relationship of the citizen to the state was the Platonic view that the state reflected the character of the individual. This relationship figures varyingly in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* as the biological vicissitudes of the individual body, sexual intercourse and reproduction, and the emotional (and sometimes physical) relationships between families, teachers and students, and lovers.[8] These differing relationships as models of democracy reveal his changing poetic explorations of a unified vision of America's democratic national identity in the face of political and social realities that posed significant challenges to his original inclusive ideal. In "Song of Myself," Whitman achieves universality by focusing on the autonomy of the

individual, the body, reproduction, birth and death, and, importantly, autoerotic impulses and acts.[9] But this vision would be superseded by 1860 after personal and political realities challenged Whitman's ideas about the source of democracy.

Though a slim volume of twelve poems without titles or clear divisions, Whitman's 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, vast in scope, ambitious in endeavor, grandly sought to unite a troubled nation. Responding to the political strains of mid-nineteenth-century America concerning slavery and westward expansion, Whitman created a poetic voice and aesthetic to encapsulate the fiercely divided proclamations regarding national union. Through an inclusive democratic model, Whitman aspired to leave behind the European legacy of strict class difference in favor of social unity. His background in partisan journalism, reform movements, his interest in classical ideas, and medicine and science, enabled him to arrive at a conception of the American citizen that harmonized with his political project of unification. Whitman's American, that favored persona "Walt Whitman," derived substance from the absolute unification of the body with the nation, including the poet, the masses, time and space, and ultimately the soul. Locating these disparate elements in the corporeal body, Whitman advances a poetic and progressive philosophy of the individual as the site of the nation's character. He did not always aspire to such a grand vision, yet the clash of a vibrant reformist impulse and a cynical political scene radicalized his poetic project.

From its founding the republic sustained a thriving reformist culture, which only increased in intensity during the 1840s and 50s.[10] Westward expansion, beginning in

earnest with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, exacerbated the divisions in the social and political spheres of the nation: the spread of slavery, the railroad, and the federal territories established a nation of tension and dissension.[11] Committed to the Free Soil campaign, as well as to the cause of "freemen" whose labor the extension of slavery into the new territories threatened, Whitman became deeply involved in the politics of the time, even attending the Democratic presidential convention of 1848 as a delegate (Loving, *Song* 142-43). While Whitman always exhibited a reformist impulse, especially in his journalistic writing, the Compromise of 1850 would dramatically transform his relatively benign, if progressive, politics.[12]

By 1850, tension over the inclusion of slavery in the territories of the westward-growing republic reached a fever pitch. In January, with secession already publicly suggested and even favored by some abolitionists, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky "propose[d] a compromise to ease the growing tension between North and South" (151).[13] Known as the Compromise of 1850, the omnibus bill included five agreements that attempted to placate many competing interests: admitting California as a free state, allowing New Mexico and Utah to decide the issue of slavery on their own, buying disputed territory from Texas, abolishing the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and strengthening the Fugitive Slave Law.[14] Many northerners, including Whitman, saw the law as a politically expedient attempt to keep the Union together rather than a principled solution that, ironically, only succeeded in making war more likely.

The Compromise of 1850 and consequent strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Law radicalized Whitman. He attempted to participate in the political dialogue by traditional means, for example, by writing to John Parker Hale in 1852 asking that he

accept the Democratic nomination for President. In this letter, Whitman prescribes a return to Jeffersonian democracy, where the candidates would "directly" address "the people" "face-to-face . . . in the old heroic Roman fashion" (*Collected* 39-40). In this same letter, Whitman reveals his increasing cynicism: "New York is the most radical city in America. It would be the most anti-slavery city, if that cause hadn't been made ridiculous by the freaks of the local leaders here" (40). The "freaks" that resulted in the Compromise of 1850 spurred Whitman publicly to "condemn Washington politicians" in verse, composing four antislavery poems in four months (Loving "Roots" 102). Beginning with "Song for Certain Congressmen," the last poem Whitman wrote using traditional prosody, and ending with "Blood-Money," his first use of free verse, linked his political activism and his emerging poetics.[15] Though Whitman's reformist interests included political figures as well as temperance, hygiene, and fair wages, he never fully accepted "social cure-alls" (99). This was especially the case with slavery since Whitman saw all-or-nothing approaches to social reform as divisively narrow minded, as seeking political conformity rather than democratic diversity (99). He began to turn away from the political fray, looking for democratic possibilities elsewhere that would surface in the poems of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass.*

As early as 1851 Whitman was searching for alternatives to the corrupt partisan democracy he saw in Washington. In a speech to the Brooklyn Art Union, he proposed that American artists consider ancient Greece for inspiration in presenting their subjects as the "basis of a redeemed community" (Pollack 76).[16] Classical ideas and radical politics worked well, for Whitman, both to reflect and reform a nation headed toward war. Whitman's own thoughts about the relationship of the individual to the state, for

instance, resemble the Platonic notion that societies were not "made of sticks and stones, but of men whose individual characters" determined the shape or direction their states would assume (Plato 297). This clearly informs the persona of "Song of Myself": "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating drinking and breeding" (497-98). Such a character reflected the political and social realities of 1850s America in the individual citizen and allowed Whitman to illustrate a way to restore equilibrium to the imbalanced political body. Though Whitman would later debate the efficacy of democratic rule, in the 1850s he fervently endorsed a "populist form of liberal democracy" and all of the contradictions inherent in such a government (Cmiel 211, 215). In fact, "Walt Whitman" sounds remarkably like Plato's description of the democratic citizen in the *Republic*:

> Liv[ing] from day to day, indulging the pleasure of the moment. One day it's wine, women and song, the next water to drink and a strict diet; one day it's hard physical training, the next indolence and careless ease, and then a period of philosophic study. Often he takes to politics . . . saying or doing whatever comes into his head. Sometimes all his ambitions and efforts are military, sometimes they are all directed to success in business. There's no order or restraint in his life, and he reckons his way of living . . . pleasant, free and happy. (297)

As much as we value this today in Whitman, the manifold democratic citizen embodied the contradictory impulses (most starkly illustrated by the bitter debates over the expansion of slavery into the western territories) that divided the nation in the 1840s and 50s and that the poet hoped to resolve in a single figure. Most importantly, however,

Whitman saw in classical illustrations the connection between the individual character and the state, a direction and figure for his poetic project.

Whitman's use of the individual body and its ability to resolve agitated states as a figure for the nation's contradictions is most apparent in the autoeroticism in section 28 of "Song of Myself." This section offers an anxious portrayal of the dissolution of the self with the onset of sexual passion. Initially resisted, the "prurient provokers" ultimately succeed in seducing the not-entirely unwilling persona of the poem: "I and nobody else am the greatest traitor" (637). According to Betsy Erkkila, this sequence of "bodily perturbance" becomes "a trope for disorder in the political sphere" (106). Figuring bodily disquiet as political and social division allowed Whitman to look toward the body itself to move beyond the continual and irreconcilable disagreements troubling the country. The tone of the following section changes from agitation to release and calm, suggesting the benefit of allowing distressing urges to run their course rather than repress them:

> You villain touch! what are you doing? . . . . my breath is tight in
>
> its throat;
>
> Unclench your floodgates! you are too much for me.
>
> Blind loving wrestling touch! Sheathed hooded sharptoothed touch!
>
> Did it make you ache so leaving me?
>
> Parting tracked by arriving . . . . perpetual payment of the perpetual
>
> loan,
>
> Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward.

Sprouts take and accumulate . . . . stand by the curb prolific and vital,

Landscapes projected masculine full-sized and golden. (639-46)

Here the generative and restorative powers of sexual release indicate that what seems threatening and disruptive to the body politic actually returns and reproduces the nation in the figure of the democratic grass. Erkkila reads this section as a scene of interrupted masturbation, contending that Whitman figures the restoration of balance to national life as conscious self-regulation of the body (106). Acknowledging Whitman's suspicion of masturbation demonstrated in some of his public health tracts, Erkkila argues that the speaker successfully manages the "onslaught of touch" never achieving release: "By demonstrating the restoration of bodily balance after taking democracy to 'the verge of the limit' in a masturbatory fit, Whitman tests and enacts poetically the principle of self-regulation" (106). However, the persona clearly surrenders to the "villain touch," evidenced by the ejaculation imagery. In fact, whether the scene is masturbatory or a representation of sexual union is beside the point. What is clear, and most important to Whitman's body politic, is that tranquility is restored. In this case, orgasm reconciles the competing impulses of the persona's body, and, by extension, the nation. Thus, recompense rather than regulation occurs in the passage, the result of the body's natural processes not an act of will imposed upon it from without. In political terms, half-hearted attempts at self-control both jarred Whitman's sense of individual freedom and resulted in inadequate solutions to national problems (like the Compromise of 1850 that only prolonged rather than resolved conflict). Whitman figures the body's impulse toward tranquility as a criticism of political compromises that preserve division and as a call to

war. Moreover, this aggressive sexual impulse is procreative and perpetual. There is no interruption of sexual release in sections 28 and 29 but rather its ultimate success as "Sprouts take and accumulate." Whitman saw life and death, sexual desire and release, as natural rhythms in which the body itself will be self-corrective and reproductive if allowed to satisfy its urges and carry out its cyclical ebb and flow: "Parting track'd by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan, / Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward." In addition, phrenology and its attending eugenic theory claim that the healthy satisfaction of desire yields more and better individuals; periods of repose followed by violent urges of sensual turmoil give rise to the creative processes of life, the "perpetual payment of the perpetual / loan." Thus the nation is both sustained and improved.

Whitman's initial turn away from party politics before 1855 saw the dangerous approach of the Civil War in precisely these terms—inevitable, but resulting in "recompense richer afterward" (644). His attitude toward the approaching war reflected his democratic project and progressive theory of life and death, which he outlined in the opening lines of the "Preface" to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*: "the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms" (5). Consequently, the democratic bodily processes of "Walt Whitman" suggest that violent national conflict is natural even within a unified democratic political body. As much as "Song of Myself" calls for an inclusive democracy, it also welcomes war as a means to restore national equilibrium and usher in a period of unity and progress.

However much we remain committed to the vision of "Song," the poet himself did not. By the 1860 version of *Leaves of Grass*, he had moved on to other configurations

of democracy that responded to both his personal and political realities. As the nation edged ever closer to war, he began to articulate a homogenous model of political identity that would unite the country through sameness and exclusivity.[17] In the 1860 edition, Whitman no longer figures the nation as a single body contending with competing impulses. Many of the 134 poems added to *Leaves* do not represent the autonomy of the individual body as the source of democracy, replacing this concept with a sense of shared experience. In other words, the character of the nation resides in the emotional bonds between citizens rather than in the individuals.[18] Whitman's speakers no longer seek to contain contradictions, multitudes, or a "kosmos" but to reform the nation with a singularity of vision. Further, with the exception of "Enfans d'Adam," biology (the clash of opposites) largely recedes as a primary figure for national reproduction and unity. Beginning in 1860, Whitman looks for a generative national model that does not rely on biological reproduction: the tutorial relationship, "the manly love of comrades," is what he discovers.[19]

In "Calamus," most famously, Whitman explores the possibilities of relationships between men. David S. Reynolds notes this shift in "Calamus" toward reform through brotherhood, asserting that, by 1860, Whitman "hopes the theories and practices of antebellum friendship can be arrayed against" the political failures of the previous decade (402). However, like many critics, Reynolds is quick to point out historical specificity with regard to conceptions of male-male affection, arguing that "[p]assionate intimacy between people of the same sex was common" in antebellum America, and "the passages about same-sex love in his poems were not out of keeping with then-current theories" such as "the culture of romantic friendship" and the "phrenological notion of

adhesiveness . . . and passional social bonding" that "underscored the healthiness of such love" (391).[20] While the practice of passionate social friendship is integral to Whitman's efforts to reform the nation, discussions of friendship alone leave out important resonances in Whitman's work in 1860 and beyond, particularly the role of education in promoting these emotional attachments and national reform. Throughout "Calamus," the teacher-student relationship encapsulates such passionate friendship, linking it to education and reform. For example, the first lines of "To a Pupil" link pedagogy to reform and citizenship, proposing that charisma can be taught to promote bonding between citizens: "Is reform needed? is it through you? / The greater the reform needed, the greater the Personality you need to accomplish it. . . . Do you not see how it would serve to have such a body and soul that when you enter the crowd an atmosphere of desire and command enters with you, and every one is impress'd with your Personality?" (1-4). Additionally, Reynolds argues that this cluster "promotes the message that comradeship should be the model, the institution to reform the nation" (402). However, Whitman's notion of comradeship as a democratic institution had a ready model in Athenian pederasty. Such a social and political configuration embraced same-sex emotional, social, and political bonds.

Greek model pederasty had special appeal for Whitman because it articulated his sexuality as well as his pedagogical inclinations and offered a model of a unified social organization. He was also undoubtedly influenced by the concept of pederastic bonds, evidenced by his comments regarding *Phædrus*, noting the centrality of '[t]he passion inspired in one man, by another man, more particularly a . . . beautiful youth . . . . His whole treatment assumes the illustration of Love by the attachment a man has for another

man, (a beautiful youth as aforementioned, more especially)—(it is astounding to modern ideas)" (qtd. in Pollack 76-77). Whitman was thus aware of pederastic, if not homosexual, relations between men in classical Greece and the "higher and purer regions" they occupied in the ancient social discourse. Greek pederasty principally served social aims. The Athenian model emphasized the relationship of an older male and a younger male in the pursuit of an educational and philosophic relationship that prepared young males for the "privileges and responsibilities of adult citizenship through friendship" (Dellamora 44).[21]

The opening poem of "Calamus," "In Paths Untrodden," presents a narrative of personal conversion in which the speaker, previously lost in "the life that exhibits itself" (3), finds his calling through singing songs of "manly attachment" that reside in "the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest" (11). The poem, which begins "Calamus" in all editions, structures the cluster in several significant ways, establishing the need for reform and avoiding traditional hierarchies of race, class, and gender. The speaker achieves this revelation by moving away from the well-traversed, densely populated urban environments celebrated in "Song of Myself" to the bucolic pond-side:

> In paths untrodden,
> In the growth by margins of pond-waters,
> Escaped from the life that exhibits itself,
> From all the standards hitherto publish'd, from the pleasures, profits,
> conformities,
> Which too long I was offering to feed my soul,
> Clear to me now standards not yet publish'd, clear to me that my soul,

That the soul of the man I speak for rejoices in comrades. (1-7)

This movement presents a shift in Whitman's poetic project signaling his nascent uncertainty about a diverse democracy. The speaker's decidedly exclusive move toward the edges of society, the "growth by margins of pond-waters," contrasts sharply with the symbols of universality that pervade "Song of Myself," especially corporeality ("For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" [3]) and the ubiquitous grass ("a uniform hieroglyphic, / . . . Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones" [106-07]). Political realities and gender and racial differences were beginning to challenge Whitman's conception of American democracy as the coming together of opposites. For example, nineteenth-century "relations between men and women were often characterized by exploitation and duplicity with the rise of capitalism" and Whitman, the journalist, despairing at the inequality of these relationships, wrote about these problems, exemplified by "rising divorce and infidelity," in the *Daily Times* (Reynolds 392).

Additionally, though a staunch unionist, the poet was troubled by the divisive potential of the abolition movement (384). And while he participated in both the free love and abolition movements to a degree, he sought to transform the nation through poetry rather than direct political action. In "Calamus," Whitman attempts to avoid these obstacles to equality by refusing to engage in a dialogue about race and removing women from the now masculine landscape. Robert K. Martin proposes that Whitman's refusal to include women in his formulation of the democratic couple resulted from "the equality of men" that made "any relationship between them more democratic than any heterosexual relationship, which must be founded upon inherent inequalities of power and status" (*Homosexual* 87).

In this tumultuous and inequitable context, society is unsatisfying for the speaker of "In Paths Untrodden." Here, Whitman begins to refigure the universal as the particular—the secret life not exhibited, existing at the margins. Instead of the clash of differences, homosociality, if not homosexuality, equality through similarity is now the figure for the nation: "Clear to me now standards not yet publish'd, clear to me that my soul . . . rejoices in comrades" (6-7). The speaker universalizes his secret experience of "manly attachment" and "types of athletic love" to include all men:

> Strong upon me the life that does not exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest,
>
> Resolv'd to sing no songs to-day but those of manly attachment,
>
> Projecting them along that substantial life,
>
> Bequeathing hence types of athletic love,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I proceed for all who are or have been young men,
>
> To tell the secret of my nights and days,
>
> To celebrate the need of comrades. (11-18)

Now, the physical and emotional bonds between men will be the new universal upon which to reform the nation, to establish a democratic identity based on sameness. Finally, the appearance of "comradeship" in his poetry promotes a relationship of social equals, excluding women and minorities. By 1860, then, a bond between individual men represents the nation rather than the autonomy of the individual body, and emotive ties, not the coherence of a single body, bind the nation together. Creating and sustaining this attachment became a prime concern for Whitman as the nation hurtled toward war. In

"Calamus," the teacher-student dyad exemplifies and encourages emotional bonds between men as the new paradigm of democratic citizenship.

In addition to establishing "manly attachment" as a model of reform in "Calamus," Whitman's movement toward the "margins" in "In Paths Untrodden" addresses the issue of effeminacy according to gendered terms of "hard" versus "soft." According to David M. Halperin, from "the ancient world through the Renaissance," a man "who pursued a life of pleasure" was considered effeminate (111). The delineation of effeminate males along gender types was constructed, in mid-nineteenth-century America, in just this way. For example, masculine men were considered to have "extremely powerful sex drives . . . making them want to have sex with either men or women" (Reynolds 397). Feminine men, on the other hand, somehow exhibited "soft" qualities associated with women or were "overcivilized," domesticated (397; Martin, *Hero* 49). Neither definition could be said to cling exclusively to men who had sex with men. Whitman's conception of homosexual democracy rejected the effeminate male associated with the "pleasures, profits, conformities" of American society (49). Therefore, in order to avoid the hierarchy implicit in feminized civilization, Whitman's speaker moves beyond the "abash'd" feminine world into a homogenous, masculine world of "manly attachment." This masculine margin allows for the expression of tender emotions among men without what Halperin describes as the "tension between gender norms and erotic pleasure in traditional male cultures" (112). Thus, the speaker, having moved beyond such complications is "No longer abash'd, (for in this secluded spot I can respond as I would not dare elsewhere,)" (10). In the initial poem of "Calamus" Whitman

offers a universalized masculine world of same-sex desire and activity that evades contemporary hierarchies of soft and hard.

As Whitman attempted to move away from the constraints of male-female distinctions that inform his conception of feminized society, his use of pederastic bonds as a symbol of male "adhesion" or "manly attachment" created several possibilities and problems. Almost no subject has generated as much controversy among scholars as the appearance of pederastic relationships in Whitman's poetry. We must historicize these relationships and question our contemporary sense of their inherent inequality, manifesting the "traditional, hierarchical model of male sexual relations [that represent] sexual preference without sexual orientation" (Halperin 116). Here pederasty refers "to the male sexual penetration of a subordinate male—subordinate in terms of age, social class, gender style, and/or sexual role" (113). This traditional definition supports normative gender roles:

> This is sex as hierarchy, not mutuality, sex as something done to someone by someone else, not a common search for shared pleasure or a purely personal, private experience in which larger social identities based on age or social status are submerged or lost. Here sex implies difference, not identity, and it turns on a systematic division of labor. (115)

But conscious of the possibility of male-male relations to maintain difference rather than to construct a democratic identity, Whitman structures "Calamus" to mitigate rank. In other words, while retaining the hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship to facilitate the authority of the poet-teacher, he qualifies this relationship in ways that suggest

equality and choice. It is important to note the pedagogical aspects of the relationship to appreciate Whitman's political and social aims.

For Whitman, the educational aims of the pederastic model of male-male relations are of vital importance because they offer a way to construct a personal and national identity based upon the social, emotional, and sexual bonds of the male couple.[22] Representations of the teacher-student relationship between men appear throughout "Calamus" and emphasize both the potential difficulties attached to traditional definitions of pederasty and the democratic promise of such a relationship. For example, in "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand" the speaker is figured as the poet-teacher (even as the book itself). Apostrophizing the reader, the speaker presumes that the student initiates the relationship by picking up the book, reversing the traditional formulation of a socially privileged man choosing his sexual object. As the poem progresses, the speaker questions the reader, casting the reader as a "candidate" for the speaker's "affections," thus activating the pedagogical structure of the student and teacher within a pederastic relationship: "Who is he that would become my follower? / Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections?" (5-6). Already, Whitman has substantially altered the formulation of the classical pederastic relationship in terms of power but retained the configuration necessary to begin instruction.

Once the relationship has been established, the speaker sets out a number of caveats that both articulate the demands of initiation into democratic citizenship and bestow the agency of choice on the student-reader: "The way is suspicious . . . / . . . I alone would expect to be your sole and exclusive standard . . . / Therefore release me now before troubling yourself any further" (7-11). For Whitman, choosing partners is a

specifically democratic endeavor. Relying on the Fourierian theory of "passional attraction," in which people are "bonded by an intrapersonal magnetic pull as powerful as gravity," where love is "freely given, freely shared" but never coercive (Reynolds 224, 225), a theory that goes to the heart of Whitman's new model of democracy, he offers this choice as a way to express individual freedom. Passional theory, according to Reynolds, "was at its peak of cultural influence [during the writing of "Calamus"] . . . . Passional attraction simultaneously permitted individual freedom, strong bonding between people of the same sex, and self-determination in heterosexual relations" (226).[23] Whitman incorporates the language of sexual theories that called for freedom of choice "according to true feeling rather than exterior social codes, so that every individual heeded the inner call of his or her sexual voice" (226-27). The poem evokes a playfully erotic give-and-take between the reader-student and the speaker-teacher recalling the imagery of the margins hidden from view ("in some wood for trial, / Or back of a rock in the open air" [12-13]), the setting of homosexual democracy, reciprocal desire, and tutorial. Thus, Whitman maintains the sexual and emotional charge, pedagogical functions, and democratic potential of the pederastic relationship.[24]

After establishing the need for reform and fashioning the structure of a democracy of comrades in "In Paths Untrodden" and "Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand," the speaker performs the male-oriented pedagogical rituals of the secret fraternity in "These I Singing In Spring." Here he moves toward the margins, away from civilization: "I traverse the garden the world, but soon I pass the gates, / Now along the pond-side . . . / Now by the post-and-rail fences . . . / Far, far in the forest" (4-8). Martin characterizes this move into the masculine wilderness as "the passage from domesticity

into the more primitive" because "[t]he flowers of the garden are hardly suitable as a token of comradeship: they are too domestic, too 'feminine,' too cultivated" (*Homosexual* 65). The speaker, surrounded by a masculine "troop," enacts the pederastic model of democratic citizenship, teaching men the various plants to stand as symbols of manly attachment and love, giving them freely:

> Here, lilac, with a branch of pine,
> Here, out of my pocket, some moss which I pull'd off a live-oak in Florida as it hung trailing down,
> Here, some pinks and laurel leaves, and a handful of sage,
> And here what I now draw from the water, wading in the pond-side,
> (O here I last saw him that tenderly loves me, and returns again never to separate from me,
> And this, O this shall henceforth be the token of comrades, this calamus-root shall,
> Interchange it youths with each other! let none render it back!). (15-21)

The speaker issues a directive to share love equally and without reservation. The poem ends by moving from the universal back to the particular as the speaker reserves the calamus root for "them that love as I myself am capable" (28), presumably the speaker's acolytes. Thus, the lecture on symbols of manly affection emphasizes the function of pederastic pedagogy, namely that national reform through emotional attachment—citizenship—must be taught. Further, citizenship remains exclusive even though the benefits of learning manly love democratize authority and desire within the tutorial relationship.

Whitman connects this model of citizenship to national survival and unity in "[States!]," rejecting the radical democracy espoused in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Removed after 1860 and used to create "For You O Democracy" in "Calamus" (1867) and "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice" in "Drum-Taps" (1865), the poem repudiates the notion of a nation of laws (political and legal compromises had led the nation to the brink of destruction) in favor of dramatic national reformation. Rather than a nation bound by laws ("States! / Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?" [1-2]), Whitman demands a nation held together by loving friendship:

> There shall from me be a new friendship—It shall be called after my name,
> It shall circulate through The States, indifferent of place,
> It shall twist and intertwist them through and around each other—Compact shall
> they be, showing new signs,
> Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom
> Those who love each other shall be invincible,
> They shall finally make America completely victorious, in my name. (11-16)

Not only will such love keep the nation together, but it will preserve democracy: "For you these, from me, O Democracy, to serve you, ma femme! / For you! for you, I am trilling these songs" (41-42). Though the oracular, sometimes Christlike, speaker ("in my name") and his catalogues recall "Song of Myself," the speaker of "[States!]" is militant and exclusive, even calling for the sacrifice of many to defend the state: "If need be, a thousand shall sternly immolate themselves for one" (23).[25] Further, the poem presents same-sex relations rather than the clash of opposites as the foundation of a robust democratic society. Far from assuming a hierarchical division of labor, this representation

of the pedagogical aims of pederasty universalizes "adhesion" rather than stratifies it along the divisions of "age, social class, gender style, and . . . sexual role," as Halperin suggests (113). Indeed, the poem posits male-male love—the nexus of providence, sex, and pedagogy (the "new friendship")—as a potent model of equality and unity for all of America. The conjugal family, civil society, and even international relations ("These shall be masters of the world under a new power" [29]) are ideas Whitman explores more fully after the Civil War.

