

Publics and Counterpublics

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not so easily be heard. And by the time Rice began his popular run on the stage with Jim Crow, the African Theatre had closed, Hewlett's career had been cast into shadow, and the "Soliloquy" had been forgotten.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Whitman Drunk*

I am as independent as the United States of America.
 — Anonymous drunk of the 1840s,
 being escorted from a bar

In November 1842, New Yorkers would have been able to buy, for twelve and a half cents each, or for eight dollars per hundred, an object that would be hard to classify today. It was called *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate*. Now it is encountered as a book and is usually described as a novel. In 1842, it was a newspaper supplement — a special issue of the *New World*, unbound, printed on cheap paper, in newspaper columns. Any reader would have recognized it as a tract as well. The *New World's* advertisements for it had begun, "Friends of Temperance, Ahoy!" The first sentence makes no bones about these extranovelistic features: "The story I am going to tell you, reader, will be somewhat aside from the ordinary track of the novelist."

Many who read *Franklin Evans* today, as a novel, find it unsatisfactory; one reason for this is that the work addressed publics that

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were not simply novelistic publics. Newspaper subscribers and "Friends of Temperance" would have brought to the object the mass-mediated self-understanding of the temperance movement. And that was a public in a new way. Temperance publications like *Franklin Evans* brought together two tendencies of the early national period: an ever more aggressive press, which had become strongly entrepreneurial; and a tradition of association that by the time of Tocqueville's American tour had come to seem to be the defining feature of American culture. Temperance activism had been a prominent part of this early national pattern of association. In the ten or fifteen years before *Franklin Evans*, however, the press and voluntary association had transformed each other in the context of temperance. The early national entrepreneurial press became a mass medium, and the temperance reform societies that had been popping up in every American locale became a full-scale, mass-mediated social movement — that is, one that understood itself as such.

Temperance and the mass press planted each other on the national scene. The American Temperance Society from its beginnings in 1826 drew on a tradition of tract-distributing reform groups, especially the American Tract Society, and pushed the publishing trade to an unprecedented outreach. Temperance tracts — five million copies by 1851 — dominated the American Tract Society's output. And papers such as the Albany *Temperance Recorder* achieved mass circulation in exactly the same years that saw the first penny daily newspapers. Even before the arrival of the new steam presses — the first penny daily, the *New York Sun*, was printed on a flatbed handpress — tract writers and newspapermen were developing the basis of a mass public. Not only were temperance societies and newspapers expanding; they incorporated an awareness of non-state "society" in the culture of their membership and readership. As Charles Sellers tellingly notes:

Americans were first habituated to statistics by the Benevolent Empire's bourgeois passion for enumerating souls saved, money raised, Bibles circulated, tracts printed, missionary years expended. Endlessly temperance reformers calculated the dollar costs of alcohol, including crime, pauperism, and lost labor. The \$94,425,000 total of one tally would "buy up all the houses, lands, and slaves in the United States every five years."¹

This statistical consciousness, combined with a vast network of non-state association and an equally vast body of print, brought a mass public into awareness of itself and its distinctness from the national state. The Washington Temperance Society, founded in 1840, was especially emphatic about the social scale of the voluntary movement; and the Washingtonians quickly outstripped the more elite-based American Temperance Society.

In this essay, I will argue that the thematic language of temperance rhetoric had much to do with the emergence of the cultural form of the social movement, which from the 1830s to the present has been one of the givens of the political world. Temperance ideology shifted so radically in this process as to become virtually the opposite of temperance, as will become clear. I will also argue that both temperance rhetoric and the temperance movement were the context in which the tract's author, the newspaperman Walt Whitman, first articulated what would later become the major issues of his career. I will be especially interested in two residues from his temperance publishing: a dialectic or tension that would eventually become sexual expressivism; and the strange conception of a public that distinguishes his poetic writing and his publishing practice.

For all his trumpeting about the friends of temperance, Whitman, when he is talking about alcohol in *Franklin Evans*, often seems to be thinking about something else. Franklin Evans has

his first encounter with musical drinking shops shortly after he arrives in New York from the country, when his new city-boy friend, Colby, says to him, "Let us go out and cruise a little, and see what there is going on."² "How delicious everything seemed!" Franklin exclaims:

Those beautiful women — warbling melodies sweeter than ever I had heard before, and the effect of the liquor upon my brain, seemed to lave me in happiness, as it were, from head to foot!

Oh, fatal pleasure! There and then was my first false step after coming in the borders of the city — and *so soon* after, too! . . .