Though Untermeyer claims that the third edition of *Leaves* established the boundary of modern American poetry as the country hurtled toward war, a war that he argues gave all of Whitman's work credibility, "Calamus" as a whole, is a dramatic qualification if not rejection of all that came before it.[26] The political inertia that exacerbated national divisions revealed to Whitman the limitations of his earlier vision of democracy. Speakers in poems such as "[Long I Thought That Knowledge Alone Would Suffice]" not only envision democracy as the exclusive domain of male lovers but also reject the inclusive, universal voice of the poet in favor of the exclusive voice of the lover. Unless the nation can reform itself in the image of the "dear love of comrades," the speaker has no use for a national poetry:

> For I can be your singer of songs no longer—One who loves me is jealous of me,
> and withdraws me from all but love,
> With the rest I dispense—I sever from what I thought would suffice me, for it
> does not—it is now empty and tasteless to me,
> I heed knowledge, and the grandeur of The States, and the example of heroes, no
> more,

I am indifferent to my own songs—I will go with him I love,

It is to be enough for us that we are together—We never separate again. (8-12)

Indeed, relationships between people rather than the individual's abstract relationship to impersonal laws now reflect the ideal and indivisible nation. Personal relationships, not public laws, bind people together; sentiment does not exhibit itself in law or politics but privately, by the pond side. This shift in Whitman's description of citizens' relationship to the state marked a significant and lifelong change in his poetry. Beginning with the acknowledgement of the necessity of interpersonal bonds to the creation of national unity in "Calamus," Whitman turned to popular literary models that fostered an emotional investment in political issues linking the private life to the public, the pond side to the entire nation. However, apart from the bombast of a poem like "[States!]," the vast majority of the "Calamus" poems are tentative, equivocal, and even evasive about this model for reform and national cohesion. The Civil War and its aftermath would change this doubt into certainty even in the face of terrible loss and destruction. The war, for Whitman, confirmed the restorative power of the male couple, a homogenous model of political identity that would unite the country through the bonds of duty and love rather than through difference.

In the "Drum-Taps" section of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman presents a model for national unity based upon the relationship of comrades in arms, which he had witnessed during the war. This productive relationship was epitomized for Whitman by Spartan-model pederasty, a tutorial relationship between older and younger men that exemplifies the duties and emotional bonds of the citizen-soldier to the state. To reform the nation in the mode of comradeship, Whitman utilizes the rhetorical conventions and political force

of sentimental literature. Moreover, the conventions of sentimental literature support much of the social, sexual, and political underpinnings of Greek-model pederasty: the imagery of filial devotion, service to the nation, the interrelation of the public and private spheres, and the emotive value of the death of a child or the death of a lover (Chapman and Hendler 8-11). Drawing on the reformist and didactic tradition of sentimental literature, Whitman promoted the notion of an ideologically homogenous nation based on the martial and erotically charged bonds of citizen-soldiers.

In "Drum-Taps," the poet performs a pedagogical role, connecting the individual to the nation in the martial tutorial relationship of Spartan-model pederasty. Greek pederasty consisted primarily of the association of males within a tutorial relationship. Spartan pederasty, specifically, combines the duties of the citizen and the soldier within this tutorial relationship (Dellamora 44). This association relied on the "sexual and emotional ties between men" formed by a martial, and therefore public, situation to solidify and strengthen social bonds and the bond between the citizen and the state (3-4).[27] In "Drum-Taps," Whitman seeks a national order based upon the intense bonds among soldier-citizens who demonstrate proper filial love and a proper subservience of private feelings to public concerns. Martin also notes Whitman's acknowledgment of the "relationship between pedagogy and pederasty" in "The Base of All Metaphysics," which he, tellingly, added to "Calamus" in 1871, after the Civil War (*Homosexual* 88). In "Calamus" and "Drum-Taps" Whitman sought to elaborate the democratic potential of such relationships for America (xvii).[28]

Whitman was not alone in the nineteenth century in his appreciation of the political possibilities of male-male relations, particularly those based on martial affection.

According to Richard Dellamora, "desire between men" was admired in much nineteenth-century prose "when merged in nationalist fraternity or even . . . in a model of father-son relationship" (45).[29] In fact, love between men during the Civil War was widely represented in "popular poetry and journalism," and "commentators frequently emphasized the physical beauty of the soldiers . . . and often called them darlings" (Reynolds 428, 430). Whitman's erotic and sentimental portrayals of male relations during the Civil War were part of a larger discourse in early nineteenth-century America concerning the connection between "classical martial virtue" and an "ideal of private affection, benevolence, sentiment and sympathy shared among men" (Chapman and Hendler 11). The martial virtue that ennobles and condones the emotional and physical relationships among men is also linked to the emergence of the nation: "Sexuality and the nation . . . are linked through the sentimental," creating what Michael Millner calls "male sentimental citizenship" (34, 23). The connections between sentiment, male sexuality, private and public life were established early in America's history.

In "Drum-Taps," Whitman utilizes the rhetorical conventions and political aims of sentimental literature to promote his political project of reforming the nation in the image of comradeship. Many critics have noted Whitman's use of the conventions of sentimental literature in "Drum-Taps" and his political project of reforming the nation within the structure of male-male love. However, none acknowledges a political or ideological link between the two. For example, M. Jimmie Killingsworth suggests that Whitman utilized the "hyperbolic rhetoric common in expressions of conventional romantic love" as a screen to deflect public condemnation of representations of homosexuality (144-45). Also, Millner acknowledges the potential for Whitman's erotic

portrayals of male-male relations to act "as a relay between intimacy and abstractness, embodiment and universality, the individual and the nation, the private and the public," but insists that Whitman's portrayals of homosexuality subvert this formulation by restricting identification to particular groups of men (38). However, for Whitman, sexuality and politics were one. Whitman saw in the intense, loving relationships between men a model to be imitated by the masses, and he presented the possibilities of these relationships with the tools that were familiar to him, tools that were intended to persuade rather than disguise.

Whitman had long utilized sentimental conventions to promote social and political reform. In fact, his early writings on education and temperance, "fit into well-established popular categories" (Reynolds 85). Harold Aspiz links Whitman's representations of death throughout his career to sentimentalism, asserting that his early work "mirror[ed] the sentimentality and moralizing that characterized the popular press" (*So Long* 14). Moreover, in 1860 Whitman aimed for a mass readership "to promote his vision of unity for the States," even simplifying his poetry (Reynolds 388). Furthermore, his association with the Washingtonian temperance movement resulted in his reformist novel *Franklin Evans, or, The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, his "most popular work during his lifetime" (94).[30] Surely, in seeking to reach the broadest audience possible for his war poetry, Whitman would look to his own success in popular genres and seek to replicate it by using sentimental conventions to shape his poetry of reform.

"Drum-Taps," originally published in 1865 in a single volume, underwent several changes before Whitman finally settled on the order of the section that was published in the *Leaves of Grass* of 1881 (Herrington 29-43). The difference between the first edition

and the final edition is noteworthy. Initially, the order did not reflect a chronological history of the war but instead appeared to represent the chaos of the years of the war, contrasting bucolic scenes of farm life with scenes of war, patriotic fervor, and demobilization (Szczesiul 130). However, in the final version, perhaps because of his distance from the war or the desire to represent the cost of the war for future generations, Whitman placed the poems in chronological order (132). This sequencing situates the experience of the persona in an educational narrative extending from the first days of mobilization through scenes of war toward the close of the war: "the poems . . . trace the dramatic (and classic) pattern of the initiation of innocence into the real experience of the war" (Thomas 84). The persona's movements through the war shift from abstract national ideals of loyalty to particular encounters with the soldiers who endanger and even sacrifice their lives in the service of nation. To make such connections, sentimental maneuvers are particularly effective. Jane Tompkins argues that conventional forms acknowledge the audience's "possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event" such as "attitudes toward social institutions . . . notions of political and social equality" (126-27). In fact, Erkkila describes Whitman's organization of the 1881 "Drum-Taps" cluster as "a providential scheme," a sentimental structure aimed at sustaining the moral superiority of a cause (212).[31]

"Drum-Taps" opens with depictions of mobilization that strongly assert the unifying and democratic forces of war. In "First O Songs for a Prelude," the persona relates the mobilization of Manhattan as the city instinctively responds to the call for war: "How at once with the lithe limbs unwaiting a moment she sprang" (4). The martial call prompts a unifying and democratic outpouring of citizens who aim to defend the nation:

"her million children surround her, suddenly" (14), "young men falling in and arming, / The mechanics arming . . . / The lawyer . . . arming" "by common consent" (22-24, 27). Also portrayed are the nascent Spartan bonds of "devotion between a young and older warrior in the service of the common safety" (Dellamora 4-5): "The new recruits, even boys, the old men show them how to wear their accoutrements, they buckle the straps carefully" ("Prelude" 28).

Further, these poems relate the filial union between the citizen and the state; the nation is the mother of the soldiers. These children unite "by common consent" to defend their mother. The sentimental portrayal of the parent-child bond of the citizen and the state "encourages a disinterested benevolence that will allow individuals to forgo their private interests . . . for the good of the whole" (Barnes 601). Indeed, according to Elizabeth Barnes, "It is filial attachment . . . that makes social structures possible" (601). Representations of such civic responses to the state also serve a pedagogical function. By depicting the instantaneous unification, "by common consent," of citizens responding as if to the need of a parent, the poem incites the "natural sentiments that blood kinship calls forth" in the service of the state (604). Spartan bonds likewise rely on similar intense emotional attachments to ensure common defense.

"Song of the Banner at Daybreak" elaborates the proper filial relationship of citizens to abstract notions of nationalism, beyond the automatic patriotic responses to national emergency. The persona seeks to sing a "new song, a free song" (1) with "streams of blood, full of volition, full of joy" (18). Yet a debate between a child and a father ensues with the poet and the banner promoting the manly spirit of war in opposition to the pursuit of luxury, which Whitman associated with effeminacy and

civilization (Martin, *Hero* 49). For Whitman, dissenting voices that promoted peace and prosperity over union were to be feared, and in this poem the poet "dramatize[s] the potential conflict between the long-range benefits of the Union and the more immediate benefits of material wealth" (Erkkila 194). The debate articulates an ideal parent-child relationship that transcends the base desires of materialism in favor of larger national ideals, thus replacing the earthly, effeminate parent with a national, masculine parent represented by the flag. Spartan pederasty inspires an analogous emotional attachment to a masculine ideal.

Faced with the difficulty of inspiring strong emotional attachments to abstract notions of national unity, Whitman utilized pedagogical models and sentimental tropes to make such ideals tangible for the reading public. "Drum-Taps" is organized to relate the sentimental education of the poet in the mode of the martial tutorial. The tutorial attempts to concretize the abstract relationship of the citizen to the state through the ideals of duty and love embodied by Spartan comradeship: "an idea only, yet furiously fought for, risking bloody death, loved by me" ("Banner" 139). Whitman's use of a child as the mouthpiece of patriotism and war corresponds to sentimental portrayals of the purity of children that position them as authoritative figures (Tompkins 128). Indeed, in the last two sections of the poem the banner and poet both sing the "yearning of children" (107). Through the child's patriotic demonstration, the persona learns the proper relationship of the citizen to the nation and seeks to convey it to others: "my theme is clear at last" (121). He echoes Isaiah 11.6: "a little child taught me" (124). Nineteenth-century audiences would read this reference typologically as prefiguring Christ's redemptive leadership. According to Tompkins, nineteenth-century sentimental use of typology and eschatology

presented "political and social situations both as themselves and as transformations of a religious paradigm which interprets them in a way that readers can both understand and respond to emotionally" (135). The allusion to Christ would have signified redemption through suffering; this is a narrative in which "historical change takes place only through religious conversion" (133). Indeed, the cluster enacts the "conversion" of the persona to the selfless love of comrades. Thus, Whitman's change from "lead" in the biblical verse to "taught" in "Song of the Banner Daybreak" proposes a pedagogical relationship the following poems will bear out.

Like "Song of the Banner at Daybreak," "The Centenarian's Story" portrays a tutorial relationship in which the speaker comes closer to understanding the true purport of the war: "Not for nothing have I brought you hither—we must remain, / You to speak in your turn, and I to listen and tell" (21-22). Initially, the persona, a "volunteer of 1861-62," attempts to explain the significance of contemporary patriotic sentiment to a Revolutionary war veteran: "Rest, while I tell what the crowd around us means" (6). Yet the speaker struggles to find import in the "smiles" of "the well-drest friends and the women" (13-14) and the "approval of hands . . . clapping" (19). The older warrior intervenes to educate the younger about the responsibilities of comradeship and self-sacrifice in the service of the nation. The centenarian elaborates all that the student-persona is to learn from his own generation's conflict in defense of democracy, specifically that the sacrifices made by comrades for each other and for larger national goals are the meaning of war, not demonstrations of patriotism. The centenarian constructs his lesson around the exemplary sacrifice of a particular group of comrades in arms: "I tell not now the whole of the battle, / But one brigade" (49-50). And, of course,

because the soldiers must remain children of the nation, "It was the brigade of the youngest men" (54). In addition to emphasizing the parent-child relationship of the citizen to the nation, the youth of the soldiers recalls Christ and the organization of Spartan comradeship. In the centenarian's tale, the "brigade of the youngest men" sacrifices itself for the good of the whole, allowing General Washington to escape to fight another day. The speaker draws a connection between the deaths of the soldiers and the banner, asserting that the flag had been "Baptized that day in many a young man's bloody wounds, / In death, defeat, and sisters', mothers' tears" (108-09). Such iterations mythologize the soldiers' sacrifice and the suffering of all citizens, thus making the flag stand for sacrifice and war rather than material gain.

The allusions to the Revolution in "The Centenarian's Story" place Union defeats within a context of a national history that prophesies ultimate victory. National myths and references to Christ, stereotypical even in the nineteenth century, serve in sentimental literature to make obvious "that human history is a continual reenactment of the sacred drama of redemption" (Tompkins 134), thus signifying a progressive, redemptive, and reformist impulse in Whitman's poems. Additionally, the pedagogical function of sentimental literature, in which characters act out "what kinds of behavior to emulate or shun," is represented in the pederastic relationship of the speaker to the centenarian.[32] In the following section of "Drum-Taps," the persona leaves behind the din of patriotic fervor rejected by the centenarian and begins to recede and observe the war, no longer a singer of bloody death but a loving observer and participant in the American tradition of young men immolating themselves for each other and for larger national purposes.

As the cluster identifies the location of national ideals within the relationship and sacrifices of comrades in arms, the poems begin to focus on the particular events of the war. In this section of "Drum-Taps" the speaker becomes an observer and later a participant in the action. The initial grouping of poems in the section, "Cavalry Crossing a Ford," "Bivouac on a Mountain Side," "An Army Corps on the March," and "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame," depicts the monotony of war. The poems move through time, day to night to day and night again, and the cadences of the poems slow drastically in contrast to the fevered lines of patriotic mobilization. This temporal organization suggests the long, arduous marches, the exhaustion of battle, and the fighting and dying of the soldiers as they "In columns rise and fall to the undulations of the ground" ("March" 5). Furthermore, this image suggests that Spartan bonds forged through many days of deprivation are part of a continuous history, a history set in motion in "The Centenarian's Story." In this setting, the speaker attempts to learn the lessons of the centenarian's tale and the values for which the little child yearns. Erkkila suggests that the realism of this group of poems is Whitman's attempt to create "a style of poetic reportage commensurate with modern and mass warfare" (214). However, Aspiz posits that these short poems are Whitman's acknowledgement "that composing war poems on such a grandiose scale was beyond his capabilities," citing Whitman's assertion that writers of battle scenes usually fail to represent the essence of action (*So Long* 170). Yet considering the sentimental Spartan education that the speaker seeks to attain throughout the cluster, he struggles with the limited sympathy afforded by simple observation. The speaker acknowledges the hardships suffered by the soldiers but is unable to relate this life to the abstract notions that inspired such sacrifices: "What was once happiness and righteous adhesiveness in

numbers has now become abject misery" (Burrison 164). As the speaker studies the scenes of army life, the soldiers become less available visually; they cannot be depicted sufficiently, appearing as "shadowy forms" ("Mountain Side" 6) "Glittering dimly" ("March" 4), "phantom" figures ("Flame" 5). And though he tries to connect the men gathered around the campfires to abstract notions such as "eternal stars" ("Mountain Side" 7), he fails to recover his confidence because he cannot sympathetically link the soldiers' lives and deaths to the larger purposes of war; he does not have the experience.

However, in "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame," the persona overcomes spatial and emotional distance by placing himself in the camp. It is here that he has access to the thoughts of the soldiers, thoughts inspired by the physical circumstances of war. Like the "procession" of soldiers, a "procession of thoughts, O tender and wondrous thoughts, / Of life and death, of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away" (6-7) enter and exit the speaker's mind. Only by overcoming emotional and spatial distance from them may he engage in a sentimental relationship to the soldiers and, thus, experience and understand the war. The persona figuratively joins the centenarian's "brigade of the youngest men." In this sympathetic attitude, thoughts can move easily from the particular surroundings of the camp to larger abstract notions like love and death.

As the persona progresses through the martial tutorial of war gaining the experience of the deprivation of the camps, he has yet to experience sympathetically the centenarian's mythologized notion of the flag "baptized . . . in death . . . and sisters', mothers' tears" (108-09). "Come Up from the Fields Father" gives him this experience. Introducing death into the sequence, the poem does not depict the body of the dead soldier; instead, it focuses on the effects of death upon the soldier's family. The speaker

relates the bucolic setting of harvest, noting the scent of ripening fruit, the sounds of bees, the calm sky, and "prosperous" fields. Tompkins points out the political uses of such "homely" details in sentimental literature, which, she contends, "invest those details with a purpose and meaning which are both immediately apprehensible and finally significant" (139).[33] Additionally, by examining the first death in the cluster through the grief of the family rather than in the heat of battle, Whitman foregrounds familial bonds and creates a frame of filial sentiment in which to read the deaths that follow wherein soldiers become proxies for mothers, fathers, and lovers. Moreover, the mother's anguish brings to mind the sacralization of the flag related in "The Centenarian's Story," through mothers' tears and soldiers' blood. Finally, this sacrificing mother evokes another sacrificing mother figure in the cluster, the nation. Thus, "Come Up from the Fields Father" concretizes the sacrifice of families and connects this familial loss to a soldier's sacrifice for the nation.

Juxtaposed to the home front, "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" moves beyond the sacrifices of the conjugal family and places filial grief directly between two soldiers, allowing the loving relationship of soldiers to symbolize the loving relationship of families and citizens to the nation. In this poem, rather than a sympathetic, loving observer, the speaker is a participant in the action, mourning the death of his comrade. As the speaker ponders the dead youth, he figures the deathwatch as a "vigil," or spiritual observance. The speaker of the poem spiritualizes the death of his comrade, figuratively performing an ablutionary ritual as the dead soldier is "bathed by the rising sun," and tenderly wraps his comrade in a burial shroud before interring the young soldier "in his rude-dug grave" (21), corresponding to "Christian traditions" (Aspiz, *So Long* 174). Also, the older soldier tenuously consoles himself with the notion of an

afterlife in which he and his comrade will be reunited: "I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall surely meet again" (17). Like the allusion to Christ in "Song of the Banner at Daybreak" and the image of the flag's baptism in the nation's tears, the poem employs a sentimental eschatological notion of redemption. Through the contemplation of Spartan pederastic bonds and the death of the individual soldier, Whitman is able to extrapolate individual suffering and loss into Christ's sacrifice for humanity, thus relating the actions of comrades and the consequences of war to abstract spiritual ideals.

As the cluster progresses, the persona continues to cast the soldiers' deaths in religious terms. After the battlefield scene set forth in "Vigil," the speaker turns his attention to its aftermath, depicting a mass of wounded and dying soldiers in "a large old church at the crossing roads, now an impromptu hospital" (6) in "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown."[34] In keeping with the lexicon of Christian sacrifice, the first individual soldier whom the speaker approaches is wounded in the abdomen, "The youngster's face is white as a lily" (12), calling to mind the crucified Christ (Erkkila 224). Before leaving the church, now a hospital, he bends to gaze upon a "dying lad," as if kneeling in reverence to Christ. Tompkins identifies just such redemptive connotations surrounding the death of children in sentimental literature: "When the spiritual power of death is combined with the natural sanctity of childhood, the child becomes an angel endowed with salvific force" (129). Similarly, in "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim," the speaker represents three dead soldiers as the Holy Trinity: an "elderly man," a "sweet boy," and "the Christ himself, / Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies" (14-15). The speaker also acknowledges these dead soldiers as

comrades, spiritualizing the personal bonds of soldiers. By transfiguring the last body into the body of Christ, the speaker plainly evokes the redemptive nature of the soldiers' deaths in the service of the nation and humanity. Yet he continues the retreat from the front, site of the death of his comrade, and the scenes of the churchyard, both inspired and doubtful about the future of the nation in light of his battlefield experiences.

The retreat dwells upon the meaning of soldiers' sacrifices and the speaker's responsibility to understand and communicate their import. Along the road, he encounters an unknown soldier's ultimately prophetic epitaph nailed to a tree, "*Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade*" ("Toilsome" 7). Without exegesis, he relates his continual recollection of the inscription in future uncertain times: "Yet at times through changeful season and scene, abrupt, alone, or in the crowded street, / Comes before me the unknown soldier's grave, comes the inscription" (10-11). Sensing that a higher power compels him to compose a new "battle-call" for the future ("Pilot" 5), he finds himself beset by profound doubt about the nature of this new watchword: "Must I change my triumphant songs? . . . / Must I learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled?" ("Year" 4-5). The answer to these questions lies in his service as a wound-dresser. "The Wound-Dresser" sees the culmination of the pedagogical project that the centenarian set out for the speaker. He now apprehends the meaning behind the banner, the self-sacrifice of comrades for each other and by extension for the nation and democracy. In the position of teaching the nation's children, the speaker answers their questions about the war. Similar to the centenarian, he does not relate "the whole battle" but recollects his hospital experiences, witnessing the sacrifices of loving comrades in the service of the nation. Also, like the centenarian, he expresses humility in the face of such selflessness,

presenting himself during the war as a sympathetic student within the tutorial relationship, continually bowing "with hinged knees" in reverence to his comrades. The pivotal moment of the entire cluster occurs when the speaker finally internalizes the altruism crucial to Spartan comradeship, expressing his willingness to sacrifice himself for his comrade: "poor boy! I never knew you, / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you" (37-38). Indeed, he makes the connection for the young students between comradely love and the nation, expressing not abstract notions about defending freedom, but the sacrifice of one for another. Anthony Szczesiul argues that for Whitman "Democracy in its abstract sense . . . became a hollow cause for war, but democracy as revealed through comradely love is worth any price" (136-37). This moment, sympathetically related to the pupils of the future, signals a shift in tone that takes the cluster to its conclusion.

Now sure of the meaning of the war, the relationship of abstract values represented by the flag to the self-sacrificing bonds between comrades, the speaker's confidence returns. In the final section of "Drum-Taps," after "the narrator's initiation into the shocking reality of war" (134), the persona no longer seeks to sing "red war" but confidently sings the sacrifices of the soldiers and veterans who responded to the call for self-sacrifice (North and South). The section continues to figure the citizen's relationship to the nation by depicting the bonds of comrades in the terms of parent-child and lover-beloved relationships. Also, having established the social benefit of altruism formed through the bonds of comrades and sentimentally related to parallel Christ's sacrifice for humanity, the speaker boldly expresses the erotic and political potential of such union in "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice" and "As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap

Camerado." Indeed, no longer the obedient student learning the harsh lessons of war, the speaker now teaches the unifying power of martial love: "Sons of the Mother of All, you shall yet be victorious, / . . . If need be a thousand shall sternly immolate themselves for one" (5, 8). The cluster continues to gain confidence in the celebration of this unifying power, celebrating soldiers' sacrifices and the nation.

Finally, the speaker bequeaths the political legacy of the war to future generations: a politically unified and ideologically homogenous nation forged through the erotically charged bonds of martial comradeship. The final poem of the cluster, "To the Leaven'd Soil They Trod," explores the generative and redemptive qualities of Spartan sacrifice; the blood and deaths of the soldiers have consecrated the ground, South and North. Whitman's characterization of the land as "leaven'd" evokes the domestic sphere, suggesting lifted national burdens and the restorative power of the soldiers' deaths—on both sides. The poem ends with the land, literally the graves of soldiers, embracing the speaker "as the father to bosom broad the son" (12). Again, the embrace of comrades is cast in a parent-child relationship reflecting the citizen's relationship to the state, sentimentally recalling the transformative sacrifice of Christ by God for the greater good. Yet this martial vision of national identity hardly seems "Whitmanian" in the terms we have come to accept, eclipsed as it has been by our enthusiasm for "Song of Myself."

At the end of his career, Whitman insisted on the centrality of the Civil War in his personal and creative life. The war offered a glimpse of the unifying power of comradeship and a public acknowledgement and appreciation for the strong emotional

and physical ties between men that promoted political harmony through duty and love; he sought to incorporate this sentiment into his work. The 1865 edition of "Drum-Taps" was chaotic and uneven, but Whitman's Civil War contemporaries needed no help understanding the cost of the war and the value of comradeship. Yet as time passed and the United States became more aggressive, Whitman revised "Drum-Taps" by constructing a narrative of salvation throughout the cluster in order to persuade the nation to remember the value of union and manly love, offering the possibility of redemption. To accomplish this Whitman created a sequence of his Civil War poems that sentimentally related the events of the war and the initiation of the poet-citizen into a proper relationship to the state. In the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman sought to present "Drum-Taps" in a way that would make sense to generations who had not experienced the war. Preserving the experience and memory of the Civil War became paramount for him (Aspiz, *So Long* 169-70): "It pleases me to think also that if any of my works shall survive it will be the fellowship in it—comradeship—friendship is the good old word—the love of my fellow-men" (qtd. in Reynolds 577). By utilizing conventions of sentimentalism he could meaningfully convey the extreme circumstances of industrial, fratricidal war and the acceptance of the intimate and erotic bonds between men to a generation turning away from the lessons of the war and to other generations far removed from such scenes, continually reforming the nation.

It is impossible to overstate the impact of the Civil War on Walt Whitman, his democratic vision, and his work. The world after the war left the poet skeptical of America's democratic potential and very survival. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman lays out his hopes for the future in spite of the present in which a collective national

regression disregards the bitter and painful sacrifices of citizen-soldiers and debases the nation:

> these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics . . . everywhere . . . are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity—everywhere the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere an abnormal libinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignoned, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceased, shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners . . . probably the meanest to be seen in the world. (12)

For Whitman, these circumstances, the result of Old World hierarchical traditions and cultural diversity, present an acute danger to national survival. Indeed, domestic divisions, not foreign threats, are the most serious menace to the nation: "Subjection . . . is impossible to America; but the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and a lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me" (8). A common national identity and culture were an urgent necessity for Whitman, particularly after witnessing the devastation of the war. Though the nation was materially successful by the 1870s, aggressive and exploitive capitalism would not prevent a national catastrophe like the Civil War: "With such advantages at present fully . . . possessed—the Union just issued, victorious, from the struggle with the only foes it need ever fear (namely, those within itself, the interior ones), and with unprecedented materialistic advancement—society, in these States is cankered, crude, superstitious and rotten" (9). Class divisions, poverty, ignorance, and new immigrants continually reminded Whitman of the deep

antebellum national divisions. To address these anxieties, he argued that America "counts . . . for her justification and success . . . almost entirely on the future" (1) and turned his attention toward posterity. He felt that the war's citizen-soldiers proved America had the greatest democratic potential in the history of the world, but the nation was not ready to accept the responsibilities of a manly democratic society in which the individual and the nation never conflicted. A nation of citizens educated and bonded through love, imbued with a common culture, sealed off from outside influences that encourage distinction would be America's destiny but not America's present. Thus, he describes a controlled, but progressive, vision of the nation's future and the salvific role of literature.

Whitman felt that national survival was not possible without a common cultural identity based on democratic ideals. The sources of the aimless, antidemocratic forces that threatened the nation even after the Civil War were outdated social ideas revealed through literature, what he collectively refers to in *Democratic Vistas* as "feudalism" (2-4). In short, Whitman argues for a cultural revolution that completely rejects the past and clearly defines a new national identity:

> I should demand a program of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture rooms, but with an eye to practical life . . . . I should demand of this program or theory a scope generous enough to include the widest human area. It must have for its spinal meaning the formation of a typical personality of character . . . . The best culture will always be that of the manly and courageous instincts, and loving perceptions, and of self-respect—aiming to form, over this continent, an idiocrasy of universalism. (36)

Whitman calls for a modern cultural elite, a cohort of "mighty poets, artists, teachers" or "a class, and the clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures," to communicate common values and common personalities to the masses, "what is universal, native, common to all" (8). Whitman believed art taught in schools could more effectively construct cultural identity than any "superficial popular suffrage": "The literature, songs, aesthetics, etc., of a country are of importance principally because they furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways" (32). To educate a citizen from childhood to adulthood, to provide a common national identity is better than enfranchisement to "ballast the State . . . and in our times is to be secured, in no other way" (21).

Finally, to achieve an "American stock-personality" within "outlines common to all," Whitman turns to poetry and poets. Poets in Whitman's new America will replace politicians and priests ("The priest departs, the divine literatus comes" [5]). Calling for "some two or three really original American poets," Whitman holds that a national literature could be created to unify the nation by providing common values and identities, a common culture (rather than a common Constitution): "At all times, perhaps, the central point in any nation, and that whence it is itself really swayed the most, and whence it sways others, is its national literature, especially its archetypal poems" (5). Henry Wadsworth Longfellow shared Whitman's goal of a universal American literature and belief that literature produces cultural identity although he felt that a literary elite of a "few gifted minds" would diminish the country's literary prospects: "high excellence in one individual brings with it a hopelessness of success to others, and damps for a season the ardour of competition" (25). For Longfellow, the writing masses would achieve a

universal American literature over many generations rather than a select few. Whitman, on the other hand, held that just a few representative poets and poems would best contribute to the creation of an American character like the one he proposed in "Calamus" and "Drum-Taps" by the time of America's bicentennial: "Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man—which, hard to define, underlies the lessons and ideals of the profound saviors of every land and age, and which seems to promise, when thoroughly developed, cultivated, and recognized in manners and literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States" (56).[35] Informed by the trauma of the Civil War, Whitman's cultural program depended on the promise of the emotional and physical bonds of warriors to overcome difference to protect and maintain an abstract ideal.

In fact, *Democratic Vistas* and Whitman's program of political poetry are motivated more by a fear of multiculturalism than an inclusive democratic impulse. Whitman's response to the postbellum era stands in stark contrast to Longfellow's uneasy reaffirmation of a multicultural national identity at the same time. For Whitman, the stakes of individual interests threatening the integrity of national unity were too high to continue merely singing himself. Far from the expansive, inclusive, and chaotic 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*—and most especially "Song of Myself"—"Drum-Taps" and "Calamus" give us not "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual," but a loving, manly, well-ordered citizen devoted to his nation and comrades in a spirit of shared sacrifice. Beginning with "Calamus," Whitman embarks on a project of cultural homogenization in the hopes of preserving the nation and breaking with a past of divisions.

The pressing issue of national unity and the impact of the Civil War caused Whitman drastically to qualify his ideas about the source of democracy and change the way he saw his culture and its potential. In "Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Whitman asks us to historicize his work, asserting that his magnum opus reflected him in his time: "'Leaves of Grass' indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record" (573-74). A crucial part of what he wanted to put on the record in *Leaves of Grass* was the trauma of the Civil War, which lies both at the heart of the nineteenth century and of *Leaves*. In response to national upheavals Whitman tested different ideals and models of democracy, employing various figures to explore their viability. While we know this about Whitman, our canonization of "Song of Myself" nevertheless continues to obscure the significant changes of his long career. We cling to Walt, our legendary father of American poetry. But what was most important to Whitman during the nineteenth century is less important to us today. We value the celebration of humanity and individuality in "Song of Myself," whereas Whitman came to value the loyalty and the sacrifice of citizens to and for each other and their nation in response to great moral crises. It was this ultimate faithfulness, as we see in "Drum-Taps" and his later writings, that would fulfill the promise of democracy. "Song of Myself" remains important, of course, but it also remains the signature poem of his very early career. At the end of that career, in 1890, Whitman would declare in the prefatory note to the "Second Annex" of *Leaves of Grass* that his book was the "indubitable outcome and growth" of the "the times of 1862, '3, '4 and '5" . . . . Those times of which, O far-off

reader, this whole book is indeed finally but a reminiscent memorial from thence by me to you" (538-39). Here, at the end, Whitman explicitly identifies the Civil War years as the period *Leaves* memorializes and the events of those years as the undoubted source of the volume. His term "growth" is instructive: *Leaves* grew from "Song of Myself" in 1855 to "Calamus" in 1860 to "Drum-Taps" in 1865, as Whitman grew from singing himself to singing the sacrifice of self for the nation.

Notes

[1] This quotation from "Song of Myself" appears on page 48 of *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition.* Quotations from "Song of Myself" will be specified parenthetically with the edition and line number.

[2] For a complete discussion of the New Critics' reaction to Whitman refer to pages 86-102 in Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry*.

[3] Interestingly, though Whitman did revise and add to "Song of Myself" (most interestingly to include some minor aspect of the Civil War), the poem did not change dramatically, suggesting that Whitman, too, saw the poem as iconic in some way.

[4] Though Whitman did not achieve popular acclaim during the nineteenth century, his contribution to American letters was recognized at the time, exemplified by *the New York Times*' obituary where we can already see the reevaluation of Whitman. The *Times* reflected, "It is impossible to forecast what Whitman's place in American literature is going to be. For one thing he represents . . . the great bulk of the Nation educated in common schools. Yet hitherto he has been the scholar's delight, and the people will have none of him" ("Career" 802). The *Times* attempts to account for his lack of popular and elite acceptance regarding his work as too groundbreaking for either audience:

> To the last he expressed himself in verse after that fashion which he elaborated about the middle of the century, and which far more than the two or three indecencies he printed, set against him the prigs and the narrow-minded among literary folk. As in religion so in literature, one must genuflect and cross one's self in orthodox fashion or submit to anathema" (793).

The obituary also acclaims Whitman as the "most remarkable literary character [in New York City] since Washington Irving" and notes his profound influence on Alfred Lord

Tennyson and others (794). Further, the *Times* bemoans the fact that "New York never cared for Walt Whitman or bought his books or read them" because, though Whitman's "smooth early verses had pleased the crude, literary tastes of the readers of newspapers in the early half of the century, sprang with a bound far beyond their comprehension when he learned to disdain the fetters of ordinary rhythm and the chains of rhyme" (794-95). Aside from the apology for Whitman's body of work, the *New York Times* obituary offers an astute evaluation and account of Whitman's works and the trajectory of his poetic career.

[5] As important as Matthiessen's book would become, he was discouraged as a Harvard graduate student from writing his dissertation on Whitman "on the grounds that there was nothing of substantial interest in the proposed subject" (Abrams 10).

[6] In fact, while we have incorporated much recent scholarship into the headnotes of Whitman in anthologies, such as his sexuality and his intense political engagement, we find that his use of popular modes of expression such as sentimentalism and sensational journalism, his interest in pseudo-sciences, and his various views of democracy do not find their way into these narratives even though scholars have recovered these elements as well. Most importantly, while the importance of the Civil War to Whitman's work is continually addressed we do not investigate his work after this experience but return to his earliest writings. In short, all of these recoveries should produce an even more interesting and dynamic poet. For example, by examining "Calamus" and "Drum-Taps" closely we can see Whitman's literal and figurative uses of sexuality, its relationship to the democratic state, and his evolving pessimism toward the possibilities of democracy.

[7] Long before Whitman conceptualized *Leaves of Grass* or the body as a figure of a unified democracy, he entertained a personal curiosity about human physiology. He commented that from his experiences of the 1840s and early 50s "came the physiology of *Leaves of Grass*, in my opinion the main part" (qtd. in Aspiz, *Body* 48). Long before his experiences in the Civil War, Whitman frequently visited hospitals, observing doctors and witnessing amputations, developing his "observation and his revelations of acute physical suffering" (41, 57-58). Whitman's notebooks and newspaper editorials from the time reveal an intense interest in both "scientific and pseudoscientific discourses relating to medicine, health, and hygiene" (Beach 175). Some of the pseudo-sciences and "medical unorthodoxies" with which Whitman was familiar were "homeopathy, Thomsonianism, and hydropathy," all of which appealed to an holistic concept of health (41-42).

The most influential of these pseudo-sciences for Whitman was phrenology. By 1847, Whitman became an advocate of both phrenology and Orson S. Fowler, a well-known phrenology proponent (Loving, *Song* 150). In fact, Lorenzo and Orson Fowler and Samuel R. Wells of Fowlers and Wells distributed Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 (Aspiz, *Body* 116). Phrenology helped Whitman develop both his eugenic theories of national identity and provided a language (and biological justification) for him with which to describe intensely emotional male-male bonds. Whitman, himself, submitted to a phrenological exam in 1849 scoring a 6 ("the safest high") in "both 'Amativeness"

(sexual passion) and 'Adhesiveness' (friendship)" (Loving *Song* 150). Invented by Dr. Franz Joseph Gall, phrenology located an individual's character in the "organic structures within the brain" (Aspiz, *Body* 110). Measurements of the "contours of the head" revealed innate "tendencies, and feelings" (110). Further, applying the Lamarckian law of exercise, Gall applied an evolutionary, or in this case eugenic, element to his theory (110). Fowler promoted the eugenic component of phrenology stating, "a nation's future depends on a race of wholesome mothers who take all possible means to cultivate their physical energies" as well as discover their ancestry to identify elements that should be amplified or elements that should be bred out (111). Importantly, Whitman would combine the political and emotional power of physical suffering into his work from the beginning, showing his use of popular sentimental rhetoric.

[8] Like other reform movements of the time, phrenology "emphasized balance and self-control," a concept that appears throughout Whitman's work, particularly "Song of Myself," thus providing a scientific model that manifested a person's character in the corporeal body (Grossman 191). This idea, in addition to Plato's conception of the relationship between the state and the citizen, allowed Whitman to forge a poetic and progressive philosophy of the body as the site of the character of the nation (specifically before 1860).

[9] Through the body and its processes, Whitman conceives a unity of the citizen and the nation. By insisting on the primacy of the body as the arbiter of nature and culture, Whitman creates a poetics in *Leaves of Grass* that, like the generative processes of the body, "could and would grow, evolve, and change in response to corresponding changes in his own and the nation's development" (Erkkila 78). His interest in the discourses of health and phrenology allowed him to see this equivalence of the body and character, as well as eugenic improvement. Betsy Erkkila applies this concept to all of *Leaves of Grass*, but provides evidence by citing the "hieroglyphic of the grass" in "Song of Myself." I argue that this specific figure of democracy is limited to "Song of Myself" and informs critical approaches to the entirety of *Leaves of Grass.*

[10] In "The Political roots of *Leaves of Grass*," Jerome Loving points out that this reformist culture began with abolition and grew, by the 1840s and 50s, to include the establishment of utopian communities, and "the first women's rights convention in 1848" (106).

[11] Adding urgency to debates over westward expansion, the acquisition of new territory following the nationally divisive Mexican War (1846-48), the gold rush in California beginning in 1848, and extension of railways into the west (Asa Whitney had developed plans for transcontinental railway by 1845, leading to the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 that extended the territory ceded in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) upset previous political agreements like the Missouri Compromise of 1820. For an extensive study of the issues and events that contributed to the Civil War, see Hamilton.

[12] Tracing Whitman's "lifelong contradiction" between being a political moderate himself but associating with political radicals, Jerome Loving, cites "Song of Myself" to account for the distinction: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" (Loving, "Roots" 98). This use of "Song of Myself" recapitulates the iconic status of "Song of Myself" and our conflation of Whitman's persona and the poet.

[13] By the time he proposed a new compromise, Senator Henry Clay was already known for his instrumental role in the Missouri Compromise of 1820 over the same issue.

[14] Most famous of these amendments was the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 that attempted to reinstate the authority of the original Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, which had been undermined by states' passage of additional laws inhibiting enforcement and prohibiting cooperation of state officials in carrying out the law. As part of the Compromise of 1850, the federal government strengthened the Fugitive Slave Law penalizing state officials who refused to cooperate or enforce the law as well as individual citizens who assisted escaped slaves. The law also rewarded the return of people to slavery. Almost immediately, states and individuals responded with renewed efforts to undermine the law. For a thorough discussion of the politics behind the Compromise of 1850, see Waugh.

[15] According to Jerome Loving, the emergence of Whitman's long line, may have been modeled on "the fiery speeches of that particular political period," as well as Whitman's own abandoned plans of becoming an orator" ("Roots" 102; 115). However, most critics attribute Whitman's long line to the influence of the King James Bible.

[16] This speech also speaks to Whitman's Epicurean-influenced conception of death regarding the transformation of matter into other forms of life, rather than the nineteenth-century notion of death as a "spectral horror upon the pale horse" (Reynolds 42):

> In the temple of the Greeks, Death and his brother Sleep, were depicted as beautiful youths reposing in the arms of Night . . . Such were the soothing and solemnly placed influences which true art, identical with a perception of beauty that there is in all the ordinations as well as all the works of Nature, cast over the last fearful thrill of those olden days. Was it not better so? Or is it better to have before us the idea of our dissolution, typified by the spectral horror upon the pale horse. (qtd. in Pollack 76)

[17] As national events made the possibility of unity less likely, Whitman sought to overcome difference rather than embrace diversity. Between 1855 and 1860 events like the brutal 1856 beating of Charles Sumner on the Senate floor by South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks, the Dred Scott decision in 1857 that declared blacks non-citizens and authorized the transportation of those enslaved into free territories, and John Brown's Harper's Ferry raid in 1859, which resulted in his execution and controversial trials of "the secret six" in the North, exacerbated the already considerable political

tensions. Events culminated in 1860 with the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency and the secession of South Carolina from the Union in March. For an extensive study of the issues and events that contributed to the Civil War, see Hamilton.

[18] Reynolds notes that the 1860 edition was both more programmatic and personal than either the 1855 or 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass*: "The 1860 edition showed an anxious Whitman trying to establish meaningful links between private experience and public life" (388). Reynolds also senses the hesitancy of Whitman's voice in these new poems arguing that the 1855 poet (and perhaps persona) "who felt he could transfigure America and himself in long, holistic poems" does not appear in the new poems of the 1860 edition.

[19] Untermeyer identifies the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as the genesis of "modern as well as American" literature: "it is with the Civil War and the publication of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* that modern American poetry is defined" (3). In spite of this declaration, Untermeyer recapitulates the Whitman of "Song" even as he extols the edition that begins to qualify that persona: "it is Whitman's spirit . . . which assures him permanence. It is the broad and resistless affirmation . . . which quickens everything he writes and which so profoundly affected the spirit (not the letter) of subsequent writing. . . its indiscriminate acceptance is the very core of its faith, enclosing good and evil, beauty and ugliness in the mystic's circle of complete affirmation" (7).

The third edition was also pivotal for Whitman. Reynolds notes that for the first time, Whitman had full control over every aspect of his book: "He directed every aspect of the 1860 edition—typography, binding, and contents—toward his overriding goal of reaching the public that had so far eluded him" (390). Reaching a popular audience was of prime importance and he even abandoned the street tough image of the original frontispiece in favor of a more mannerly portrait (387). This desire to reach a general public, according to Reynolds, accounts for the organization of many poems into clusters, "[s]tripped of ornament," to get his points across as clearly as possible, without layering or indirection" (388-89).

[20] Reynolds notes that "Calamus" illustrates a philosophical view of friendship and that "Romantic friendship was sanctioned by philosophy and practiced by many nineteenth century Americans. Transcendentalism borrowed form European philosophy the notion that intimacy between people of the same sex by definition approached true love because it was untainted by sensuality" (391).

[21] Many recent critics take note of Whitman's use of the various discourses of gender, sexuality, and friendship to poetically construct a democratic republic. However, all are quite conscious of Halperin's caveats about reading the present onto the past and take great care in contextualizing Whitman's sexuality in a pre-homosexual period, which encouraged same-sex affection while at the same time recognizing identifiable resonances. However, such careful historicizing often succumbs to the broadly inclusive persona of "Song of Myself." For example, Martin discusses the use of the male couple by both Whitman and Herman Melville as recognition of "the links between sexuality

and structures of power," asserting that this male couple undermines the heterosexual organization of society based on production (*Hero* 10, 1-16). Yet Whitman's "Calamus" poems still maintain traditional notions of gender even as he attempts to undo the hierarchies that result from this dichotomy. Whitman's political project sought to associate the male couple with the structures of the state, even the foundational structures of society, underscores his acknowledgement that his contemporary society's reliance on traditional hierarchies must be replaced with "comradeship" in order for democracy to succeed (Reynolds 401-02). But hierarchies remain even in same-sex political configurations in Whitman, and become evermore exclusive.

[22] Greek pederasty primarily served social aims. The Athenian model of pederasty emphasized the relationship of an older male and a younger male in the pursuit of an educational and philosophic relationship that prepared young males for the "privileges and responsibilities of adult citizenship through friendship" (Dellamora 44). Whitman's use of this relationship in "Calamus" resembles the thoroughly educational aspects of Athenian-model pederasty as opposed to the social and military function of the Spartan model.

[23] According to Reynolds, "What [Whitman] wanted was the "passional" theory of the free lovers without their antimarriage proposals. The notion of passional attraction had been introduced by the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier, who conceived of an ideal society made up of cooperative communities whose members were bonded by an intrapersonal magnetic pull as powerful as gravity. Conventional marriage would be abolished in these communities, where passional attraction would operate as a subtle, constant force exhibited in various kinds of experimental sex" (224). Because of the prevalence of radical social movements in the nineteenth century such as "spiritualism, mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, Harmonialism" the embraced "some version of the free lovers' views, the idea of passional attraction spread far beyond free love circles" (225), Whitman was very familiar with these sexual theories. Further, he associated with many free love advocates such as Sarah Tyndale, a Fourierist, even using "similar language in his personal relations, as when he explained to a friend the presence of a boy by saying, 'I am trying to cheer him up and strengthen him with my magnetism'" (225-26).

[24] Whitman is also at pains to legitimize this model of democracy as the foundation of Western civilization and as an ideal to aspire toward. Added to the cluster in 1871, "The Base of All Metaphysics" follows the example of equality within the pedagogical pederastic relationship. The poem presents a classroom of male students and an "old professor" in which the speaker relates the ending lecture of a popular course that recounts the lessons of the term. Here Whitman combines the classical, Germanic, and Christian "systems" to announce a genealogy of "[t]he dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend" (13) that stands as a universal ideal for the world: "Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents, / Of city for city and land for land" (14-15). This scene connects various ideologies of love and beauty presenting a complex of divinity, sex, pedagogy, and love between men as the foundation of a

democratic society, of Western civilization. Indeed, the poem posits male-love as the model for equality within the conjugal family, civil society, and international relations.

[25] This line was later added to "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice" in "Drum-Taps." This revision to *Leaves* is important because Whitman's experiences during the Civil War both justified and demonstrated the power of this model of comradeship in the service of national unity; he witnessed numbers of citizen-soldiers sacrifice their lives for each other and the motherland, thus accounting for the changing direction, tenor, and shape of *Leaves of Grass* after the war.

[26] The impact of the Civil War on Whitman is widely recognized. Untermeyer's 1936 *edition of Modern American Poetry* declares that the cultural shock of the Civil War relegated the poetry of the likes of Longfellow, Bryant, Taylor to another era altogether. It was Whitman who captured the new spirit of the age and would determine modern American poetry: "In the history of poetry the line may be drawn with a measure o certainty, and it is . . . the publication of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* that modern American poetry is defined" (3). Though Untermeyer charges Whitman's form as the poet's "chief contribution," he adds that "It is the broad and resistless affirmation . . . which quickened everything he wrote and which so profoundly affected the spirit (not the letter) of subsequent writing" (6). Clearly, this "resistless affirmation" begins with the opening lines of "Song of Myself" (1855). But the third edition of *Leaves* gains its eminence, for Untermeyer, because Whitman's Civil War experiences gave him "an intimacy with life in the raw which, for all his assertions, he had never seen so closely. No longer a spectator, he was a participant . . . . The end of the Civil War defined a new spirit in Whitman: the man and his poetry became one" (34). In short, the Civil War lent Whitman's early poetry authenticity.