Colby saw at length that he had been too heedless with me. Used as he was to the dissipation of city life, he forgot that I was from the country, and never in my life before engaged in such a scene of *pleasure*.³

This passage tries simultaneously to articulate pleasure and to manage it. Self-mastery and self-abandonment struggle for supremacy in a way that is visibly absent from earlier writing on alcohol, such as Benjamin Franklin's or Washington Irving's. Fatal pleasure, but also *Oh, fatal pleasure*.⁴ Thematically, the focus is on drink. But Whitman does not write, "Oh, fatal alcohol."

If alcohol does not seem quite to be the subject here, still it is no accident that Whitman's first extended treatment of a dialectic between self-mastery and self-abandonment should occur in the form of temperance fiction. The temperance movement *invented* addiction. Thomas De Quincey never uses the term (though current editions supply it in prefaces and notes), and only some decades after the concept was developed in temperance was it extended to drugs other than alcohol. Addiction had been a legal term, describing the performative act of bondage, before it was metaphorized to describe a person's self-relation. Someone who

is addicted to, say, Sabbath breaking could be understood as having developed a habit, bound himself to a custom. In temperance rhetoric, the concept loses the sense of an active self-abnegation on the part of the will. Desire and will became distinct in a way that Jonathan Edwards had been able to dismiss: "A man never, in any instance, wills any thing contrary to his desires, or desires any thing contrary to his Will . . . the thing which he wills, the very same he desires. . . . It cannot truly be said . . . that a drunkard, let his appetite be never so strong, cannot keep the cup from his mouth."⁵

Temperance reformers began imagining the reverse — that the drunkard *cannot* keep the cup from his mouth even if he wants to do so. At this point, they gave up on the traditional concept of temperance in favor of abstinence and the treatment of addiction as disease. In the culture of modernity, where people are held responsible for the disposition of their lives as an act of will, it became possible to imagine desire no longer as self but as the paradigm case of heteronomy. Controlling your body *had* made you temperate. Now it made you free. Where desire and will had been one for Edwards, temperance reformers — like liberal evangelicals — began radicalizing the concept of volition. The corollary was an expanded concept of desire as the limit on the will.

In *Franklin Evans*, Whitman is on the cutting edge of addiction theory when he writes:

Reader! perhaps you despise me. Perhaps, if I were by you at this moment, I should behold the curled lip of scorn, and the look of deep contempt. Oh, pause stern reverencer of duty, and have pity for a fellow-creature's weakness! . . . Thou sayest, perhaps — Begin a reformation, and custom will make it easy. But what if the beginning be dreadful? The first steps, not like climbing a mountain, but going through fire? What if the whole system must undergo a

change, violent as that which we conceive of the mutation of form in some insects? What if a process comparable to flaying alive, have to be endured? Is the weakness which sinks under such struggles, to be compared with the pertinacity which clings to vice, for itself and its gross appetites?⁶

What if it isn't vice at all, this, or at least not vice *for itself*? What if it's, well, what could it be called? Flaying, infrapersonal trouble, the shudders of a mutating bug. "Impotent attempts to make issue with what appears to be our destiny." Whitman or Evans pleads by this logic for humanity: "The drunkard, low as he is, is a *man*." He articulates an antinomy between will and desire, the moral solution to which is in fact a much more radical valuing of will: "The GLORIOUS TEMPERANCE PLEDGE."⁷

How does a picture of the body's own heteronomy (so to speak) produce the alien solution of the voluntary pledge? Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has astutely observed this pattern in our own day, witnessed in a wild proliferation of addiction theories to the point that she speaks of epidemics of the will:

So long as an entity known as "free will" has been hypostatized and charged with ethical value, for just so long has an equally hypostatized "compulsion" had to be available as a counter-structure always internal to it, always requiring to be ejected from it. The scouring descriptive work of addiction-attribution is propelled by the same imperative: its exacerbated perceptual acuteness in detecting the compulsion behind everyday voluntariness is driven, ever more blindly, by its own compulsion to isolate some new, receding but absolutized space of *pure* voluntariness.⁸

The glorious temperance pledge marks the receding horizon of that relatively absolute voluntariness. Whitman, pursuing the volun-

tarist utopia of pledging to an extreme, interpolates a dream vision, a Jacobin fantasy about a stateless festival republic in which every last peasant will have signed the temperance pledge, bringing all born persons into the Washingtonian associational network. In Franklin's dream, he appears in the crowd during this big event:

A venerable old man came forward upon the scaffold, and presented a document to the speaker. He received it with evident delight; and snatching a pen from a table, he wrote his name under it, and held it up to the view of the people.

It were impossible to describe the thunder-peal of hurrahs that arose in the air, and sounded to the skies, as the Full Work was consummated thus. They cried aloud —

"Victory! Victory! The Last Slave of Appetite is free, and the people are regenerated!"⁹

If it weren't so queer, this passage would be a true nightmare of democratic totalitarianism. It is rather queer, partly because the ideal of political union, this delirious consummation, takes place in the public witnessing of a man's relation to his own appetitive body; partly because of the campy feudalism involved in calling John Doe the Last Vassal; partly because of the odd mixture of humiliation and heroization involved in parading him about; partly because of Franklin Evans's phantom self on the margin of the whole scene.

What interests me most here is the fantasy of stateless public association, because I think this points to the institutional context for addiction culture. Temperance was not just another discourse but a rather special kind of social movement. The assumptions of addiction discourse silently explicate the associational style of temperance, which was of course a civil-society phenomenon, arguably the largest and most sustained social movement in modernity. In the year of the novel's publication, 1842, hundreds

of American cities had held temperance festivals on Washington's birthday; but, as one temperance lecturer announced, "the festival at New York surpassed all others in its extent, beauty, and appropriateness."¹⁰ There were even more festivals on July 4 of that year. There were also new temperance publications, including the *New York Washingtonian*, in which Whitman published a temperance story in March 1842 and in which he would publish the beginning of a second novel, *The Madman*, in 1843. Festivals and publications alike helped to mediate for temperance participants an understanding of the social movement as part of a repertoire of action. Their sense of membership and the very nature of their participation were mediated by the idea that temperance organizing was an action on the part of non-state society. *Franklin Evans* also helped to mediate that constitutive self-understanding.

Whitman in later life told Horace Traubel that *Franklin Evans* was essentially commissioned by two temperance activists, "Parke Godwin and another somebody" — probably, in fact, Park Benjamin and James Burns.¹¹ The idea of commissioning fiction as propaganda had been part of the public strategy of the temperance movement since 1836, when the second convention of the American Temperance Union, in Saratoga, formally voted to endorse fiction and other "products of the fancy" as public-sphere instruments.¹² Whitman echoed this notion of the instrumental role of fiction in the preface and conclusion of his novel:

Issued in the cheap and popular form you see, and wafted by every mail to all parts of this vast republic; the facilities which its publisher possesses, giving him the power of diffusing it more widely than any other establishment in the United States; the mighty and deep public opinion, . . . its being written *for the mass* . . . all these will give "THE INEBRIATE," I feel confident, a more than ordinary share of patronage.¹³

Both the temperance movement in general and *Franklin Evans* in particular are therefore embedded in a context of non-state political association.

Just seven years before the publication of the novel, Tocqueville had given this social form the ideologization by which it has been known ever since: voluntary association.

In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America. . . . The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life; he looks upon the social authority with an eye of mistrust and anxiety, and he claims its assistance only when he is unable to do without it. . . . If some public pleasure is concerned, an association is formed to give more splendor and regularity to the entertainment. Societies are formed to resist evils that are exclusively of a moral nature, as to diminish the vice of intemperance.¹⁴

In Tocqueville's account, as in *Franklin Evans*, the imperative of will for the individual ("to resist the evils and the difficulties of life") translates directly into a form of association. Americans fill up their social space with a vast network of associations all formed occasionally, entered and left at will, existing only to make the exercise of will more powerful. Temperance was shaped organizationally by this ideologization, not only in being open-member associations like so many other moral reform groups but also in calling attention to voluntarism by the ritual of pledge signing. The thematic content of self-management and addiction in this context was able to provide an implicit metalanguage by which association might be perceived as valuable *because* voluntary. (Compare Thoreau's statement of only a few years later: "Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be

regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined."¹⁵)

Perhaps another way of showing how important these metaso-
cial themes are in Whitman's treatment of alcohol is to show how
unimportant alcohol itself is. Certain moralizing passages claim
that all bad things in the story come from drink. But actually very
little follows directly from alcohol in the plot. The "Oh, fatal
pleasure" scene is perfectly typical: Franklin's dissipation comes
as much from sopranos as from gin. Alcohol never plays more
than an ancillary role in such gothic disasters as his marriage, on
impulse, to a Creole slave who later turns into a homicidal mad-
woman. (It's a very male text.)