[27] Spartan pederasty began in ancient Lacedæmon (Dellamora 45). Facing potential military threats from surrounding city-states Lycurgus, a Spartan political official, created a "permanent military corps. He inscribed pederasty within the constitution as a prime means of socializing young men into this organization (45). In contrast to the thoroughly educational aspects of Athenian-model pederasty is the Spartan-model pederasty, which combines the duties of the citizen and the soldier within the tutorial relationship of older and younger males (44).

In the nineteenth century notions of male comradeship and martial citizenship were heavily influenced by Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic* and became associated with "that pure intellectual commerce between male lovers which brings forth the arts, philosophy, and wisdom" and thus civic virtue (Dowling xv). Linda Dowling discusses the pedagogical implications of Spartan, or Dorian, martial citizenship for Victorian England through the Oxford Greek studies of the late-nineteenth century, beginning in 1850 with Benjamin Jowett's educational reforms at Oxford University. These reforms of the curricula resulted in the system of "tutor worship," which became "visible as an instrument of profound ideological change . . . effectively channeling . . . intellectual self-development and diversity" in response to military and antisocial threats (33-35). Significantly, K. O. Müller's history *Dorians*, which detailed the "pedagogical, military,

and social centrality of Greek paiderastia," was particularly influential to the interpretation of Greek texts at Oxford (xv). The atmosphere at Oxford during the late-nineteenth century accounts for John Addington Symonds insistent queries of Whitman's aims in "Calamus" and "Drum-Taps" poems.

[28] Martin also contends Whitman's use of homosexual relationships as the basis for national unity required "the loving forces which lead to an economic system of sharing, a political system of universal participation, and a sexual system that allows for the full expression of sexual energy in ways that are neither aggressive nor directed toward use" (*Homosexual* 21-22). While Whitman surely would have admired such a formulation, his representation of the generative and socially functional sexuality of comrades in arms contradicts Martin's assertion by enlisting sexual relations between men in service to the state.

[29] Dellamora notes that sexual ties between men that were not in the service of statist projects "fell outside the normalizing representation of masculinity in nineteenth-century middle-class culture" and "were construed as signs of a criminal conspiracy against the state" (45).

[30] *Franklin Evans* sold twenty thousand copies (Reynolds 94).

[31] Although Whitman presents the ultimate morality of the war in "Drum-Taps," he remains largely silent on the issue of slavery. The poet focuses instead on the Spartan values that undergird expressions of selfless nationalism: "Whitman was fixated on the idea of Union" (Reynolds 436).

[32] Many critics have noted the sentimental uses of the Revolutionary War in "The Centenarian's story," but do not discuss it in the context of the pedagogical scenario the poems play out. For example, Reynolds places such uses straightforwardly within popular "jingoistic and lachrymose" verses of the time without exploring the artistic and reformist functions Whitman employed through these conventions (91). Harold Aspiz simply determines the poem "an artistic failure because it is so far removed from the war's essential action and because the . . . Whitman persona is characterized only as a passive bystander listening to an elderly observer summon up his memories of an earlier war" (*So Long*, 166). However, the pedagogical relationship represented in the poem and the poem's didactic message regarding the individual relationships and sacrifices of the war move toward the particular and away from the abstract, demonstrating the citizen's relationship to the state.

[33] Tompkins suggests that these details of domesticity place the center of political power in the home, the domain of women (139). However, Whitman uses themes of domesticity to connect to families' losses in the war to the state in a way that suggests the filial bonds of the citizen and the state not just the home.

[34] In the context of Whitman's war experiences and his pedagogical project to model citizenship on the love of comrades, this image of the church-hospital becomes overdetermined, signifying the healing and redemptive powers of the soldiers' deaths and Whitman's own devotion to the wounded. Whitman explained his hospital visits to Horace Traubel: "It was a religion with me . . . made me its servant, slave; induced me to set aside other ambitions" (qtd. in Erkkila 198).

[35] For Whitman, comradeship is the essence of American identity and citizenship and national survival: "It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship (The adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it), that I look for the counterbalance and offset our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof. Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inferences; but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown—not only giving tone to the individual character, and making it unprecedently emotional, muscular, heroic, and refined, but having the deepest relations to general politics. I say democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself" (*Democratic Vistas* 56).

CHAPTER IV

"IF WE MUST DIE": ICON AND MYTH OF CLAUDE MCKAY'S POETRY

Many are familiar with the defiant opening of America's most famous sonnet, "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.[1]

Equally familiar are the poem's history, that it was written in response to the race riots of 1919, and its fabled recitations by Winston Churchill and U.S. senators during both World Wars. In "If We Must Die," the speaker now legendarily implores his doomed "kinsmen" (9) to resist racist brutality, thereby exalting their deaths and affirming their essential humanity: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" (13-14).

"If we must die": the declamatory inaugural phrase aligns the speaker with an embattled group and reveals the desperation of their predicament. He recoils at the potential of racist violence to turn all of humanity into beasts but particularly at its power to dispossess his people of dignity. If death is certain, then his people should reject an undignified death "like hogs" slaughtered by a vicious pack of dogs.

The second quatrain repeats "If we must die" but shifts from negation to affirmation: "O let us nobly die" (5). The predicament described in the first stanza must

be transformed into martyrdom for a common cause that would distinguish the blameless community from the reprehensible aggressors. Abandoning the dishonorable figure of animals attacking animals, therefore, the speaker advocates honorable deaths imbued with purpose: "So that our precious blood may not be shed / In vain" (5-7). Though they cannot avoid death, they can avoid degradation, forcing even an inhuman enemy to acknowledge their humanity: "then even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" (7-8). McKay's use of the esteemed sonnet form, the formal diction and archaic syntax suggesting an inspired oration, magnifies the high mindedness of the speaker and the ennobling message of martyrdom and justified resistance.

The speaker encourages his brothers not only to die with dignity but also to unite in battle. Shifting his attention from shaping a virtuous attitude toward death at the hands of the mob, he encourages his people to unite in battle, to retaliate valiantly even when confronted with an overwhelming enemy: "Though far outnumbered let us show us brave, / And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!" (10-11). Tauntingly, the quatrain proclaims that death met with self-respect in the service of the common defense cannot intimidate: "What though before us lies the open grave?" (12). "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!": the final couplet carries the strength of an ultimatum to the forces of oppression—senseless racial violence will be met with unified purpose and deadly resistance (13-14).

Though McKay's animal figures distinguish between victims and aggressors, they also risk dehumanizing people. The exact rhymes that compare black people to "hogs" and racist whites to "dogs" equate them both with animals and link them to each other aurally. However, there is an important distinction between McKay's use of similes when

speaking to African Americans and metaphors when describing white racists. By announcing themselves as comparisons with *like* or *as*, similes foreground that they are figures for the attitudes of whites towards blacks. Simile here encourages change by being comparative rather than defining, by suggesting that proud resistance to oppression is a human characteristic and that blacks can die "like men" rather than "like hogs." Black people are never animals in this scenario because they can choose to die "like men . . . fighting back" (13-14). The metaphor to describe the racist mob, on the other hand, asserts the inhumanity of the attackers—racists *are* dogs. The aggressors remain animals throughout the poem, bereft of their humanity, exposing the ignobility of the mob that indulges senseless bloodlust, a "murderous, cowardly pack" (13).

In the context of the poem's composition, these details become more meaningful still. McKay's elevated diction and traditional verse defied stereotypes about the intellectual and creative abilities of African Americans. The romantic love traditionally associated with the sonnet is refigured in the poem as racial love, indicated through references to the "precious blood" of "kinsmen." The poem's appearance at a time of unfettered discrimination emblematizes the empowering race consciousness of the New Negro movement of the 1910s and 1920s. Its moral clarity, principled defiance, and contempt of injustice, its fraternal love and keenly felt ideals express a new hopefulness, and the sonnet form itself declares a sense of cultural authority.

And yet for all its legendary authority, few American poems are accompanied by a mythology as contradictory as Claude McKay's "If We Must Die." The poem unites many threads of American political and literary history; commemorating the disastrous events of the Red Summer, the poem was hailed as the commencement of a new era of

African American racial consciousness. The poem's impact at the time cannot be overstated, and, precisely because of this, many fictions have risen around it, demonstrating not just the cultural resonance of the poem but also our inclination to mythologize the story of American poetry. Moreover, McKay grappled with the poem for his entire life, sometimes trying to elude it, more often trying to use it to advance his literary and political aspirations. Certainly, then, our fixation on the poem is justified—but not for the reasons that we think. Understanding the centrality of "If We Must Die" to American poetry and to McKay resolves many of the contradictions and myths surrounding the rest of his corpus: his American political and racial "awakening," the "immaturity" of his Jamaican dialect verse, and his "loss" of poetic power at the end of his career.

A wide range of interests have made use of the poem over the last century. "If We Must Die" has been recruited by radical politicians, Winston Churchill, the Henry Cabot Lodges (Sr. and Jr.), anonymous white soldiers killed in World War I and in World War II, and the rioting prisoners in Attica. Lee M. Jenkins examines the disputed "rights to McKay's poem" that began "from the moment of its composition" and reflect the racial and political tensions surrounding the poem. McKay was advised to keep the poem out of his collection *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) because of its revolutionary subject matter, a point that Jenkins finds "ironic in the light of the most notorious, alleged, appropriation of McKay's text—that of Winston Churchill" (334). According to several accounts, Churchill recited the poem, without crediting its author, to "boost the morale of the British forces" during the London Blitz (334), one of many stories that will cast the poem as a universal protest against injustice.

Yet other versions of the Churchill tale return the sonnet to an American context, suggesting tensions between myths that emphasize the poem's universality and those that promote its radical roots. Melvin B. Tolson and Raymond Nelson claim that while Churchill read the poem to rally the British people, American Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. read Churchill's speech—and thus McKay's poem—to Parliament's House of Commons into the *Congressional Record* to persuade United States to enter the Second World War (334). Lloyd Brown and James R. Giles assert that it was Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr. who did this—but to illustrate the dangers of black radicalism after World War I (334)—a version that emphasizes the poem's racial and political origins. To point out the irony of the poem's mainstream acceptance, Arna Bontemps wrote that it was "quoted as climax and conclusion of [Churchill's] oration before the joint houses of the American Congress when he was seeking" to persuade the U.S. to enter the war (qtd. in Jenkins 335).[2]

Indeed, these competing versions are myths, significantly departing from the available facts to emphasize the poem's universal, political, or racial import. Lloyd Brown and Kamau Brathwaite report that the poem was found on the body of a dead white soldier during World War I, an incident contradicted by the fact that it was composed and published after the war (335).[3] Discussing the poem's lack of racial signifiers (a concern for many critics), James R. Giles refers to a letter to Max Eastman in which McKay writes that a Jewish friend "having read the poem insisted that it must have been written about the European Jews persecuted by Hitler" (qtd. in Jenkins 335). In 1971, *Time* magazine reported that inmates under siege at the Attica prison in New York "passed around clandestine writings of their own; among them was a poem ['If We Must

Die'] written by an unknown prisoner, crude but touching in its would-be heroic style" (335-36). Gwendolyn Brooks wrote to the magazine to correct its error, pointing out that the poem was "a portion of one of the most famous poems ever written—known to Hitler, elementary school children, to say nothing of Winston Churchill" (336). In his effort to corroborate these uses of "If We Must Die," Jenkins finds no evidence to support many of our cherished stories about the sonnet, but absence of evidence has not diminished reports of its afterlife. Such myths reveal both the poem's iconic status and a literary history that pushes the poem away from its racial and radical roots toward a more mainstream, idealized protest of injustice.[4] Even McKay himself perpetuated these myths.[5] The facts and the fictions surrounding the poem define McKay and "If We Must Die" as an American voice of protest.

Claude McKay's place in American poetry is assured by his influential work during the early part of the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance. While it makes sense that the critical discussion of McKay as an American poet would begin with his most influential writing in the United States, the ways his earlier work is characterized (or ignored) tell us much about our national investment in McKay. Critics often attribute McKay's protest poetry solely to his experiences with racism in the United States, most evident in the mythic "If We Must Die," and read his work as part of an American tradition of political protest. From its first publication, "If We Must Die" has exerted considerable pressure on McKay's reputation and reception. Indeed, the popularity and history of the poem make the strongest case for its inclusion in the canon of American poetry and particularly the

African American literary canon. However, as an American, McKay has always been an ambivalent figure for scholars, anthologists, and other poets. After the publication of his famous sonnet, his skill, defiance, and politics put the white literary and political establishment on notice, and he became both a dangerous and irresistible poet to anthologizers through the 1930s. In the late 1960s, when the Black Arts movement rejected much Harlem Renaissance poetry, McKay's use of a traditional European form became controversial. Yet the historical impact of "If We Must Die" on the black masses and its racial theme adhered to the Black Arts agenda for art to "expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution" (Karenga 6). Ironically, though the poem has brought critical attention to McKay it has also overdetermined our reading of McKay and curtailed his range and corpus.

The importance of "If We Must Die" to American poetry has fixed our focus on one aspect of McKay. Written in the midst of the race riots in numerous cities and states during the summer of 1919, the poem reflects frustration and anger over increasing racial violence and continues to speak to the U.S. legacy of racism. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937), McKay recounts the uneasy atmosphere that gripped the country and African Americans in particular and its effect on him and his fellow black railmen:

> Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings. Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous. We were less light-hearted. We did not separate from one another gaily to spend ourselves in speakeasies and gambling joints. We stuck together, some of

> us armed, going from the railroad station to our quarters. We stayed in our quarters all through the dreary ominous nights, for we never knew what was going to happen. (29-30)

McKay says "If We Must Die" was "the only poem I ever read to the members of my [railroad] crew," and it had an immediate, galvanizing effect on them similar to the effect it would have on African Americans nationally (30). In fact, one among his crew suggested that he read the poem at Liberty Hall, the headquarters of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), but he declined, saying that he had "no ambition to harangue a crowd." Once the poem was published, however, multiple constituencies used the poem for just this purpose.

One of the most incendiary uses of the sonnet was its original publication with a number of McKay's other poems in July 1919 in the left-wing *Liberator*. Almost immediately, the radical black press extolled the poem as exemplary of the new, revolutionary attitude of African America, its intention to achieve black security, self-defense, and self-determination. The poem was reprinted in the September *Messenger* as part of W. A. Domingo's editorial, "If We Must Die," which used it to emblematize postwar radical African American sentiment toward racial violence and political oppression: "The New Negro has arrived with stiffened backbone, dauntless manhood, defiant eye, steady hand and a will of iron. His creed is admirably summed up in the poem of Claude McKay, the black Jamaican poet, who is carving out for himself a niche in the hall of Fame" (qtd. in Turner and Turner 64-65). This issue also included a cartoon of the "new Negro . . . riding in an armored car and shooting down his white opponents in race riots" (Detweiler 170). That same month, *The Crusader* published the sonnet to

invigorate black resistance against racial violence: "The immediate goal of the republication was to spark further black boldness in all these battles" of the Red Summer (Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left* 64).

The poem's circulation in the African American press intensified the already considerable attention of the white establishment on the political content of the community's journalism. In October, Congress requested a report on the *Investigation Activities of the Department of Justice against Persons Advising Anarchy, Sedition and The Forcible Overthrow of the Government*.[6] There, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer identified African Americans as a group susceptible to Bolshevism, anarchism, and a host of other "dangerous" ideologies (Kornweibel xiv-xv). Listed as Exhibit No.10 of the section entitled "Radicalism and Sedition Among Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications," the poem is described as "of significance" and "officially designated as seditious" (Jenkins 335).[7] The summary of the report concluded that publications like those that printed "If We Must Die" "emphasized feeling of a race consciousness, . . . always antagonistic to the white race and openly, and defiantly assertive of its own equality and even superiority" (qtd. in Work 64).

In an atmosphere of powerful social tensions and acute government scrutiny of African American editors, "If We Must Die" became for more moderate publications simultaneously a noted accomplishment because of its popularity among black Americans, a work that reflected the spirit of the time, and a liability because of its perceived danger to the official establishment. Many black editors in the 1920s sought to present a unified voice for the New Negro in a milieu of movements and ideologies that fostered black racial consciousness but that the U.S. government considered "seditious":

Ethiopianism; Garveyism; the heritage of the "social gospel" that informed the "rhetoric of black nationalism"; "civilizationism," which sought to educate or "civilize" the black masses; primitivism; socialism (Moses 72-76). To reconcile these various constituencies in the preface to the first edition of his celebrated anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1921), James Weldon Johnson notes McKay's "power, breadth, and skill as a poet," most striking when "he pours out the bitterness and rebellion in his heart in those two sonnet-tragedies, 'If We Must Die' and 'To the White Fiends,' in a manner that strikes terror" (43-44). He assures readers, however, that McKay "has passed beyond the danger which threatens many of the new Negro poets—the danger of allowing the purely polemical phases of the race problem to choke their sense of artistry" (43-44). Yet in his introduction to McKay's poems, he demonstrates intense pride regarding the famous poem despite governmental suspicions. He credits McKay as being one of the "principal forces in bringing about the Negro literary awakening" and places him with "the post-war group," describing him as "preëminently the poet of rebellion" who "[m]ore effectively than any other poet of that period . . . voiced the feelings and reactions the Negro in America was then experiencing" (168, 166-67). Johnson is also one of the first to discuss at length McKay's choice of the sonnet in opposition to his Jamaican poetry, inaugurating a century-long preoccupation with McKay the American protest sonneteer:

> Incongruous as it may seem, he chose as the form of these poems of protest, challenge, and defiance the English sonnet; and no poetry in American literature sounds a more portentous note than these sonnet-tragedies. . . . Reading McKay's poetry of protest and rebellion, it is difficult to imagine him dreaming of his native Jamaica and singing. [8] (166-67)

By 1922, the year *Harlem Shadows* was published, McKay's reputation as the representative black American rebel sonneteer was firmly established. Frederick G. Detweiler's 1922 study of the African American press captures the continuing impact of the race riots of 1919 and of McKay's poem. Detweiler reprints "If We Must Die," describing the poem as exemplary of postwar black anger: "if one wants an expression of the bitter, fighting-back spirit, the spirit fanned into flame by the post-war riots, one must take . . . the two poems that have been printed again and again on newspaper pages. I refer to Claude McKay's 'If We Must Die' . . . and Carita Owens Collins' 'This Must Not Be' (198-99).[9] In his anthology *Our Singing Strength* (1929), Alfred Kreymborg repeats Johnson's characterization of McKay, referring to him as a black poet who sounds a "scornful note" and is the "writer of perfect sonnets" (575), and yet rather than "If We Must Die," he prints the first four lines of another sonnet, "America," to "limn McKay's spirit" (575).[10] Because of the notoriety of "If We Must Die," McKay came to stand for racial protest and the sonnet.

Louis Untermeyer's influential twentieth-century anthology, *Modern American Poetry* (1930), echoes both Johnson and I. A. Richards in its characterization of McKay's life and poetry of the of the 1910s and 20s when "he had been writing, and some of his more belligerent verse attracted the attention of a few literary radicals" (630). Generally, Untermeyer argues, 1922, the year McKay's *Harlem Shadows* was published, was a milestone for African American letters, though McKay "expressed a stern if over-violent spirit in verse and prose" (25), reflecting the established association between the poet's radical politics and protest sonnets. In 1930, only "If We Must Die" was included in this anthology; in 1936, another, less strident sonnet, "The Harlem Dancer," accompanied it.

Apart from John Dewey's surprisingly nuanced reading of McKay's poetry in his "Introduction" to *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (1953),[11] critical attention to McKay was nonexistent for thirty years, perhaps because New Critical standards of evaluation favored ambiguity, indirectness, and indeterminacy and because poems like "If We Must Die" threatened to inflame continued racial tensions and intense anti-Communism. Those seeking to reform the American literary canon, and particularly black scholars and artists defining an African American tradition, recovered his work in the late 1960s—although it was an ambivalent recovery precisely because of the fame and form of "If We Must Die."

The Black Arts revaluation of African American literature, particularly the Harlem Renaissance, is the most decisive factor in McKay's current reputation. With the goal of illuminating history to recognize and confront the effects of what W. E. B. Du Bois called "double-consciousness," the sense of being inwardly divided of black Americans in a majority white culture, artists and intellectuals of the Black Arts movement engaged in "a critical re-examination of Western political, social and artistic values . . . a rejection of anything that we feel is detrimental to our people. And it is almost axiomatic that most of what the West considers important endangers the more humane world we feel ours should be" (Neal 638). Because of the West's spiritual bankruptcy and the assumption that "art reflects the value system from which it comes" (Karenga 5-6), black people must bring about "some kind of psychic withdrawal from its values and assumptions" (Neal 647-48) and replace them with meaningful black art that is "collective and committing and committed" (Karenga 5-6). To accomplish this, writes Neal, "We will have to alter our concepts of what art is, of what it is supposed to 'do.' The dead forms taught most writers in the white man's schools will have to be destroyed,

or at best, radically altered" to reflect a nonassimilationist black culture, a black aesthetic—the black church, folklore, and music (653, 650). Such a revolutionary program necessarily rejected much formally conservative of the Harlem Renaissance poets but responded with ambivalence to McKay, who may have employed European forms but voiced black power themes.

Dudley Randall expresses this ambivalence in his anthology, *The Black Poets* (1971), which sought to delineate black literary history and to define contemporary black aesthetics. To trace the progress of black poets' rejection of "white models and [return] to their roots" in the wake of "Watts and Detroit, and the Black Arts movement," Randall includes "the full range of black American poetry" (xxiii-xxvi). In this context, McKay, "well-known for his poetry of defiance and rebellion," is a flawed forerunner for contemporary black poets because his literary forms are not authentically black.[12] Randall asserts that McKay and "the first literary black poets" wrote "as whites for a white audience," whose antiquated forms constituted an interruption of an authentic black voice, contrasting him with his more innovative contemporaries:

> In the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen wrote under the influence of Keats and Houseman, and Claude McKay wrote sonnets in the tradition of Wordsworth and Milton. It took the impingement of racism on Cullen's life, and McKay's belligerent personality, to give their poetry distinction. Only Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer, one by his use of colloquial black speech and blues form, and the other by his employment of new images and symbolism, were abreast of the poetic practices of the day. (xxv)

And yet despite its formal backwardness, "If We Must Die" remained useful to the black community. A poem so well known and so closely associated with such an important era for African American political and artistic history made a comprehensive dismissal impossible. Making McKay the exception to the rule, however, only created a more adamant image of McKay the American protest sonneteer.

Even during the Black Arts movement there were attempts to preserve McKay as a founding voice in the African American literary canon rather than a radical exception. James A. Emanuel's study of the "Renaissance Sonneteers" cautions against a blanket rejection of the Harlem Renaissance in the search "for literary combinations of the useful and the beautiful" (34). He argues that the poetry of the era be judged according to "the new scales of Black value" (33).[13] Emanuel outlines the utility of black poetry and culture of the 1920s and its possible contributions to contemporary black life: its "widening of Black men's democratic vision of themselves," "positive racial awareness," the "decline of Booker T. Washington's conciliatory philosophy," "encourage[ment of] self-examination," its corrections of the historical record, and the fame it bestowed upon African American authors (34-35). Though these accomplishments did little to raise the standard of living for the masses of African Americans, they provided tools "without which utilitarian political measures have little meaning" (35). The failures of the period, too, provide "usable guides and warnings" to the new Black poetry (35-36).[14] According to these standards, rather than strictly formal ones, the African American sonneteers of the 1920s, like "every Black poet," know "the stifling underside of racial experience," its "psychic brutalities," alienations, and economics (36). Therefore, in the hands of black poets, the sonnet may be more than simply "an evasion of, or indifference to, racial

claims upon the artists"; it can also represent self-control against the antagonisms of poverty and racism, exhibit participation in a cosmopolitan artistic tradition, and function as a mode of protest (36).

Considering these possibilities, Emanuel makes the case for the incorporation of McKay's protest sonnets into the "usable" African American canon by ranking several sonnets according to their relevance to "issues now being emphasized by Black critics of unexpected will and fervor" (37). The "most common theme" of these poems that authorizes their inclusion according to the "racial imperatives of today" is "the insistence upon a positive image of Black people" (37). Other themes that conform to these criteria are those that represent "the white man's negative strategies to destroy" black people, racial violence, miscellaneous racial injustices, African ancestry, love, and youth. According to Emanuel, once in the United States, McKay, a "Chief of Blackness among the sonneteers," "began to write burning sonnets that heralded the twentieth century spirit of proud Black men," a few of which are clearly pertinent to African American literary and social history, exemplifying not only the successes of the Harlem Renaissance but the goals of the Black Arts movement. His protest sonnets portray black pride, anger, and speakers who are "courageous, formidable" Black men transcending racism, the brutal racial violence of American life, and life in a racist society (42, 37-38). The value to the African American canon of "If We Must Die," "Claude McKay's most famous sonnet . . . renowned because it is intensely inspirational" in the context of the Red Summer of 1919 and the late 1960s, speaks for itself: "It is hard to imagine how any Black person . . . could read the poem without profound identification with the desperate heart of its author. . . . Perhaps this sonnet is the only one that needs no commentary" (42).

Ultimately, Emanuel affirms that, in the hands of poets like McKay, the sonnet can "illuminate the truth of Black experience," constituting an original contribution to African American literature (95). If Black Arts critics reject the form, this will be less the result of Harlem Renaissance aesthetics than a Black Arts misunderstanding of the form (96-97). The Black Arts' recovery of McKay's voice of protest and the subsequent defenses of Harlem Renaissance sonnets brought McKay back to popular attention and further contributed to his now-legendary association with the protest sonnet and with an overemphasis on "If We Must Die."

Indeed, "If We Must Die" has shaped our notions of McKay's writing: the poem has deflected attention away from his political and literary life before 1919 and in the 1930s and 1940s, but preserved him in the African American literary canon, and led to our current tendency to limit his work geographically, temporally, formally, and politically.[15] Our McKay was not racial or political enough before immigrating to America; his Jamaican poetry lacked maturity and depth compared to his work in the 1920s; and his poetry of the 1930s and 1940s amounts to a perplexing loss of poetic ability. These judgments persist even while scholars attempt to discover McKay's radical politics, explore his expatriate years, and account for his colonial roots beyond "If We Must Die."

In the introduction to his collection of McKay's prose and poetry, *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Prose and Poetry, 1912–1948*, Wayne F. Cooper confirms the 1970s image of McKay as protest sonneteer—racial, political, and above all American—even as argues that McKay can only be appreciated "within the full context of his life and career" (1). He concludes that McKay's Jamaican poetry "betrayed his youthful naiveté

and provincialism" (4). Though his formative experiences as a member of a racial majority in Jamaica would give the poet strength during his "later years" (6), it was his experience as a racial minority encountering virulent American racism that produced our sophisticated protest sonneteer: "McKay reacted to this state of affairs [American racial segregation and violence] with incredulity and anger, although nearly six years passed before he finally channeled his anger into a decisive rebellion against the social system which supported such injustices" (7). "If We Must Die" constitutes this rebellion and gives us the unequivocally American McKay, the protest sonneteer whose "militant verse after World War I breathed anger, alienation, and rebellion into American Negro poetry" (1) and whose use of the sonnet and short lyric recalled "the Elizabethans and English Romantics" and "conveyed a startlingly bitter, and essentially modern, message of despair, alienation, and rebellion" (8). Cooper gives the impression that only in the US did McKay find his voice as a black poet. Cooper also suggests that McKay's political education was completed in the United States and England: "Once in the United States, of course, he had acquired a broader, soberer view of the world (13-14). Finally, Cooper argues that McKay's life represents "a continuous chain of creative development [of African American literature] stretching from the time of Booker T. Washington forward toward the Black Power movement of the late 1960s" (2-3). Such an appraisal casts McKay's life and work as essentially American and presents him to a reformed canon.

The narrowing of McKay to his early American years intensified in the 1980s and 1990s and began, more than ever, to focus on his protest sonnets. Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery* (1989), which promises to be "an overview of the problematics of writing [a literary history] and a provocation to reexamine what remains the dominant

story of modern poetry," seeks to retrieve McKay's voice of protest, virtually forgotten until the early 1970s, and defend his sonnets, contributing to the already quickly ossifying picture of McKay: "*Harlem Shadows* (1922) gave black anger new specificity and a much greater rhetorical range . . . demonstrating that poetry could offer condensed, uncompromising, emblematic versions of pervasive racial conflicts" (89-90). Concerning the sonnet, Nelson reflects the work of scholars like Emanuel, Cooper, and Houston A. Baker, Jr. by noting that "McKay is often faulted for his decision to struggle within the constricted . . . form," but in actuality the poet "was not only trying to demonstrate that black poets could master traditional forms but also, like other political poets, working to destabilize those forms from within" (89-90).

Such a reading of McKay's sonnet demonstrates what Baker refers to as an African American tradition of the "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery" (15). Baker says McKay's sonnets are "mastered *masks*" that reveal a "denigration of form—a necessary ('forced,' as it were) adoption of the standard that results in an effective *blackening*" of the form (86). In other words, to gain a hearing, McKay (and other poets) adopted "*recognizably* standard forms" and attained by "straining (like McKay's rebellious cries) variations and deepenings of these forms." In this sense, rather than trying to write as a white writer for a white audience as Dudley had asserted, McKay was "forced" into the sonnet form but remade it into black expression through his "straining." According to this logic, among his poems only McKay's strident protest sonnets count as authentic African American expression.[16]

In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995), George Hutchinson explores the interracial aspects of the Harlem Renaissance and discusses the complicated

nature of interracial politics of the modernist period and contemporary constructions of the Harlem Renaissance but recapitulates the standard image of McKay even as he attempts to add nuance to it. In contrast to most critics who place McKay's political awakening in America, Hutchinson claims that his "sudden political intensity" was the result of his visit to Moscow from 1922-1923. His evidence for this is McKay's limited support for nationalist movements in the 1920s and his belief that class struggle by itself would not end racism (267). However, when discussing McKay's protest sonnets and nostalgia for Jamaica of the 1910s and 1920s, Hutchinson argues that "McKay's experience of the United States as a black immigrant was profound, painful, and poetically productive"; it was "[i]mplacable racism" in America that "brought out a racial pride and poetic intensity beyond any he had previously expressed" (413-14). Though Hutchinson notes that McKay's Jamaican poetry voiced protest, it is in America that he "projected onto the (cold, hard, male) land," Jamaica's problems—"That is, the evils were simultaneously racialized and 'Americanized.'" He concludes that McKay's "Americanization parallels the development of his mature poetic voice and what John Dewey called his 'clean' hatred" (413-14). So, if not his politics, then McKay's racial pride and protest resulted from his American experience, exemplified by "If We Must Die." Certainly, by the 1990s, then, scholars had fashioned McKay as an instance of American exceptionalism—only America can create and contain voices of protest like McKay's.

More recently, scholars have begun to recover McKay's internationalism, but "If We Must Die" continues to exert considerable pressure upon their efforts. This is primarily because of the national boundaries created by our fixation on the poem.

William J. Maxwell's Introduction to *Complete Poems: Claude McKay* asserts that McKay's internationalism comprises both the most remarkable feature and the biggest challenge of his life and work. Indeed, it is McKay's internationalism that distinguishes him from other modernist writers, particularly his experience of the "Black Atlantic": "McKay's vagabond soul . . . was nurtured in a singular odyssey across frontiers and oceans, a voyage exceptional even in the era of modernism, the immigrant-built, tradition-smashing art style that dominated his post-Jamaican lifetime" (xvii). Rather than the exposure to *avant-garde* salons in Europe, connection with an international black working class defines McKay's modernity (xii-xiii). In fact, Harlem itself reflected the Black Diaspora with immigrants composing "almost one-quarter of adult Harlemites" by the 1920s (xiv). Though Maxwell goes to great lengths to discuss the full range of McKay's career and international connections, he too attributes the maturation of McKay's political consciousness to the interracial bohemian milieu of Harlem and Greenwich village (xv), making "If We Must Die" the pivotal text for this reading of McKay's life—even without mentioning the poem. For example, he identifies McKay's attendance of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International and the inclusion of his verse in A. Mitchell Palmer's infamous report to the U.S. Senate as setting McKay's "lasting reputation as the gallant bomb-thrower of black poetry" (xvi). It was this notoriety that enforced McKay's expatriate wanderings; the Department of Justice sent orders to customs officials at several major ports to block his reentry to the United States until 1934 (xvi-xvii). Thus "If We Must Die" determines Maxwell's analysis of McKay as a revolutionary globetrotter by linking his international politics and his protest sonnets. The poem also influences Maxwell's discussion of the poet's use of the sonnet, a

discussion that does not address "If We Must Die" because it attempts to move beyond the "sonnets of racial tension that remain classroom mainstays" (xvi-xxvii).[17] Maxwell argues that in addition to traditional claims of its adaptability to figure black anger, the sonnet appealed to McKay because of its internationalism: "it was . . . a long, many-authored volume of international cues to New Negro awakening" with "an exceptionally transnational poetic design . . . dispersed throughout more of the modern world than any other type of Western lyric . . . a fellow vagabond equipped with centuries of worldly advice on living through the century of the color line" (xxxv-xxxvi). However, linking the sonnet to McKay's internationalism, itself the result of political expulsion, connects it to his political radicalism and racial protest in the United States, completing the familiar circuit of casting McKay as the American protest sonneteer of "If We Must Die."

Gary Edward Holcomb's *Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance* (2007) also attempts to avoid the apparent political contradictions attributed to McKay over the past 40 years to reveal a McKay who is not solely an early voice of black nationalism but a "cultural nationalist" who was "simultaneously an internationalist . . . dedicated to Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist cross-racial revolutionary change" (6). Holcomb contends that the "difficulty of [McKay's] multiplicity" is the result of disciplinary boundaries and that we must historicize him. To demonstrate the simultaneous cultural nationalist and "Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist cross-racial revolutionary," Holcomb turns predictably to "If We Must Die." The convergence of McKay's radical associations and the U.S. government crackdown on political radicals, the dramatic postwar racial violence, and the publication of "If We Must Die" locates America as the setting for McKay's newfound and simultaneous racial consciousness and

radical politics. In Holcomb's reading of the sonnet, the masses of black and radical voices are united through the "poem's first-person plural subjectivity" that takes "possession of the Declaration of Independence's inclusive plural voice, 'We the People,'" making "radical and black suddenly synonyms in the American age of modernity" (7-8). Thus, there is no distinction between cultural nationalism and radical politics: "McKay's sonnet utters the impatience of the tyrannized black Great Migration class along with the cresting tide of besieged cross-cultural American radical socialist action" (7-8). While the historical facts surrounding the composition of the poem are clear, Holcomb's reading optimizes McKay's leftist activities in the United States, which once again diminishes the political force in both his earliest Jamaican poetry and his later emphasis on black community institutions. Moreover, virtually all critics discover McKay's political sophistication in his Marxist period, equating authentic political consciousness with Marxism as opposed to other forms of political engagement like anticolonial nationalism. More than disciplinary boundaries, national boundaries—often embedded in disciplinary turf and reinforced by iconic poems—create political contradictions in the poet's work.

Because of the notoriety and influence of "If We Must Die," the icon of McKay as a protest sonneteer has diminished our appreciation of the formal strategies of Harlem Renaissance poets.[18] After the canon reformation work of the 1980s, the characterization of McKay as a sonneteer has only intensified, particularly in the last ten years, with four major teaching anthologies paying close attention to McKay's protest sonnets, emphasizing those poems that appeared in *Harlem Shadows* (1922).[19] The focus on *this* McKay allows us to place him firmly within the context of the Harlem Renaissance to tell

a story of African American resistance to racial violence in the United States in the 1920s. Further, such a view of McKay shapes a discussion of poetic form within the period, casting McKay and Countee Cullen as conservative, traditional formalists opposite Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer as modernist innovators, while simultaneously maintaining that these differences are evidence of an inclusive modernist movement. For example, Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke's *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004) describes the Harlem Renaissance as "the most significant alternative realization of American Modernism," which "combined both traditional and experimental methods with [the] hugely important component of racial identity" (xlii). To emphasize this assertion, the anthology announces that African American poets of the period "claimed the right to delineate" their "experience on their own terms—so much so that one of the signal characteristics of the period is the poetry's diversity of form[, ranging] from the experimental genre blending of Jean Toomer's *Cane* to the sonnets of Claude McKay and Countee Cullen" (309-10). Paul Lauter et alia's *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1998) also maintains this opposition of traditional formalism and modernist formal innovation, yet contains it within an inclusive movement, arguing that the Harlem Renaissance exhibits an "apparent democracy of artistic expressiveness that embraced a literary agenda as divergent as Claude McKay's sonnets" and "Countee Cullen's lyrics, and Langston Hughes's experimentation with 12-bar blues mode" (1580). The *Heath* links McKay and Cullen at least three more times and states that "the poetry of the Renaissance reflects two major currents: (1) experimentation with verse form that takes its inspiration from African-American musical idiom . . . and (2) the exploration of traditional verse forms, including free verse technique that . . .

rewrites aspects of [the] European courtly love tradition" (1580). Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair's *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003) follows suit, asserting that McKay and Cullen modernized traditional forms by adding non-traditional themes (498-99), while other Harlem Renaissance poets "embraced Imagist or high modernist styles" or "renovated . . . African American oral genres" (lxii). Yet this formal distinction obscures commonalities among poets, such as Toomer's traditional verse, McKay's and Hughes' shared interest in radical politics, the later influence of religion on both Toomer and McKay, and the ambivalent relationships these artists had with dominant American culture, the African American elite, and white patrons, all of which influenced their form and themes. While formal strategies are important, this way of framing McKay obscures the cultural contexts that produced those texts and the intense debates, differences, and similarities between McKay and other poets at the time.[20] The myopic focus on McKay's protest sonnets, driven by the influence of "If We Must Die," prevents us from seeing his other contributions to American poetry.

In some of the major teaching anthologies of the last ten years, then, we see a remarkable critical consensus in discussions of McKay that foregrounds the thematics of "If We Must Die," as well as its form, in order to discuss him as a member of the Harlem Renaissance coterie of formalists, while dismissing his other poetry as nostalgic. Such uniformity in the headnotes to McKay selections allows him little range, eclipsed as he is by the protest sonnet and *Harlem Shadows*. This focus on 1922 ignores McKay's earlier dialect poetry and later expatriate poetry, decontextualizing his work, giving us only the nostalgic immigrant protest sonneteer of Harlem when we might have the young

Jamaican nationalist, free-thinker, immigrant, protestor, radical, world traveler, and convert to Catholicism—a McKay who employed traditional forms to deal directly with specific places and events, specific political and social conditions. According to the received story, McKay only develops his true poetic voice and political impulses in America, not as a product of the Black Diaspora, the sphere of English colonialism and American influence abroad, or international socialism. Finally, these accounts of McKay insist on a fundamental difference between his American and Jamaican work, denying the obvious fact that McKay's life and work in Jamaica conditioned his responses to American racism and international socialism.

Thus, while most recent anthologies acknowledge McKay's Jamaican origins, left-wing politics, and his travels outside of the U.S. *in their headnotes*, their poetic selections still largely favor protest sonnets and nostalgic lyrics and offer uncomplicated characterizations of his Jamaican poetry and background, and they virtually ignore his poetry of the 1930s and 1940s. For example, the *Heath* notes that McKay published two volumes of dialect verse in Jamaica and that "McKay's poetry includes nostalgic lyrics about rural Jamaica, and poems celebrating nature, love, and Christian faith, in addition to the powerful protest verses" (1688). In *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000), Nelson writes of McKay's dialect verse: "A white British expatriate in Jamaica, Walter Jekyll, encouraged him to write dialect poems embodying Jamaican folklore. That he did in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912)" (314).[21] If we were to consider McKay's career in all respects, these assertions would certainly seem distorted. For one thing, McKay's dialect poems "celebrating nature" and "love" are not as innocent or uncomplicated as such statements suggest. For another, a reading of McKay's dialect poetry reveals that he did

not seek simply to recreate traditional Jamaican folklore but rather deployed the folk and Jamaican dialect toward anticolonial nationalist ends.[22]

"If We Must Die" was not the first time McKay voiced protest or intervened in traditional forms. His poem in support of the streetcar protests in Jamaica in 1912, "Passive Resistance," issues a challenge similar to that in the famous sonnet: "An' we send the challenge forth, / 'Only touch us if you dare!'" (23-24). Also, the notions that McKay's love poetry was simply sentimental and that his yearnings for Jamaica betray an uncomplicated nostalgia are not supported by *Songs of Jamaica*. Many of McKay's love lyrics, especially those written in Jamaica, address the specific social and cultural circumstances that shape intimate relationships. To read these early love poems is to confront the influence of black Jamaican nationalism on American protest poetry—a confrontation that must alter our understanding of the Harlem Renaissance.

And more: the influence of Walter Jekyll, McKay's mentor and patron, on McKay's poetry is overestimated. Regardless of McKay's claims to the contrary, critics often argue that Jekyll's interest in Jamaican folk culture motivated the poet's use of dialect, a view justified by textual tensions and contradictions between Standard English and Jamaican dialect in *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912). While such stylistic tensions require analysis, many critics account for them by suggesting McKay's assumed lapses from dialect to Standard English result from an unconscious rebellion against an imposed use of Jamaican dialect, or worse, suggest that he is pandering to colonial stereotypes. Such readings misrecognize McKay as a colonized non-subject, who lacks the ability to carry out his own artistic aims. They overemphasize Jekyll's influence on McKay, portraying the relationship, predictably, as one of unilateral

power possessed by the white colonial patron, which compromises the protégé's artistic integrity to satisfy the demands of the white order.[23] The relationship between Jekyll and McKay is important to our understanding of his Jamaican period, but even more important are the dual significations of dialect within racialized social structures.

Indeed, scholars of McKay's dialect poetry have not acknowledged the subversive anticolonial and nationalist potential of this work. His dialect poetry does not merely romanticize the Jamaican peasantry but shows the damaging effects of colonialism on all aspects of peasant life—while at the same time articulating a black Jamaican national identity.[24] McKay's poetry creates what Benedict Anderson calls an imagined community with shared historical, political, economic, and national concerns. In a colonial context, nationalist writers fashioning an imagined community free of colonial authority speak to different audiences simultaneously: "Nationalist texts were addressed both to 'the people' who were said to constitute the nation and to the colonial masters whose claim to rule nationalism questioned" (Chatterjee 30). This mutual address was designed to refute paternalist justifications for colonialism as well as "assert that a backward nation could 'modernize' itself while retaining its cultural identity" (30). By recognizing the mutual address of McKay's dialect poetry, we can recognize the artistic and nationalist agency at work in his verse.

Published in January of 1912, *Songs of Jamaica* became part of a context of social controversy that pitted lower-class Jamaicans against foreign business interests and the colonial government. In February, a popular movement arose to protest the unreliability and increased fares of a Canadian streetcar company (Cooper, *Rebel* 51). The protests, initially peaceful, eventually resulted in violence and mass arrests of the protesters (51-

52). McKay fully participated in the controversies and sided against the establishment, publishing protest poems in Kingston newspapers that advocated active resistance (46-53).[25] That McKay would be sympathetic to the protesters is not surprising considering that all of black Jamaica shared the history of colonialism, slavery, and rebellion.[26]

In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jamaica maintained strict color and class lines. According to Winston James, McKay's relatively well-off family was an anomaly in Jamaica where "the masses of black Jamaicans, especially the darkest ones, were not only poor but often desperate" (20). Blacks were largely shut out economically as the landed class sought to maintain a system of peonage, refusing "to sell or rent land to black Jamaicans" and resisting government efforts to build infrastructure in peasant areas (20-21). The colonial government also impeded the economic progress of blacks through a system of taxation that taxed the most basic necessities of the poorest Jamaicans while leaving virtually untaxed the luxury items of the wealthy classes (21). This double oppression of race and class resulted in stark poverty and massive migrations from the countryside to urban areas, prompting many to seek work in other countries like Panama (21). With class, racial, and color lines drawn so clearly and given the negative economic and social effects of such lines, it is difficult to imagine a young, educated artist who would not feel compelled to represent them, particularly an artist like McKay, who openly declared "a fierce hatred of injustice" (qtd. in Maxwell 296). While McKay may not have been a revolutionary, *Songs of Jamaica* depicts an anticolonial nationalism that emphatically responds to such a history of injustice.

A fundamental problem with much scholarship on McKay's dialect poetry is the failure to recognize an anticolonial imagined community that articulates a shared identity and shared concerns among various individuals. This is because nationalism is traditionally associated with political movements rather than expressions of cultural difference in opposition to the colonizer (Chatterjee 5). For Partha Chatterjee, "anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power" (6). This "domain of sovereignty" consists of the "spiritual domain," or an "inner" domain that exhibits "the 'essential' marks of cultural identity." It is primarily in this inner domain that nationalism claims autonomy and "refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain."[27] For anticolonial nationalists, the nation is "imagined" or "brought into being" in the "inner" domain: "In this, [the nation's] true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power." Chatterjee points to areas within this autonomous sphere where anticolonial difference, or national culture, is expressed: language, religion, and personal and family life (6-13; 26). McKay expresses his anticolonial nationalism, based on difference, in just these areas.

While Jekyll's influence and the colonial interest in primitivism allowed McKay access to the marketplace, McKay's use of dialect also accords with nationalist goals of creating the nation and establishing an imagined anticolonial community based on difference from the colonizer. According to Chatterjee, the colonized middle-class "came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity" (7). In Jamaica, the Creole dialect became a sign of national sovereignty and its appearance in print, through McKay's poetry, allowed dialect to articulate an imagined community with

a shared cultural and linguistic history. Additionally, Chatterjee argues that the "bilingual elite" works to "provide its mother tongue with the necessary linguistic equipment to enable it to become an adequate language for 'modern' culture" (7). Such a conception goes far toward explaining McKay's interest in dialect poetry and his formal choices. The distinctive combination of Jamaican dialect and European verse forms such as the ballad and dramatic monologue establishes not only the adequacy of Jamaican dialect for modern culture (through its nationalist assertion of autonomy) but also the superiority of Jamaican dialect to Standard English to express the peasant experience. McKay's modulation between dialect and Standard English demonstrates a mastery of both modes. And his use of European forms further confirms the versatility of dialect to communicate and create art across cultural lines, from Annancy folk tales to the dramatic monologues of the late English poet, Robert Browning. Further, literate black and mulatto Jamaicans would most likely appreciate the multiple valences of McKay's verse, while white colonials would have to rely on footnotes, such as those Jekyll provided, which mediated their access to McKay's verse. Thus dialect articulates a nationalist sovereignty over language, establishes anticolonial difference, and hybridizes European literary forms.[28]

Formally and thematically, McKay's poems imagine the nation through the peasantry. Using the folk to demonstrate the connection of the nation to the land is a typically nationalist move. David G. Nicholls argues that McKay depicts the folk in the novel *Banana Bottom* (1933) as a political identity rather than simply a traditional premodern culture, creating a representation of peasant life that is both resistant and autonomous (66-67). Similarly, in *Songs of Jamaica,* McKay uses the folk to establish the nation. For example, "King Banana" presents a complex portrait of the nation that

expresses anticolonial difference in the personal sphere, economic autonomy, and a vital connection of black Jamaican peasants to the land through its depiction of the cultivation of Martinique bananas, a staple crop for Jamaicans. The first stanza recounts the specific ways that blacks prepare green bananas for consumption, contrasting these, in the second stanza, to the "buccra" (white) habit of eating bananas ripe and asserting that white colonials do not rely on bananas as a staple food the way black Jamaicans do: "Dem eat it differan' way" (8). This particular assertion of difference implies a separation of white colonials from the land: they do not rely on it for sustenance as peasants do.

Traditional cultivation practices assert autonomy and an intimate connection of the folk to land. The speaker describes the peasant cultivation practice of burning to harvest the bananas and to fertilize the soil: smoke "go'p to heben wid de nize / Of hundred t'ousan' cricket" (11-12). When the fire subsides the remaining black mound offers itself to further cultivation: "De black moul' lie do'n quite prepare' / Fe feel de hoe an' rake; / De fire bu'n, and it tek care / Fe mek de wo'm dem wake" (13-16). The smoldering mound is figured as both sentient, in that it can feel the hoe and the rake, and as part of the natural cycle of life and death, awakening worms to work the debris into the soil, fertilizing future crops. Thus, the cycle of the banana crop is linked to the cycle of life and death, both of which bring about future crops. The burning mound also recalls a funeral pyre, suggesting that the body gives itself to produce the banana crop, which preserves the "naygur man," specifically. Furthermore, McKay's emphasis on the blackness of the mound and the figure of the funeral pyre links this cycle of cultivation to the black Jamaican peasants, literalizing their connection to the land and agricultural production. The body of the black Jamaican peasant gives itself to the production of the

life-sustaining banana crop: "It mek fe him all way." Here, black peasants are the land and make the banana crop possible through their bodies, their labor, and their lives.

McKay also contrasts peasant agricultural practices, like the preparation of bananas for consumption, with those of colonial whites. The speaker suggests that white farmers have nothing to offer peasants with regard to agricultural practices, asking "Wha' lef' fe buccra teach again / Dis time about plantation?" (17-18). Offering evidence of successful cultivation in the previous two stanzas, the speaker believes that the answer is obvious: "Dere's not'in dat can beat de plain / Good ole-time cultibation" (19-20). The speaker's assertion that there is nothing better than the time-tested methods of cultivation rejects the interference of industrial agricultural practices. Such difference asserts an autonomous sphere of peasant agriculture. In addition to peasant cultivation practices that result in "bunches big an' 'trong; / Pure nine-han' bunch . . . / Ole met'od all along" (22-24), peasant harvesting practices meet market demands and satisfy peasant economic needs: "De cuttin' done same ole-time way, / We wrap dem in a trash, / An' pack dem neatly in a dray / So tight dat dem can't mash. / / We re'ch: banana finish sell; / Den we 'tart back fe home: Some hab money in t'read-bag well, Some spen' all in a rum" (25-32).

The final stanza, again, declares that the Martinique banana belongs to black Jamaican peasants exclusively. The speaker, addressing an audience of blacks, the imagined community whose labor and sustenance the poem details, declares that "Our islan' is banana lan', / Banana car' de sway" (35-36). The first person plural possessive, "our," asserts that the island belongs to the speaker and to the community members who share these cultural practices in opposition to "buccra." Such articulations of community

are crucial to establishing an anticolonial point of view: "[By] applying the criterion of 'we' and 'they' . . . a principle of community gives to all these specific aspects their fundamental constitutive character as the purposive political acts of a collective consciousness" (Chatterjee 163). The final line, "Banana car' de sway" (the banana crop carries the sway) asserts that bananas have power, too. The bodily link here between the peasants, the banana, and the land suggests that black Jamaican peasants have influence and power. Not only is peasant agriculture superior to modern colonial farming practices, Jamaican peasants possess the island and maintain power through their connection to the land and its produce. While Cooper reads this poem as signifying the small farmers' independence because banana cultivation occupied a "central place in the black farmer's life" and "provided the small farmer's chief revenue on the export market" (*Rebel* 39), he also sees it as autobiographically describing the harsh conditions of peasant life.[29] However, this does not consider the political potential contained in the poem's assertions of anticolonial difference with regard to cultivation. McKay's poem argues for a nationalist configuration of agricultural practices within the inner domain.

Political work takes place even in the collection's most apparently private poems. William Hansell argues that McKay's love poems do not offer any critique of race or colonialism, reading the love poems as unremarkably universal: "Except for the dialect and the setting they could concern lovers anywhere" (124). However, McKay's love poems do not happen just anywhere; they happen in Jamaica, are expressed in the Jamaican peasant dialect, and involve rigorous critiques of race, class, and colonialism. For example, the speaker in "De Dog-Rose" observes the racial and class dynamics within what Maxwell calls a "colonial love triangle": "Left him for anedder man / Wid a

pile o' money, / Dat he carried from his land / O' de Injin coney" (29-32). Additionally, the setting of the home and the proximity to the home of invasive plants is a further key to McKay's anticolonial nationalism: "Growin' by de corner-stone / See de pretty flow'r-tree blows, / Sendin' from de prickly branch / A lubly bunch o' red dog-rose" (1-4). In the context of anticolonial nationalism, the intimate relations between men and women are configured in the domain of the "home," which "must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the world" (Chatterjee 120). Often these divisions become associated with gender, with women representing the inner domain of the home. In "De Dog-Rose," McKay explores the threats to intimate relations between black men and women in the colonialist setting and the failures of the nation when the material interests of the world invade the intimate domain of the home, the national Woman.

Maxwell points out that "De Dog-Rose" "describes a classic New World plantation love triangle, with Miss Sal jilting Freddy for a wealthy white man" (290). Recounting such romantic configurations, the poem expresses a concern over native and colonizing species of plants and animals as symbols of national specificity and of the extent to which colonialism affects peasant relationships. These concrete, local details work with the dialect toward nationalist ends. The first invasive plant identified in the poem is the dog-rose, a native European wild rose. Its central role in the poem evokes the extent of European colonization. Not only does the colonizer rule politically, but his plants have colonized the landscape. That Freddy gives Sal a dog-rose bloom as a token of his love further suggests that colonization has invaded the most personal relationships between black Jamaicans. In a nationalist context, then, the location of the "dog-rose" is crucial to the poem's warning to resist colonial encroachment. The speaker notes that the

"dog-rose" is "growin' by de corner-stone" (1). The proximity of the invasive species to the domestic space threatens the purity of the "domain of sovereignty" described by Chatterjee as the seat of the nation (6-13; 26). Moreover, the "corner-stone" confirms the importance of such relationships to the nation. Corner stones are foundational, suggesting that the domestic space and the peasant couple are of primary importance to the nation but are under threat from colonization.

McKay's reference to the "Injin coney" also indicates the importance of species' origins in the poem, in this case, the origin of Sal's new lover. According to Jekyll's footnote, the Indian coney is a rabbit native to England (Maxwell 290). Thus, Sal's new lover is presumably a white, wealthy English colonial. Sal's betrayal, while certainly a betrayal of Freddy and of race as specified by the "classic New World plantation love triangle," is also a betrayal of class. In the complex color scheme of colonial Jamaica, Sal's "baby son" would not be part of his mother's class: as a member of the property-owning mulatto elite, he would occupy a higher social class (Cooper, *Rebel* 3), signified in the poem by the "great-house" where Sal now lives. Considering McKay's view that the darker peasant class is the essence of the nation, Sal's betrayal of class (and race) is also a betrayal of nation.

Additionally, colonial class hierarchies pose a threat to the nationalist peasant couple. The schoolhouse and the field signify the division between Sal and Freddy before they come together: "Young Miss Sal jes' come from school: / Freddy, fresh from groun' and grub" (9-10). Education recalls the vexed relationship of the peasantry to the colonial establishment, the nationalist implications of over-identification with Britain. In fact, McKay pointed to the influence of the colonial education system on himself: "to those of

us who were getting an education in the English schools, the Jamaican dialect was considered a vulgar tongue" (qtd. in Cooper, *Rebel* 27). Conversely, Freddy comes to the meeting from working in the fields, a realm of national power, as we have seen in "King Banana." However, under English hierarchies of race and class, a union between Sal and Freddy would be difficult at best. The juxtaposition of Freddy's and Sal's relationship to the land and to the colonizer makes clear the impediments to peasants' education and the simultaneous inculcation of colonial values in young children, which reinforce rigid class, racial, and color lines that support the oppression of the laboring classes. To warn against the threats posed by such conditions, McKay employs *native* species, the gray kingbird, or petchary.

The petchary, here, symbolizes anticolonial sentiment. The speaker supposes that the petchary can see the outcome of the romance before Sal ever meets her future Englishman: "De petchary laugh an' jig, / Sittin' on a bamboo low; / Seems him guess, jes' like mese'f / How de whole t'ing gwin' fe go" (21-24). Presumably, the speaker and the petchary understand that the differences in education and class between Sal and Freddy, in a colonial context, are insurmountable obstacles to the couple. The petchary is known for its aggressive defense of its territory against much larger animals (Maxwell 290; "Petchary").[30] Considering this, the bird's presence in the poem operates pedagogically, warning of the dangers of colonial encroachment upon the most intimate aspects of peasant life; even the most intimate relationships must be defended against the forces of colonialism. The petchary is a nationalist symbol of creating and defending the inner domain of sovereignty. Thus, the failure of Sal and Freddy's love is rendered as the failure to defend the inner domain from colonial intrusion indicated by the petchary's

departure from the scene and the speaker's question "Wonder whe' de petchary?" (33). As a nationalist work, "De Dog-Rose" speaks both to the impact of colonialism on intimate relationships and to the imagined nation coming into being. Finally, Sal's betrayal of Freddy suggests the need for an alternative ideal national woman, a woman who will resist the affections of the colonizer and thus resist the colonizer's invasion of the inner domain in order to preserve the nation's sovereignty. McKay's attention to specific social and cultural conditions in an early poem like "De Dog-Rose" roots the nationalist impulses in his work and politics in Jamaica, long before they flourished in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Like "De Dog-Rose," "Mother Dear" articulates the nationalist argument through references to plants and animals and, here, to Christianity. The establishment of difference in nationalist life involves religion and family (Chatterjee 9). The poem recounts the death of the mother. Her family consists of the father, children, and the observing speaker, but plants and animals are an integral part of this family, too. In addition to the conventionally sad scene of a family member's death, the figure of the mother acquires multiple associations in the context of nationalism. Nations are, of course, conventionally symbolized as mothers, suggesting a filial relationship between the nation and its subjects. Too, women and mothers not only embody but produce and define the inner domain: "The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality" (126). Finally, the mother and the father are both of the peasant class, signified by their dialect.

On her deathbed, Mother remarks on the surrounding environment, and many of her references have national and historical significance. Initially, these elements create a rural scene depicting the life of the peasantry. But in addition to signifying a thriving countryside and farm, they also resonate with Jamaica's particular colonial history, creating a sovereign national sphere based on difference. For example, in her survey of her surroundings, the mother remarks that "Akee trees are laden, / But de yellow leaves are fadin' / Like a young an' bloomin' maiden / Fallen low" (9-12). Introduced from West Africa in the eighteenth century, the Akee tree recalls the history of slavery in Jamaica, imported along with the ancestors of the mother. Moreover, the fruit of the tree is a central ingredient in Jamaica's national dish of cod and Akee (Maxwell 290). The historical specificity of the Akee and its place in peasant life link the national sustenance to black Jamaicans and their African roots. Further, McKay's simile, "Like a young an' bloomin' maiden / Fallen low" (11-12), describing the "yellow leaves" of the tree, suggests an additional significance in the context of Jamaica's history of colonialism and slavery. McKay compares the "yellow" leaves to "fallen" women. His use of "yellow" recalls the color and class scheme of Jamaica, specifically the mulatto class. The evocation of fallen yellow women connotes the history of the intermingling of blacks and whites on the island as well as rampant violence against women during slavery and colonization. The association of these young fallen women with the "bloom" of youth emphasizes the damage of colonialism to the nation's future mothers. And, of course, fallen young women points to prostitution in Jamaica's cities, the result of colonial poverty. Indeed, the Akee tree in McKay's simile evokes a national narrative that

excludes white colonials from membership and criticizes the color and class lines enforced by the English and the elite mulatto class.

The treatment of Christianity in the poem suggests yet another dimension of anticolonial difference when the husband urges his wife to "Spend de endin of your day in / Christ our Lord" (27-28). While not directly challenging Christianity, the mother does not heed her husband's request. Instead, the speaker states that the mother is deaf to her husband's appeal, hearing only "Things she had been rearin', / Only those could claim her hearin'" (33-34). The only things that can capture her attention are those associated with the inner sphere. While the poem suggests that the couple is Christian, at the time of death the religion of the colonial oppressor cannot invade the spiritual sphere of home and family. This extremely personal moment imparts a fundamental difference between the anticolonial nationalist and the colonizer.[31] Further, the mother only sees, "her home," or garden burial plot, recalling the association of the peasant and the land registered in "King Banana" and restating the nationalist claim of ownership of the land founded on the peasant's relationship to the soil.[32] The mother, in this sense, is Jamaica.

Throughout *Songs of Jamaica* McKay reverses the colonial claims of superiority for nationalist ends. If, for example, biological determinism was a scientific truth, then such truths could be made to operate in the service of resistance. Indeed, the primitivism and essentialism in McKay's dialect poetry, and his later novels, which many scholars see operating in the service of the colonial power, take on a decidedly different meaning in the context of anticolonial nationalism. McKay's concern with the natural world in his poetry makes clear the superiority of "natural" and "essential" characteristics in the nationalist cause; they are a source of power, rebellion, and sovereignty. Indeed, in his

introduction to *Constab Ballads*, McKay embraces his inborn inability to submit to colonialism:

> I am, by temperament, unadaptive; by which I mean that it is not in me to conform cheerfully to uncongenial usages. We blacks are all somewhat impatient of discipline, and to the natural impatience of my race there was added . . . a peculiar sensitiveness which made certain forms of discipline irksome, and a fierce hatred of injustice. (qtd. in Maxwell 296)

For McKay, such characteristics and history are the basis of a shared community that was, by nature, anticolonial. Moreover, McKay's nationalism, communicated through the depiction of the folk to articulate a sovereign sphere based upon an essential difference from colonial and racist social structures anticipates the ethnic nationalism of the Harlem Renaissance and McKay's own calls to create autonomous black institutions within the US.

Indeed, to understand his American period in the context of his lifetime of writing—and our deep investment in the American McKay—we must move past "If We Must Die" to acknowledge McKay's colonial roots. Yet, this has proven singularly difficult to do for the poem is iconic not only to literary scholars but to McKay. Although, we continue to view McKay primarily as a sonneteer because of a sonnet he wrote in 1919, he did not turn to the sonnet form in earnest until at least 1934 in his "Cities" manuscript. From that point until his death, he composed sonnets almost exclusively. However, the vast majority of this work went unpublished during his lifetime and has received little critical attention since, making his reputation as a sonneteer curious. McKay's attitude toward his most famous poem was deeply ambivalent. He

would use and abuse that poem and the sonnet form for the remainder of his life, simultaneously embracing and resisting its formal operations in response to his own needs and the politics of the times.[33] In light of this, the iconic status of "If We Must Die" is crucial to understanding this phase of his career.

McKay both appreciated and resented the influence of the poem. Throughout his life, he acknowledged the sonnet's impact on his career, particularly its popularity among the African American masses during the dangerous days of the summer of 1919: "It was during those days that the sonnet, 'If We Must Die' exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet" (*Long Way* 21-22). But he felt that the fame of the poem limited his range as a poet: "Indeed, that one grand outburst is their sole standard of appraising my poetry." He expressed similar sentiments in 1923 in a speech before the Fourth Congress of the Third Communist International in Moscow, saying that though the poem authorized him as a spokesperson for his race, it also impinged his lyrical aspirations:

> When I heard the Negro question was going to be brought up on the floor of the Congress, I felt it would be an eternal shame if I did not say something on behalf of the members of my race. Especially would I be a disgrace to the American Negroes because, since I published a notorious poem in 1919, I have been pushed forward as one of the spokesmen of Negro radicalism in America to the detriment of my poetical temperament. ("Fourth Congress" 92)

However, in this particular setting McKay was not at all burdened by the responsibility to speak for his race. In fact, he used the poem to usurp the political and racial authority of the American delegates after they attempted to have him removed from the Congress.[34]

McKay was critical of the delegation's misrepresentation of the political and racial conditions in America: "I had listened to the American delegates deliberately telling lies about the conditions in America, and I was disgusted" (*Long Way* 136). Because of this, McKay overcame his reluctance to speak during the Congress and delivered many speeches, and many recitations of "If We Must Die," throughout his time in Russia. This is precisely the way he would utilize the poem when he returned to America in 1934.

In addition to using the poem to legitimize his claims of authority, McKay employed the poem to resist black editors' aesthetic proscriptions in support of propagandistic goals. In his 1932 essay, "A Negro Writer to His Critics," McKay dwells on "If We Must Die" at length. He defends the prerogatives of the young black writer to "write faithfully about the people he knows from real experience" (133) rather than adhere to the demands of racial propaganda. Charging the African American elite with turning their backs on the black masses in favor of a literature over-concerned with avoiding white stereotypes, McKay presents his popular work as exemplifying the value of "the work of art" (as opposed to propaganda) to reach the African American lower classes:

> Before I published *Home to Harlem* I was known to the Negro public as the writer of the hortatory poem "If We Must Die" . . . . The poem was an outgrowth of the intense emotional experience I was living through (no doubt with thousands of other Negroes) in those days. . . . At the time I was writing a great deal of lyric poetry and none of my colleagues on the *Liberator* considered me a propaganda poet who could reel off revolutionary poetry like an automatic machine cutting fixed patterns . . . we believed in the highest standards of creative work. (133-34)

McKay emphasizes the disparity between the immense popularity of the poem among African Americans and the "apologetic" tone of black critics like William S. Braithwaite, who called McKay a "violent and angry propagandist, using his natural poetic gifts to clothe [arrogant] and defiant thoughts," and Countee Cullen who referred to McKay as "rebellious and vituperative" (134-35). For McKay, "If We Must Die" expressed the genuine feeling of the black masses in a way no propaganda could. Any bitterness in black art, he argues, is essential to black life in America and black aesthetics: "To ask the Negro to render up his bitterness is asking him to part with his soul. For out of his bitterness he has bloomed and created his spirituals and blues and conserved his racial attributes—his humor and ripe laughter and particular rhythm of life" (135). Indeed, "the work of art" reached the masses in a way that propaganda alone could not, and he used "If We Must Die" to emphasize his point.[35]

As his literary career began decline after his return to the United States, McKay would, time and again, turn to "If We Must Die" and the sonnet in his attempts to regain his cultural authority. In February 1934, McKay returned to America eager to use his influence as a poet of the people to help black writers and workers but, according to Cooper, faced three interrelated challenges: "his future livelihood, his relationship to Afro-American leaders, and his political stance in depression America" (*Rebel* 291-92). Depression-era Harlem little resembled the Harlem of the 1920s; black workers were in dire economic straits, and black writers faced fewer and fewer publishing options as the interest of white publishers waned and the budgets of house organs like *Crisis* and *Opportunity* diminished (292-93). Seeking to forge independent black institutions, McKay believed that blacks could achieve political and economic power and self-

determination through "effective self-organization as a distinct ethnic group" and avoid the well-known betrayals of political forces unconcerned with their interests (294). However, McKay faced strained relations with black leaders, eschewing as he had both the mainstream integrationist platform and the influence of the Comintern on the American Communist Party, which was making inroads into Harlem and in Black Belts around the country (293), and his efforts received little support.

His organizing projects stymied and his own financial situation deteriorating, McKay, in an effort to resuscitate his diminished political credibility and literary fortunes, turned to the form that made him famous—the sonnet. This effort, too, failed. Writing to Max Eastman, he complained that his attempts to place his newest poems (all sonnets) with a publisher, using the possibility of an expanded *Harlem Shadows* as a selling point, received no interest. [36] Finally, with few allies, no publisher, no job, McKay entered a work camp in October; when he left there in late December, he began to write *A Long Way from Home* (1937), a book that, according to Cooper, was meant to "clear up the many misapprehensions that existed among both blacks and whites, radical and conservative, about his literary career and political beliefs" (*Rebel* 317). *A Long Way from Home* offers insight into McKay's own myth making of "If We Must Die." There he continually puts forward "If We Must Die" to address these misapprehensions and to generate support for his literary and political efforts in the 1930s.[37]

The story of "If We Must Die" in *A Long Way from Home* seeks to present McKay as a popular, politically independent, pioneering black American poet of high literary distinction, possessing common goals with the political and racial leaders of Harlem. Initially, McKay's narrative of "If We Must Die" demonstrates his literary

achievement, his credibility as a poet among critics other than the African American elite, whom he suspected of both questionable literary standards and social conservatism. His account begins with his introduction to Frank Harris in 1918, when Harris thought "The Lynching" sonnet sounded like an "anti-climax" considering its subject. Harris charged McKay to write "literature," to be more forcefully direct in his poetry, telling McKay he "should have risen to the heights and stormed heaven like Milton" (*Long Way* 21-22). When he presents "If We Must Die" on a second visit to see if "in 'If We Must Die' I had 'risen to the heights and stormed heaven'" (30), Harris instantly recognizes his achievement:

> "Now what have you done to be called a real poet, to join the ranks of the elect? Have you written a GREAT poem yet?" I produced "If We Must Die." He read it at once. Then he slapped his thigh and shouted, "Grand! Grand! You have done it. That *is* a great poem, authentic fire and blood from a bleeding heart." (30)

Acknowledged by a distinguished white critic, "If We Must Die" confirms McKay's literary achievement and stature as a poet, not a propagandist. The poem's subsequent fame corroborates Harris's estimation and verifies his standing as a poet of the black masses.

"If We Must Die" not only establishes McKay's literary credentials and popular approval, but solidifies his reputation as a principled and pioneering American poet, contributing to the development of African American literature. By the time McKay was writing *A Long Way from Home*, *Harlem Shadows* had been credited with inaugurating the Harlem Renaissance. However, McKay points out that this important book would likely never have been published without his desire to see "If We Must Die" in an

American collection. Excluding the poem from his collection *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920), McKay felt that he had betrayed his artistic independence and his responsibility as a black American poet: "The excision of the poem had been like a nerve cut out of me, leaving a wound which would not heal. . . . I resolved to plug hard for the publication of an American edition, which would include the omitted poem" (81-82).[38] He recalls the period writing *Harlem Shadows* and seeking a publisher as one of expansive, creative freedom: "I was full and overflowing with singing and I sang in all moods, wild, sweet and bitter. I was steadfastly pursuing one object: the publication of an American book of verse. I desired to see 'If We Must Die,' the sonnet I had omitted in the London volume, inside a book" (116). In fact, he considered this his apotheosis: "The publication of my first American book uplifted me with the greatest joy of my life experience. . . . The English edition of my poems had merely been a stimulant to get out an American book. For to me America was the great, difficult, hard world. I had gone a long, apparently roundabout way, but at least I had achieved my main purpose" (117). In the context of *A Long Way from Home*, this story reminds Harlem's African American elite of McKay's contribution to African American literature and their shared cause of supporting black writers.

Finally, answering charges of diminished political commitment by Harlem communists and dangerous extremism by conservative black leaders, McKay, in both cases, refers to "If We Must Die."[39] In light of his outspoken anticommunism and the Party's influence in 1930s Harlem, McKay devotes considerable attention to his experiences in the Soviet Union in the 1920s to assert his radical credentials, casting himself as the quintessential revolutionary poet. Inded, his recitation of "If We Must Die"

during the Red army's anniversary celebration connects the poem to international working-class unity: "I gave it in the same spirit in which I wrote it, I think. . . . I was transformed into a rare instrument and electrified by the great current running through the world, and the poem popped out of me like a ball of light and blazed" (162). McKay becomes the people's artistic instrument and the poem universally working-class, uniting the world across divisions of class, race, and nationality. Additionally, responding even more directly to left-wing accusations that his poetry lacked working-class content, McKay simply referred to his famous poem: "Against the Communist attack [leveled in *The New Masses*] my poem remains my strong defense" (174).[40] Yet in spite of these claims of working-class political commitment, McKay contends that rather than leaving Russia as a radical, he left as he arrived—a black poet: "I was not received in Russia as a politician, but primarily as a Negro poet. And the tremendous reception was a great inspiration and urge to write more" (174). Thus, McKay defends himself against attacks from the left and the right with conflicting uses of "If We Must Die." Ultimately, McKay believed its fame warranted the favor of those able to secure him a publisher and help achieve his social aims, and his autobiography reveals the centrality of "If We Must Die" to his vision of himself as an important black American poet.[41]

In the end, *A Long Way from Home* did not succeed in resolving misunderstandings about his literary work and politics. By the early 1940s, with the failure of his latest book, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, and having left the Federal Writers' Project, McKay was destitute, "his career, his accomplishments, and even his name went into an eclipse" as much because of his reputation as an "irascible personality" as the changing times (Cooper, *Rebel* 346). After suffering a stroke that same year, he turned

again to the form that had helped establish his literary reputation and composed his only sonnet sequence, "The Cycle." However, driven by the previous decade's disappointments, he returned to the form not to build on it now but to destroy his enemies and his own literary reputation.

Composed of 53 poems, "The Cycle" wrestles with the paradox of poetry's ability to reach and inspire the masses while failing to move the elite and overcome the oppressions of race and class in the twentieth century. The struggle represented in the sonnets figures McKay's break with both his famous poem and his traditional literary and political supporters, placing them firmly beside his long-established antagonists. However, "The Cycle" is not without its heroes, the heroes of Harlem's black masses like Marcus Garvey and Sufi Abdul Hamid, icons of popular sentiment opposed to oligarchic power. The sequence also expands its view, often taking an international perspective on the forces of oppression and discrimination. The poems concern McKay's increasing resentment of the publishing and political worlds, his newfound religious faith, personal despair, black history, Hollywood, racial pride, exasperation with the United States, and his fear that World War II would encourage the globalization of American-style racism. Formally, McKay adheres to the sonnet, but his prosaic diction drags on the iambic pentameter destroying his former lyricism. Additionally, jarring enjambments, harsh end-stopped lines, and slant rhymes create a tone limited to exasperation, bitter mocking, facetiousness, and scolding. McKay clearly resists the poeticisms of his famous sonnets and aims toward the demolition of his enemies and his own literary reputation in the process. The personal content and quarrelsome character of the poems leave little doubt that the speakers represent McKay. Abandoned, the speaker of "The Cycle" feels as if he

has nothing to lose and nothing to gain in such a world, not even his sanity: "For what have I, oh brothers of mine to lose? . . . / But whatever it may be, this is a fact, / I care not if my mind remains intact" (1: 9, 13-14). Many critics note the stylistic singularity of the collection. Cooper sees the sequence as "much different from his previous poetry, less lyrical and more like satiric prose summaries of all the controversies he had had during the last decade" (358). Barbara Jackson Griffin comments that the poems are notable for their "raw candor and prosaic style" (49). Maxwell points to McKay's unexpected use of the form to produce "one of the most polemical, most resentful, and most candidly oddball sonnet cycles in twentieth-century literature" (xxiv), filled with "the embittering experience of a poor, isolated, and bad-mouthed middle-aged author" in a "forthright, hard-boiled vocabulary" (367).

Noted for its utter strangeness, "The Cycle" demonstrates not only McKay's disillusionment since returning to the United States but also his ambivalence about the form so closely associated with "If We Must Die," a form he felt limited his poetic range but also knew was the source of his authority as a public poet. Most critics regard "The Cycle" sonnets as evidence of his waning poetic gifts and a "detailed summary of the disillusionment, bitterness, and ironic cynicism he felt toward Communists, liberals, black intellectuals, and the nation's myopic approach to black America" (358), not an attempt to move beyond "If We Must Die" or to renew the sonnet for his own artistic aims. However, many acknowledge that the shift in diction from his usual elevated register to more colloquial speech suggests that McKay was exploring the form. McKay, too, interpreted publishers' contradicting rejections of the manuscript as confirmation that he had recaptured in these sonnets the shock of "If We Must Die" while moving beyond

it to express his contemporary concerns: "The first said they were good writing, but too personal, the second that they were not poetry and too critical of everything, whites, colored and Hollywood and even Washington! And so I have a hunch that I do have something that might make America feel less smug about its fascist-oppressed Negroes, while we are fighting Fascism abroad!" ("Letter to Eastman" 306).

Like McKay, scholars understand "The Cycle" as a return to his previous work. According to Griffin, the poems are "ironically a testament to McKay's old intellectual past, a reaffirmation by a writer whose keen perceptiveness and perdurable radical spirit compel him to have the final word" (43). To Maxwell, the sequence is evidence of McKay's "abiding interest" to "revive the lyric sonnet as an instrument of radical persuasion," and "McKay's long pursuit of this seeming category mistake disallows the occasional argument that he came to reject his early American verse wholesale" (xxv). Indeed, McKay's gritty, unrestricted criticisms and the sonnet form evoke "If We Must Die." However, rather than affirming his early American work, "The Cycle" recalls this period in order to estrange himself and his poetry from it. Over the previous decades, particularly after his return to the United States, McKay invoked "If We Must Die" to persuade black intellectuals and radicals to support and recognize him, an effort that failed miserably. Now, writing sonnets exclusively, McKay alienated those same constituencies with direct attacks and religious themes, snubbing communists and rejecting the black leadership who had held his work as universal. Gone are the high-minded, inspirational, and lyrical attacks on social injustices, replaced by stark criticism of specific individuals and organizations, like poems 2 "[The millionaire from Boston likes to write]" and 26 "[Of all the sects I hate the Communists];" theses regarding

colonial oppression of people of color as in poems 42 "[One-tenth of India remains untouchable]" and 29 "[Of course, we have Democracy];" and the exploitive nature of integration at the expense of black institutions exemplified by poems 49 "[And no white liberal is the Negro's friend]" and 7 "[Tuskegee is disliked by Negro snobs]."

The title poem of "The Cycle" conveys these intentions and declares the speaker's political and artistic freedom. Divided between his experience of yesterday and the possibilities of tomorrow, the initial stanza depicts the speaker's Christ-like endurance of heartless cruelty, which he transforms into a poetry that exposes the many obstacles of racism. The sestet, shifting to the future, unaccountably maintains the ultimate ability of the poet to transcend these obstacles and dwell in the realm of pure imagination in spite of white or black detractors:

> These poems distilled from my experience,
> Exactly tell my feelings of today,
> The cruel and the vicious and the tense
> Conditions which have hedged my bitter way
> Of life. But though I suffered much I bore
> My cross and lived to put my trouble in song
> I stripped down harshly to the naked core
> Of hatred based on the essential wrong!
>
> But tomorrow, I may sing another tune,
> No critic, white or black, can tie me down,
> Maybe a fantasy of a fairy moon,

Or the thorns the soldiers weaved for Jesus' crown,

For I, a poet, can soar with unclipped wings,

From earth to heaven, while chanting of all things. (1: 1-14)

The octave's enjambed lines, jarring cadences, and halting pauses suggest the viciousness that has hedged the black poet's bitter way. Enjambment and unpredictable stops combine to represent the disorientation and torment of African American life in the United States and thus the difficulty and dissonance of the black poet's task:

The cruel and the vicious and the tense

Conditions which have hedged my bitter way

Of life.

Yet as Christ's suffering was universalized, beautified, and beatified, the poet, too, he claims can transcend his own suffering by transforming it into song. However, the misshapen lines call such transcendence into question by challenging our expectations for lyric poetry. The subsequent run-on lines accelerate the pace of the poem by dispensing with punctuation as the speaker pushes ahead after the interruption of his song: "But though I suffered much I bore / My cross and lived to put my trouble in song / I stripped down harshly to the naked core / Of hatred based on the essential wrong!" (5-8).

Supporting the formal dissonance, figural incoherence troubles the proposition that the speaker's experiences can actually be "distilled" into "song." The figure of the soaring bird competes with the poem's harsh song. Further, the poem is profuse with imagery that does not cohere: there is the distillation of the creative process ("distilled," "bitter," "core," "essential"); the difficult pathway of the black poet ("hedged . . . way"); the aim of poetic expression sometimes cast as speech and sometimes as song ("poems,"

"Exactly . . . tell," "put . . . in song," "sing," "tune," "soar," "unclipped wings," "chanting"); and, finally, Christ's Passion as a figure for the poet's suffering and supposed redemption ("cross," "stripped down," "can tie me down," "the thorns the soldiers weaved for Jesus' crown"). The figurative rivalry between the symbol of the bird and the inharmonious song of the poem is indicative of the poem's antilyricality. The speaker strips to his heart to sanctify his trials, as the allusion to Christ suggests, but finds bitterness rather than grace; just so, the formal expectations of the sonnet are upset by the dissonant lines and restless figures. Instead of being stripped like Christ to reveal a core of universal love, the speaker reveals his own naked core of hatred and the distillation of his experiences results in bitterness rather than lyricism.

After the dissonant and chaotic octave, the sestet unexpectedly describes the poet's freedom from the limiting expectations of "white or black" critics and his ability to rise above the trials of racial experience to dwell in the realm of pure poetic imagination. Similar to his ability to translate the difficulties of racism into poetry, so too can he fashion a fantastic flight of song about a "fairy moon" or religious mythology: "For I, a poet, can soar with unclipped wings, / From earth to heaven, while chanting of all things." McKay's poem claims a birdlike transcendence that his faltering lines do not echo.

McKay litters the poem with precious and clichéd language that can only give it an ironic edge. Hackneyed phrases like "I bore / My cross" (5-6), "put my trouble in song" (6), "stripped down . . . to the . . . core" (7), "sing another tune" (9), no one "can tie me down" (10), and "soar[ing] with unclipped wings" (13) contradict his declaration of originality and assertion of poetry's transcendent power. The incongruity of pagan and

Christian symbols reveals the speaker's facetiousness and the poem's resistance to poetic clichés. The assertions of poetic power belie the speaker's declaration that the poems in "The Cycle" will "Exactly tell my feelings of today" (2) in plainspoken, colloquial language. Additionally, the poem's conflicted rhythms and dissonant lines play with the sonnet's metrical expectations, which have become the formal equivalent of clichés, disputing even at the level of structure the notion that poetry can overcome racism.

Indeed, the dramatic shift from the bitter octave to the saccharine sestet, from sanctified tribulations to glib flights of fancy, calls the poem's sincerity into question. The presence of so many banalities in a poem about artistic limitations confirms that these clichés strategically satirize both McKay's caricature as *enfant terrible* and our parallel caricature of his famous sonnet. In light of his desire to oppose the proscriptions of racial and political critics and his feelings of betrayal by former allies and his failure to restart his literary career, McKay announces the intent of "The Cycle" to question the possibilities of poetry and, as crucial to that questioning, move beyond "If We Must Die."

Written in McKay's favored sonnet form, combining a Shakespearean rhyme scheme with the Petrarchan stanzaic division, the poem at first recalls McKay's sonnets of the 1910s and 1920s. Additionally, the octave evokes poems of that period, particularly "If We Must Die," through its concern with martyrdom and bitterness engendered by racism. The bitterness that constitutes the speaker's song recalls McKay's use of "If We Must Die" in his essay "A Negro Writer to his critics" to defend the representation of anger at the core of the African American experience: "To ask the Negro to render up his bitterness is asking him to part with his soul. For out of his bitterness he has bloomed and created his spirituals and blues and conserved his racial

attributes—his humor and ripe laughter and particular rhythm of life" (135). In other words, the poem's beginning recalls the familiar image of McKay, the protest sonneteer. So clearly evoking his early career in America and contrasting it with the sestet's preoccupation with artistic freedom and poetic fancy reenacts his long-standing struggle to free himself from the restrictions of propaganda, announcing his prerogative to move beyond "If We Must Die." At the same time, satirizing this image registers his disillusionment with publishers and critics and signals his frustration about the ability of a black poet to escape racial considerations. And yet, such scornful lampooning and formal discord renew the sonnet for McKay, permitting him to abandon the high-minded, formal perfection of "If We Must Die" in favor of a new ironic embellishment.

The disingenuous language of the sestet, extolling the ability of poetry to transcend the experience of racism depicted in the octave, only suggests that the black poet cannot, in fact, rise above racial concerns. Though there are clearly limitations to poetry, the poem's ironies suggest that the black poet is not so much limited by poetry as by the racial politics that frame his writing. McKay's ironical twists and turns attempt to resist these limitations by making the form satiric rather than earnest, destabilizing its traditional high estimation and parodying the formal diction and syntax, which he put to such effective use in "If We Must Die." By removing the customary formal reassurances of his famous sonnet, McKay not only rejects it but also the critics who failed him. "The Cycle" is the beginning of a new era for McKay in which he struggles with a fundamental incongruity—poetry's ability to affect the masses emotionally but not change the world. The succeeding poems proceed accordingly and insist that the obstacles to the black poet and his people include pernicious, international racism and imperialism, black intellectual

leaders of Harlem, white liberals, the Communist Party, Hollywood, and all those who may have contributed to his literary fall.

Despite McKay's attempts to control the reception of "If We Must Die," its mythology continues to influence our apprehension of his entire career. Our preoccupation with that sonnet and the sonnet form in our evaluation of McKay over the last 40 years diminishes his range and corpus and emphasizes national boundaries, reflecting an ambivalence regarding not only racial and political outsiders, but also immigrant artists and hybrid identities in the story of American poetry. Critical recoveries of McKay have positioned his work within a progressive, and nativist, narrative of African American literary protest and formal innovation that reaches its apotheosis with the Black Arts movement of the late 1960s or as an example of a repressed tradition of American political radicalism. Clearly, the poem represents an important moment in American political and literary history.[42] Our familiar reading of McKay distorts his career and thus the period of the Harlem Renaissance. For example, McKay's political maturation is often attributed to America and to the influence of Marxism, equating Marxism with mature political engagement at the expense of his earlier and later political positions regarding ethnic nationalism and identity politics, ideas that shaped his poetics and politics throughout his lifetime. This erects national borders around protest and political ideas (even those that contradict the mainstream). Though recently, many critics have begun to uncover the Caribbean influences on the Harlem Renaissance, to uncover

McKay's Caribbean background we must move beyond "If We Must Die" to examine McKay's early American work.

While there is no doubt that McKay wrote "If We Must Die" in response to the race riots of the Red Summer of 1919 and that he participated in some of the most radical political movements in the US, the assumption that he began writing political poetry only after his experiences in the US obscures political impulses in his Jamaican dialect poetry. McKay always linked his earliest and latest works. For example, to defend himself against charges of imitating Ernest Hemingway he pointed to his Jamaican work: "Any critic who considers it important enough to take the trouble can trace in my stuff a clearly consistent emotional-realist thread, from the time I published my book of dialect verse . . . in 1912, through the period of my verse and prose in *The Liberator*, until the publication of *Home to Harlem*" (*Long Way* 193). He also drew attention to his earlier work when answering charges of exploiting negative stereotypes in *Home to Harlem*: "If my brethren had taken the trouble to look a little into my obscure life they would have discovered that . . . what I did in prose for Harlem was very similar to what I had done for Jamaica in verse" (135), represented the experiences of the lower classes. Continually linking his early and late work, McKay shows that he began his career as a political poet and remained one throughout his life—even to the period of the Catholic sonnets in the 1940s.

Not only does our established account of McKay betray American exceptionalism, that only an American context can give rise to and contain such voices of protest, but it also betrays Eurocentrism in our critical assumptions about influences on American literature and culture, denying the impact of other countries in the Western

hemisphere and of the Black Diaspora on our cultural and national identity.[43] The cross-cultural influence of the Caribbean, the United States, Europe, and Africa is evident in many texts of the period. In fact, Carl Pedersen argues that the "cultural discourse" between black Caribbean and American intellectuals brought about "new formulations of black nationalism that combined a post-colonialist sensibility with the African-American nationalist tradition" after WWI (263), constructing "ideological positions of Afrocentric education, diasporic race unity, and African independence" (265).[44] McKay's focus on racial pride and black history and shifting global attitudes toward race in "The Cycle" closely resembles Pedersen's description of an African American nationalist tradition informed by a post-colonial tenor.[45] By examining McKay's work written in Jamaica, we can uncover the nuances of American identity and cultural influence outside an exclusively Anglo-American configuration. Not only can adequate attention to the nationalist impulses in McKay's dialect poetry reveal continuity between his Jamaican and American work, but it also allows us to examine McKay's other poetry, particularly a work like "The Cycle" that we often approach with a sense of bafflement.

Understanding McKay's earliest experience with colonialism makes sense of his later encounters with other European colonial powers, particularly in Africa, and illuminates his experiences and positions in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Reading past "If we Must Die" extends the borders of African American literature and American identity, clarifying the literary, social, and political influence of the Black Atlantic on, and in, the United States. McKay studies should end rather than begin with "If We Must Die," for his career as a sonneteer most appropriately belongs to discussions of the 1930s and 1940s. The poem gained momentum over time for McKay, ultimately

becoming emblematic of his struggles and frustrations with African American intellectuals and black and white radicals and explains his subsequent exclusive use of the form to expose his detractors. Avoiding a fixation on McKay's famous poem significantly expands both McKay's contributions to twentieth century poetry and the borders of American poetry.

Notes

[1] Quotations from McKay's poems are from *Complete Poems* unless otherwise noted and will be cited parenthetically in my text with the line number. "If We Must Die" appears on pages 177-78; these are lines 1-4.

[2] Arna Bontemps invokes the Churchill myth to prove the poem's appropriation by the United States government, noting its inclusion in a Department of Justice report, "Radicalism and Sedition Among Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications" (Jenkins 335). Tyrone Tillery repeats the Churchill anecdote, citing Bontemps as the source.

[3] This story misstates McKay's own mistaken claim, in a recording made late in his life, that in 1944 he heard a radio commentator "telling about the death of a young, white American soldier on the Russian front. The commentator went on to say that the youth was a lover of poetry, and he proceeded to read one of five poems, which had been discovered on the youth's body, and he read 'If We Must Die.'" ("'If We Must Die' [Introduction]"). That the Americans did not fight on the Russian front does not necessarily discount his recollection.

[4] The assertions about the poem's universality (especially those made by McKay) are ironic because they surface after World War II, when McKay remained skeptical of the Allied powers' support for the very imperial, social, political, racial, and economic structures of oppression that McKay resisted throughout his life.

[5] Some twenty years after its original publication, McKay remarks on the poem's lasting appeal, its reception, and adds his own mythology to this history: "When 'If We Must Die' was first published in 1919, it was denounced by many conservative white leaders as evidence of a new spirit among Negroes. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge read it into the records of Congress. But times change and, so, I was not at all surprised when during the Nazi air Blitz on Britain an English anthologist requested the use of 'If We

Must Die' for an anthology of verse. But I was surprised by what happened when I turned on my radio one morning in 1944. A commentator was telling about the death of a young, white American soldier on the Russian front. The commentator went on to say that the youth was a lover of poetry, and he proceeded to read one of five poems, which had been discovered on the youth's body, and he read 'If We Must Die.' The commentator did not mention the name of the author, Claude McKay, nor did he state the poem was the work of a colored man. Perhaps he did not know, but I felt profoundly gratified and justified. I felt assurance that 'If We Must Die' was just what I intended it to be: a universal poem. And wherever men are pressed with their backs against the wall, abused, outraged, and murdered, whether they are a minorities or nations, black or brown or yellow or white, Catholics or protestants or pagans, fighting against the terror, 'If We Must Die' could be appropriately read" ("'If We Must Die' [Introduction]").

[6] The report's summary: "Among the more salient points to be noted in the present attitude of the Negro leaders are, first, the ill-governed reaction toward race rioting; second, the threat of retaliatory measures in connection with lynching; third, the more openly expressed demand for social equality, in which demand the sex problem is not infrequently included; fourth, the identification of the Negro with such radical organizations as the I. W. W. and an outspoken advocacy of the Bolsheviki or Soviet doctrines; fifth, the political stand assumed toward the present Federal administration, the South in general, and incidentally, toward the peace treaty and the League of nations. Underlying these more salient viewpoints is the increasingly emphasized feeling of a race consciousness, in many of these publications always antagonistic to the white race and openly, and defiantly assertive of its own equality and even superiority" (qtd. in Work 64).

[7] Cynically delegitmizing African American anger and frustration as "red," Palmer, in an effort to preserve the racial status quo, enlisted J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Bureau of Investigation (later the F.B.I), to stamp out subversion (xv). Moreover, to Hoover, "there was little difference between civil rights activism, Pan-Africanism, and promotion of communism or socialism" (Kornweibel 179). In response to this atmosphere, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois curbed the rhetoric of his editorials in *The Crisis* to avoid "government suppression," and Claude McKay and Langston Hughes were "investigated by the Bureau . . . between 1924 and 1936" (176). In fact, simply associating with Claude McKay resulted in the investigation of at least one other individual (177).

[8] Despite his difficulty imagining McKay "dreaming of his native Jamaica and singing," Johnson is one of the few American critics of the twentieth century both to note and praise McKay's Jamaican dialect poetry and include it in an anthology.

[9] The poem's connection to the radical politics of its author and to the periodicals that published his work was also noted in Detweiler's study: "United with [*The Messenger's*] advocacy of radical socialism is the bitter protest we are already familiar with, the cry for security and rights" (169).

[10] The connection between protest, the sonnet, and McKay made it difficult for anthologists to include his other work without acknowledging the poem. Countee Cullen excludes the famous sonnet from *Caroling Dusk* (1927) but acknowledges that McKay's contentious reputation began with "If We Must Die" even as he attempts to move beyond it: "Claude McKay is most exercised, rebellious, and vituperative to a degree that clouds his lyricism in many instances, but silhouettes most forcibly his high dudgeon" (xiii).

[11] John Dewey's "Introduction" refers to works that span McKay's career, but he focuses on the section "Songs for Jamaica." He describes the poet as a Wordsworthian Romantic whose writing gives the sense of a renewed self through the spontaneous recollection of childhood: "almost every poem of the volume expresses that identity of the self with the ever fresh always renewed wonders of living which is the gift of childhood at its happiest" (59). Dewey also notes McKay's anger and religious feeling in the "Baptism" section, but contextualizes it within the poet's work, life, and social milieu:

> It is in this section that the sense of being a black man in a white man's world, which is a recurring undertone of many poems in the previous parts of the book, comes to its full expression. I feel it decidedly out of place to refer to him as the voice of the Negro people; he is that, but he is so much more than that. "Baptism" is deeply dyed with hate, but with hate that is clean, never mean or spiteful. No white man can do more than express his humiliated sympathy. (60)

Registering the dawning Civil Rights era, Dewey's introduction offers one of the the most thorough evaluations of McKay's corpus of the twentieth century in contrast to the more common surprise at black artistic production and the sidestepping of McKay's radical political force.

[12] Dudley Randall argues that contemporary black poets of the late 1960s and early 1970s use black folk culture, jazz, and black dialect to "create a truly original poetry" to write as "black men, not as black writers trying to be white" and to declare the pride and beauty of blackness (xxv-xxvi). However, in his discussion of McKay, he does not mention McKay's use of black Jamaican dialect in his first two collections of poetry.

[13] Emanuel's scale of Black value to measure the utility of historical literary models asks of texts, "What usable racial pride, racial history, and racial guidance are in the literature?" (33) and judges them in terms of use and beauty for African America: "The useful, defined by the accumulating urgencies of the Seventies, is comprised of those ideas and attitudes capable of promoting quick civic freedom for Black people. The beautiful, never definable—and for that very reason liberating and expanding—is found in those literary qualities that urge any of our faculties to conceive of a pleasant perfection of any kind" (34).

[14] The period's failures, according to Emanuel, were its lack of support from the masses, its exploitation of black experience that "minimized [black peoples'] struggle for existence, and ignored the social realities of poverty and crime (35-36).

[15] Cooper makes the case that McKay's efforts in the 1930s and 1940s to foster black self-determination through community-based institutions and practices failed to gain support because of his reputation as a dissident: "Whether justified or not, his reputation as a temperamental iconoclast had become a trap from which he could not escape" (*Passion* 40). This trap began with "If We Must Die."

[16] Rampersad argues for the centrality of poetry to African American letters and places Cullen as the first African American to publish a book of poetry since Paul Laurence Dunbar, noting McKay's Jamaican origins. However, his discussion of McKay dwells on his American work and reflects the impact of "If We Must Die," asserting that McKay was "probably the most compelling" Renaissance figure to younger poets and the only black poet to gain substantial literary reputation since Dunbar ("The Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance" 460). In addition to "If We Must Die," Rampersad estimates McKay's *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* as evidence of an "accomplished lyric poet working in traditional forms (especially the sonnet) but clearly also alert to urban, political, and racial themes" (461). However, notes Rampersad, in addition to his moving themes about prostitution in Harlem (a theme he addressed in his Jamaican poetry, a fact that goes unnoticed here) McKay's "impact was probably greater with the appearance" of his protest sonnets: "The combination of conservative form, radical socialist association, and political and racial aggressiveness made McKay a talismanic figure for blacks in the 1920s, even though he left the United States in 1922 and did not return until the 1930s" (461-62).

For David Levering Lewis, a signal feature of McKay was that of iconoclast of the Harlem Renaissance, a figure who "spoke derisively of the artistic and literary autocracy of 'that NAACP crowd'" (xxxix). In addition to his criticism of the African American intellectual elite, Lewis suggests that McKay's travels were the source of his invective against American racism: "because he was willing to leave [his African American peers] behind for London, Moscow, and Paris, or Marseilles and Tangiers, McKay surpassed his contemporaries in denouncing the racial hypocrisy of American white people" (289). Yet more than this, McKay's importance derives from the fame of "If We Must Die," "one of the most important factors in making possible the Harlem Renaissance" (289).

[17] Maxwell does note that "If We Must Die" impedes critical attention to McKay's more humorous work in the vein of Dorothy Parker and Edna St. Vincent Millay, and that a full reading of *Harlem Shadows* "invites us to recall that some of the boldest poems of a canonically bold poet have nothing to do with self-defense" (xxvi).

[18] In nine anthologies that span 82 years, "If We Must Die" appears in eight. Cullen's *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Black Poets* (1927) is the notable exception. Cullen's anthology insists on the diversity of African American literary production and resists the notion that such a thing as "Negro verse" exists," that "the work of Negro poets will show that the individual diversifying ego transcends the synthesizing hue" (xii). We can assume that Cullen, while acknowledging the influence

of racism on the experiences and verse of black poets (and trying to reduce white anxiety over black radicalism), was attempting to broaden the reception of McKay as a poet by evading "If We Must Die" in his anthology when he states, "Claude McKay is most exercised, rebellious, and vituperative to a degree that clouds his lyricism in many instances, but silhouettes most forcibly his high dudgeon" (xiii). Thus, Cullen both acknowledges the reputation and denies the importance of "If We Must Die" in order to make McKay, an internationally known poet, more easily assimilable in "the national literature." However, Cullen still included some of McKay's poems that are critical of American culture such as "America" and "Exhortation: Summer, 1919." Further, Cullen only includes five poems out of eight that appeared in *Harlem Shadows*, representing a broader picture of McKay than we have today.

[19] The influence of "If We Must Die" is addressed in varying ways in each of these anthologies. For instance, Johnson's "Preface to the First Edition" of *The Book of Negro Poetry* (1922) strives to overcome the intensity of "If We Must Die" and is at pains to point out McKay's other work (such as "Spring in New Hampshire" and "The Harlem Dancer") stating that because of the breadth of his material "Mr. McKay gives evidence that he has passed beyond the danger which threatens many of the new Negro poets—the danger of allowing the purely polemical phases of the race problem to choke their sense of artistry" (43-44).

In the introduction to *The Black Poets* (1971), Dudley Randall notes that McKay's Catholic poetry has been neglected and also uses McKay's formalism to note the difference between the newer black poets and conservative poets such as McKay. The intense focus on McKay's sonnet production is apparent, beginning, particularly, with Randall's inclusion of ten sonnets and two lyrical poems. As the motives for canonizing McKay in anthologies have changed over the years (from attempts to gain a hearing for African American poets, establishing a canon of African American poets, to telling a more inclusive story of American poetry), the teaching anthologies of the last ten years have begun to express an even more concerted critical consensus that centers on *Harlem Shadows* and McKay's protest sonnets. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1998) contains ten poems, six of which are sonnets, and all are from *Harlem Shadows*. *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000) contains twelve McKay poems, of which eleven are sonnets, and seven are from *Harlem Shadows*. The *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003) contains eight of McKay's poems, six are sonnets, and seven of the poems are from *Harlem Shadows*. Finally, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004) contains six poems, all of which are sonnets, and all are from *Harlem Shadows*. As we can see from the selections in these anthologies, the "picture" of McKay we find most useful today is the protest sonneteer of 1922. This picture obscures the influences of anticolonial nationalism and homegrown radical politics on American poetry.

[20] It is worth noting that rather than simply an uncomplicated refusal or acquiescence to traditional English verse forms, McKay's Jamaican background might also have limited his responsiveness to traditional African American folk forms. Moreover, McKay was well aware of the more experimental modernist poetry but chose

the forms that he felt best expressed his sentiments: "although very conscious of the new criticisms and trends in poetry, to which I am keenly responsive and receptive, I have adhered to such of the older traditions as I find adequate for my most lawless and revolutionary passions and moods" (qtd. in Maxwell 315).

[21] The influence of Jekyll on McKay's career in Jamaica is widely acknowledged and often overemphasized. Furthermore, such characterizations simplify the operations of cultural identity (particularly on poetic form and vernacular language) in colonial contexts. According to Stuart Hall, the "diaspora experience" is defined by the "recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity', which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (244). In the "Author's Word" to *Harlem Shadows*, McKay articulates a similar notion of "cultural identity" and its operation in his poetic production:

> The speech of my childhood and early youth was the Jamaican Negro dialect, the native variant of English, which still preserves a few words of African origin, and which is more difficult of understanding than the American Negro dialect. But the language we wrote and read in school was England's English. . . . I quite remember making up verses in the dialect and in English for our moonlight ring dances and for our school parties. Of our purely native songs the jammas (field and road), shay-shays (yard and booth), wakes (post-mortem), Anancy tales (transplanted African folk lore), and revivals (religious) are all singularly punctuated by meter and rhyme. And nearly all my own poetic thought has always run naturally into these regular forms." (qtd. in Maxwell 314)

[22] Such assessments of McKay's Jamaican dialect poetry are common. However, if we consider Nicholls' argument that the modern and the folk are mutually constituting, we can see how various poets deploy the folk and uncover competing strategies toward modernity (political and economic autonomy) expressed by these visions of the folk. I will argue that McKay's use of Jamaican dialect and folk agriculture, for example, depict an anticolonial nationalism that seeks such autonomy for black Jamaican peasants. See Nicholls, 1-19.

[23] Yet, even critics who do recognize a note of critique or resistance in McKay's poetry suggest that these songs were meant to be overheard by the white colonial powers, as a critique of colonial oppression, and ignore the possibility of black Jamaican readers who are also overhearing, if not being directly addressed, through the use of dialect and shared experiences. For example, Lindberg's otherwise astute analysis of McKay's anticolonialism ignores any notions of nationalism or of a Jamaican audience (28), primarily because Lindberg seeks to demonstrate McKay's political internationalism.

[24] Nicholls points out that such deployments of the folk in literary texts do not simply function as sentimental primitivism: "The choice of folk as an affiliation, however, fantastic or romantic the choice is presented to be in aesthetic form, is

ultimately also a political choice and not mere nostalgia. The imagining of a synchronic folk world bespeaks a certain intransigence to the modern marketplace" (68).

[25] McKay began writing dialect poems of social protest for the *Daily Gleaner* and the *Jamaica Times* in late 1911 and continued to write poems arguing against colonial and capitalist oppression through 1912 in support of the streetcar protests (Cooper, *Rebel* 46-53). His poem "Passive Resistance" was explicitly in support of the protesters and threatened confrontation if police violence against the protesters continued: "We'll keep up a bloodless war, / We will pay the farthings-fare / An' we send the challenge forth, / 'Only touch us if you dare!'" (21-24).

[26] Before emancipation in 1833, Jamaica was the largest slave market in the world. Also, Jamaica's period of slavery saw "frequent" slave revolts (Cooper, *Rebel* 2). Further, the Morant Bay Rebellion (1865) resulted in the "martyrdom" of George William Gordon and gave rise to the system of Jamaican civil service that McKay participated in during his tenure as a constabulary (3). McKay would later recall Gordon during the civil unrest of 1912 in his poem "Gordon to the Oppressed Natives."

[27] While the colonizer is kept out of the spiritual domain, the "material" or "outer" domain consists "of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology," areas where the West has "proved its superiority and the East has succumbed" (Chatterjee 6).

[28] Michael North claims that dialect was a modernist form. For North, dialect's "technical distinction, its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar language," places it firmly alongside other modernist literary techniques (v-vii).

[29] Hansell, like Cooper, does not recognize McKay's nationalism in poems like "King Banana." In fact, Hansell categorizes "King Banana" as McKay's poems of commonplace settings and argues that in these poems "There is no hint of protest . . . even the poems on . . . the virtues of 'ol' time cultivation,' [which] provide convenient opportunities" (124).

[30] The anticolonial nationalism implied by the petchary does not stop with the bird's belligerence and territoriality. According to *A Dictionary of Jamaican English*, the petchary's actions are most associated with its pursuit of the "John Crow," a scavenging bird peasants variously associate with the clergy, albinos, whiteness, submission to authority, disgrace, evil, and ugliness.

[31] This difference concerning religion is also registered in McKay's poem "Whe' fe Do?" in which the speaker states that black Jamaicans' task is "To conquer prejudice dat due / To obeah" ("Whe'" 19-20).

[32] 1969 Mnemosyne Press reproduction of *Songs of Jamaica* includes Jekyll's footnote, which states that "home" refers to "The spot in the garden she had chosen for her burial-place" (78).

[33] According to Maxwell, "McKay would not regret that "If We Must Die" remains his poetry's calling card—he never renounced dynamic resistance to the 'common foe'" (xxx).

[34] McKay was unaffiliated with the American Communist delegation and at odds with many of their positions. The delegation refused to recognize McKay as an "unofficial visitor" and sought to have him sent back to the United States. Sen Katayama, a well-connected Japanese delegate, successfully intervened with the "Big Four": Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Radek, securing a place for McKay at the Congress (*Long Way* 126-30).

[35] In this essay, too, McKay makes the case for considering his whole body of work in order to understand his American phase. To defend himself against charges of exploiting negative racial stereotypes, he directs black critics disparaging *Home to Harlem* to his earliest works where he valorized the lower classes: "If my brethren had taken the trouble to look a little into my obscure life they would have discovered that . . . what I did in prose for Harlem was very similar to what I had done for Jamaica in verse" (135). He charges white critics with approaching his work as if he "were a primitive savage and altogether a stranger to civilization":

> I should not think it was unnatural for a man to have a predilection for a civilization or culture other than that he was born unto. Whatever may be the criticism implied in my writing of Western Civilization I do not regard myself as a stranger but as a child of it, even though I may have become so by the comparatively recent process of grafting. I am as conscious of my new-world birthright as of my African origin, being aware of the one and its significance in my development as much as I feel the other emotionally. (137)

For McKay, being a creative writer allows him a range of expression, an entitlement that dogmatic critics (racial and racist) often dismiss in the work of writers of color.

McKay added that claims of primitivism in his work were also misunderstood as a naïve utopianism: "The poet of a subject people may sing for the day of deliverance without being afflicted by fanciful visions of any society of people in which the eternal problems of existence would not still exist. A Negro poet living in a purely Negro community would automatically become free of the special problems of race and color, of foreign arrogance insisting upon an aristocracy of color or stock and that a man of parts was inferior because the group of a people he belonged to was suppressed by brute power" (137).

[36] He wrote to Max Eastman of his failed attempts to place his newest poems with a publisher, using the possibility of an expanded *Harlem Shadows* as a selling point but received no interest: "I was hoping Harper would publish the poem . . . but it was a vain hope. . . . There are just about 50 poems and would be worthwhile out if *Harlem Shadows* was republished. And fancy when I saw [Eugene] Saxton in Paris he wanted to publish *Harlem Shadows* alone! Now even with the new poems he won't do it" ("Letter to Eastman" 206). When McKay later heard that Saxton referred to Negro literature as a fad,

he was astonished and incensed. He also felt that his reputation prevented him from landing a publisher (he believed many resented his anticommunist stance) and from obtaining state relief under a name other than Claude, remarking, "Well, it's a handicap to get fame."

[37] Cooper, too, concludes that McKay indulges in myth making about his career in *A Long Way from Home*. McKay used the book to bolster his image as "a black man intent upon remaining true to himself, yet accepting, too, the inescapable obligation to write truthfully about those qualities within himself and his race that both set blacks apart as unique and made them one with the rest of mankind." (*Rebel* 317-18). However, this portrayal "failed to convey the complexity of his life," partly because of his refusal to reveal the depth of his involvement with the Communist Party and partly because he "had never been an introspective writer" (318).

[38] After returning to the U.S. in 1920, McKay once again went to Harris to show him his collection *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920). Noticing the absence of "If We Must Die," Harris learned that McKay "was advised to keep it out" and chastised him as a "bloody traitor to your race. . . . A damned traitor to your own integrity" (81). McKay was both mortified and reassured: "I felt relieved after his castigation" (81-82).

[39] McKay denied that he sought to revivify his literary career. In a letter to Johnson in 1938, he wrote, "Some people . . . think I am interested in a literary organization to use it to keep up my prestige, as my recent books were not good sellers. But in reality it was more your letter which gave birth to the idea" (qtd. in Cooper, *Rebel* 327).

[40] To assuage any anxiety regarding his working class credentials and influence as a racial poet, McKay provides the poem's dramatic history even more forcefully:

> First published in Max Eastman's magazine *The Liberator*, the poem was reprinted in every Negro publication of consequence. It forced its way into the Negro pulpit (a most interesting phenomenon for this black heretic). Ministers ended their sermons with it, and the congregations responded, Amen. It was repeated in Negro clubs and Negro schools and at Negro mass meetings. To thousands of Negroes who are not trained to appreciate poetry, "If We Must Die" makes me a poet. I myself was amazed at the general sentiment for the poem. For I am so intensely subjective as a poet, that I was not aware, at the moment of writing, that I was transformed into a medium to express a mass sentiment. (*Long Way* 175)

[41] While McKay believed his autobiography would ease the tensions between himself and the racial and radical leaders of New York, the response to *A Long Way from Home* was largely condemnatory, repeating the very charges he wished to answer and dismiss, though McKay did himself no favors with his claims of artistic superiority and negative portrayals of American radicals and the African American elite.

[42] Carl Pedersen similarly argues that McKay should be considered part of a "Caribbean as well as a global African diasporic tradition" and has "traditionally been co-opted" into the "African-American canon as opposed to the Afro-Caribbean canon" effectively Americanizing the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance (259-60).

[43] Scholars are beginning to recover the Caribbean influence on the period, noting that some of the most influential personalities that shaped the era like Claude McKay, Eric Walrond, CLR James, Marcus Garvey, Hubert Harrison, and Nella Larson "were politicized before they arrived in the United States" (Turner and Turner xviii).

[44] Carl Pedersen argues for a consideration of what he calls the "extended Caribbean" in studies of the early twentieth century, which stretches from Virginia to Brazil and to New York City: "In the period of the New Negro movement, the extended Caribbean as a discursive and historical entity spans" Guyana (Eric Walrond), Trinidad (Eric Williams and C.L.R. James), Martinique (Aimé Césaire and René Maran), Haiti (Jacques Roumain and Jean-Price Mars), Jamaica (Claude McKay and Marcus Garvey), Danish West Indies (Hubert Harrison and Nella Larson), Florida (Zora Neale Hurston), Georgia (Jean Toomer), New York, and European seaports (260-61). Other notable black intellectuals and radicals of the period also hailed from the Caribbean: W.A. Domingo and Joel A. Rodgers (Jamaica), Arthur Schomburg (Puerto Rico) (Philipson 344).

[45] Additionally, Robert Philipson asserts the importance of the "West Indian presence in Harlem" because its "postcolonial perspective . . . shaped the ideology of the Harlem Renaissance in fundamental ways" by providing "an international perspective" and "rejection of the imperial worldview that always put Caribbean and African Blacks under the indefinite . . . tutelage of the white races" (146). Philipson also calls attention to the different imperial presences in the Caribbean like the British and the French but also the American. The cultural and military presence of the United States in the Caribbean surely informed the perspectives of these intellectuals and artists. In the Caribbean alone, the US deployed troops to, and maintained a military presence in, Cuba on four occasions between 1898 and 1922, Haiti from 1915 to 1934, the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924 (Paterson, Clifford, and Hagan 51-56).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: BURNING THE CANON AT BOTH ENDS

Modern American poetry did not begin only with Whitman, as the most familiar story goes, but is the product of myriad poets, historical periods, traditions, and cultures within and outside the borders of the United States. Acknowledging the sources of American poetry beyond an Anglo-American context makes newly legible poets who have troubled such boundaries—like McKay, whose poetics and politics were formed, to a great extent, outside of America; Gloria Anzaldúa, whose New Mestiza identity and literary style celebrates hybridity and challenges binary thinking about race, sexuality, nationality, language, genre, and form; and even Longfellow, who knew the difference between cultural identity and national identity. Such openness calls to mind the difficult interplay of political and aesthetic identities we can see in Gwendolyn Brooks as she attempted to remake her poetics to reflect her Black Nationalist political allegiances and values. This volatile plurality also inspired Whitman's formal and thematic experiments as well as his intense anxiety, particularly after the Civil War. Even the contradictory multitudes in "Song of Myself" cannot contain the diversity of American poetry. Yet we have largely left in place narratives of literary origins and development that misrepresent the work of poets in the United States. Though we have included more authors in the canon, the story of American poetry has not changed substantially. This is mainly because we have not fully examined the effects of our long-standing methods of inclusion, nor have we looked carefully enough at the poems that created the bases of

canonicity. Investigating iconic poems reveals the illogic of including fewer poems by more poets to expand our understanding of American poetry. We need instead to read more poems by more poets. Bringing into view the poems that have stood in the shadow of a single iconic text may challenge our ideas of poets and the roles they have been assigned to play in the creation of our national literature and suggest that there is more to be recovered in our literary history, even in those areas that seem the most established.

In addition to the case studies included in this investigation of iconic poems, other legendary American poems, say Edna St. Vincent Millay's "First Fig" or Emily Dickinson's "[There's a certain Slant of light]," deserve a careful rereading with an eye to how these iconic poems have influenced their poets' received personae and poetry. Like McKay's, Millay's critical reputation and popular reception focus exclusively on her sonnets. Originally heralded for her expansive long poem, "Renascence" (1912), but most recognized by her brief iconic "First Fig"—"My candle burns at both ends; / It will not last the night; / But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends— / It gives a lovely light!"—our fascination with Millay's sonnets has had a singular effect on her role in literary history.[1] The focus on this aspect of her work produces a particular story about form and gender during the modernist period, in which women transform traditional genres and gender roles through anti-romantic innovations and the direct treatment of female sexuality, epitomized by a sonnet like "I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed." The focus on this thematic impulse in Millay serves a critical obsession with her use of the sonnet, and both subject (love) and form (love poem) exclude Millay from the modernist canon. Similar to McKay's, Millay's formalism remains a problem for critics who have deemed the period

between the wars one of formal experimentation. When "modernist" is defined as "formally innovative," poets like Millay and McKay become anomalous.

There is no doubt that many of Millay's sonnets provide a powerful example of her anti-romanticism, feminism, frank sexuality, and gender instability. However, by reading only her sonnets, the traditional poetic form to express the aspirations and frustrations of an adoring lover, we nevertheless reinforce the widely held notion of Millay as a sentimental love-poet or poet-diva. This caricature comes at a cost to her entire corpus. It interferes with our appreciation of her political poetry and varied aesthetic projects, not to mention her work in a variety of forms on a variety of themes. By reading beyond, in this case, her iconic *form*, we can see that Millay not only embodies formalist modernism but politicizes the pastoral (again, like McKay). For example, a poem like "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" launches a political critique of her region, landscape, and national identity. Millay's corpus defies easy categories and offers evidence of political and aesthetic links to other American poets as diverse as Whitman, McKay, Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Frost, and Edgar Allan Poe. Her versatility and political ideals offer a progressive American identity, giving order and voice, sound and sense, to the chaos of American democracy.

If Walt Whitman has been cast as the father of American poetry, Emily Dickinson has been considered its spinster aunt. These two poets are often contrasted as competing strains of American poetry, with Whitman emblematizing the male, public, democratic poet, and Dickinson his female, private, Puritan antithesis. Yet while critics have long sought to challenge such a dichotomy, Dickinson's work remains mired in this dated notion.[2] Dickinson has troubled critics since the first volumes of her poetry were

published (and heavily edited) in the 1890s by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. Willis Buckingham notes the "strangeness" of Dickinson that readers in the 1890s responded to in contradictory ways. Audiences saw in Dickinson's work both the values of popular taste and the values of a younger critical audience opposed to the restrictive clichés of nineteenth-century popular poetry. Guided by Dickinson's first editors, many readers responded enthusiastically to her supposed conventional themes, themes especially "popular . . . in female verse" (xv), in such uncharacteristic poems as "[If I can stop one heart from breaking]," "[Success is counted sweetest]," and "[There's a certain Slant of light]." Yet younger critics hailed her unconventionality with reference to the same poems. In the 1920s, Dickinson's value increased, fueled by modernists who now saw their own concerns reflected in her strangeness, in such poems as "[I felt a funeral in my brain]" and "[My life closed twice before its close]." Critics "perceive[d] in Dickinson a depth of psychic derangement, and an evocative power in her fractured poetics" (xvi). By the 1970s, feminist critics sought to recover Dickinson's poetry from such critical biases, arguing that her poetry reacted against patriarchal culture. For Adrienne Rich, Dickinson's figures and metaphors are more than biography; they are evidence of "a major act of nonconformity in the nineteenth century" (183), less the product of "renunciation, isolation, and incorporeality" (168) than "a mask . . . of innocuousness and of containment" (170). Dickinson's indirections were artful, evidence of strategies to conceal dangerous feminine creativity revealed in poems like "[My life had stood—a Loaded Gun]." Each one of these Dickinson chestnuts has had an iconic force at different moments in her reception.

More recently, a Dickinson canon has emerged in a most unlikely place. A vast industry of test preparation books and courses, inspired by the content of the SAT Reasoning Test (formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the Scholastic Assessment Test), has emerged as a canon maker of American poetry. These tests, study guides, and courses use Dickinson, primarily as a way to measure critical reading skills, but also both to instill and measure cultural literacy in subject areas (literature and history). College entrance exams and their attendant study guides have tremendous power to shape American literature. Today, the test preparation industry earns about $4 billion each year. In December 2009, *Wired* magazine interviewed Knewton, Inc. CEO Jose Ferreira about the industry's future. According to Ferreira, the internet may increase the profitability of these companies by eliminating test preparation centers and reducing the number of teachers they employ: "Kaplan's got like 10,000 to 12,000 teachers and *Princeton Review* has over 1,000 teachers, and by definition, most of them aren't very good . . . . Our model is, let's just disrupt the entire industry altogether. Let's get the best 20 teachers in the country . . . just get the very best people you could never find at any local center and make them our [video] teachers" (Ferreirra). In August of 2010, the company announced its partnership with *US News & World Report* to offer online SAT preparation (Knewton). Such a limited curriculum, reduction of teachers, and increase of students taking online test preparation courses suggest that the narrowness and rigidness of the canons they create will become more and more pronounced. Emily Dickinson is a staple poet for this industry, which trades almost exclusively in canonical and iconic poems and poets.

It should be no surprise that the Test-Prep Dickinson looks just like the nineteenth-century Dickinson. Not only anthologizers and professors have perpetuated the Belle of Amherst myth.[3] The Test-Prep canon is composed of such popular Dickinson poems as "[The Soul selects her own Society]," "[There's a certain Slant of light],"and "[Success is counted sweetest]"—poems featured in multiple study guides for the SAT and advanced placement courses. All of these guides have standardized Dickinson's spelling and grammar. Such canons reach an audience even more vast than that of teaching anthologies, and they have the power to define poetry for millions of people—which they are complacently doing without any accommodation of the canon reformation work of the last 40 years.

The immense public cachet of iconic poems disperses them throughout our culture. Inevitably, various audiences recruit them to support a variety of interests. By examining iconic poems we may be able not only to reexamine and reevaluate the poems and poets we have always remembered but also recover works and poets they eclipse and exclude, shedding light on our literary history, critical practices, and political interests. Moreover, we may discover new canons and canon makers whose impact on the reception of poems and poets far outstrips that of scholars, critics, editors, and teachers. Most important, acknowledging the full range of a poet's work contributes to the promise of canon reformation to alter our understanding of American poetry and suggest new possibilities and stories.

[1] Millay's most public champions, seeking to preserve her historical status refer to "First Fig" to identify her fame and thus importance. The Edna St. Vincent Millay Society whose mission is to preserve the "Legacy of a Great American Poet" posts the entirety of "First Fig" on their website in the banner to their "Millay the Poet" biography page. In the brief account of the poet's life and work, the Society notes her importance to American culture and literature:

> In the immediate post-World War I era, Millay emerged as a major figure in the cultural life of Greenwich Village, when the Village served as an incubator of every important American literary, artistic, and political movement of the period. As part of this milieu, Millay's work and life came to represent the modern, liberated woman of the Jazz age, free of the restrictions of the past, as represented in her famous lines of poetry, 'My candle burns at both ends . . .' ("Millay")

This synopsis of Millay's importance, here exemplified by "First Fig," is virtually identical to estimations of her sonnet.

The New York Landmarks Preservation Foundation also identifies Millay by "First Fig" on its historical marker at her famous Greenwich Village residence. From 1923-1924, Millay lived at 75-1/2 Bedford Street, known as the smallest house in Manhattan, 8-1/2 feet wide and 30 feet deep (Nevius and Nevius 227). The plaque distinguishes the house as having once belonged to Edna St. Vincent Millay: "The irreverent poet, who wrote '*my candle burns at both ends*' lived here in 1923-24 at the time she wrote the '*Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*,' for which she won a Pulitzer Prize." While critics laud her work as a sonneteer, and the public knows her for "First Fig," the discussions of both the form and her short lyric support an identical image of Millay.

[2] Adrienne Rich attributes the longstanding "uncoupled couple" to their originality, an originality that mainstream American culture has responded to by relegating them to traditional gender roles: "Our categories have compressed the poetic energies of the white nineteenth-century United States into a gendered opposition: a sensual, free-ranging, boastful father, and a reluctant, elusive, emotionally closeted mother—poetic progenitors, neither of whom had children of the flesh" (15).

[3] This myth pervades Dickinson's reception for the entire last century. During the seclusion of her later years, her neighbors took to calling her the "the Myth" of Amherst. More recently, and perhaps most famously, William Luce promulgated this account of Dickinson's life in his play, *The Belle of Amherst* (1976).

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