Indeed, so unimportant is alcohol to the plot that Whitman
was able to republish the novel with a new title that made no refer-
ence to it — twice: first as *Franklin Evans; or, The Merchant's
Clerk: A Tale of the Times* (advertised through the same *New World*
in 1843); then again in 1846 in Whitman's own paper, the *Brook-
lyn Daily Eagle*, as *Fortunes of a Country Boy*. The latter version
especially is no longer a temperance novel. The interpolated tales
have been removed, but most of these had little to do with alcohol
themselves, as, for example, in the tale of Wind-Foot (an exquis-
ite Indian boy who does what Indians do best in white American
literature: die in erotically thrilling ways). By means of such cuts
and some discreet alterations — "dissipation" replaces "drunken-
ness" — *Fortunes of a Country Boy* becomes a novel about self-
development and urban associational space. Addiction is replaced
by a character flaw: "weakness of resolution, and liability to be
led by others."¹⁶ Franklin's final conversion to the total abstinence
pledge is dropped, which means that his return from the dark
night of his Southern sojourn is marked only by the sudden reap-
pearance of Stephen Lee, who leaves him a large inheritance. "So,
at an age which was hardly upon the middle verge of life, I found

myself possessed of a comfortable property; and, as the term is
'unincumbered' person."¹⁷ (When Evans asks the reason for this
largesse, Lee says, "My own fancy."¹⁸ At the beginning of the nov-
el, he says, "I do not wish to conceal that I am somewhat inter-
ested in your case."¹⁹)

What both versions share is an interest in the dilemmas of self-
coherence. In the following passage from *Franklin Evans*, Whit-
man sounds almost like De Quincey:

How refreshing it is to pause in the whirl and tempest of life, and
cast back our minds over past years! I think there is even a kind of
satisfaction in deliberately and calmly reviewing actions that we feel
were foolish or evil. It pleases us to know that we have the learning
of experience. The very contrast, perhaps, between what we are, and
what we were, is gratifying. . . .

From no other view can I understand how it is, that I sometimes
catch myself turning back in my reflection, to the very dreariest and
most degraded incidents which I have related in the preceding pages,
and thinking upon them without any of the bitterness and mortifica-
tion which they might be supposed to arouse in my bosom. The for-
mal narration of them, to be sure, is far from agreeable to me — but
in my own self-communion upon the subject, I find a species of
entertainment. I was always fond of day-dreams — an innocent plea-
sure, perhaps, if not allowed too much latitude.²⁰

As a pretext for introducing the daydream about the Last Slave of
Appetite, this transitional passage assumes a fair amount of latitude
and stands out all the more for that reason as an index to the novel's
characteristic obsessions. Franklin indicates the autobiographical
act as a version of liberal individual morality, an act of taking
responsibility for one's entire disposition. But he quickly begins
instead to describe the perverse pleasures of self-discontinuity,

even self-repudiation and self-abjection. The scenes he contemplates are dreary, even degrading; though he says he contemplates them without bitterness or mortification, he also tells us that the contemplation is pleasurable because he knows it *should* be bitter and mortifying.

The dialectic between these two moments — liberal self-integration and perverse self-contemplation — governs the entire narrative. *Franklin Evans* seems designed more than anything else to narrate its title character into as many disparate social spaces as possible and to compound his integration problems with the endless resurgence of appetite. From his first appearance en route from rural Long Island to Manhattan, Franklin is the subject of his elective associations, especially male (he will marry twice and take one mistress, with fatal consequences for all three women). He falls in with some fast boys who introduce him to male circles of urban appetitive decadence. He also meets Lee, the mysterious older widower who takes a special interest in him. His path between these affinitive influences leads him in and out of various states of self-coherence, where integration tends to be associated with capital and temperance, disintegrative tendencies with alcohol, sexuality, time, death, the city, sickness, poverty, market dependency, crime, prison, shame, singing, and pleasure. “How delicious everything seemed!”

At the end of *Franklin Evans*, Whitman summarizes the moral of the story: “I would warn that youth whose eye may scan over these lines, with a voice which speaks to him, not from idle fear, but the sad knowledge of experience, how bitter are the consequences attending these musical drinking-shops . . . pestilent places, where the mind and the body are both rendered effeminate together.”²¹ It’s not difficult to hear attraction here. Something that cannot be openly avowed is nevertheless coming to expression. Modern bourgeois culture gets a lot of things done

this way, but nowhere more visibly than in the literature of addiction, to which *Franklin Evans* belongs. Addiction literature is marked by a dialectic: no sooner do scenes of self-abandonment conjure up the necessity of self-mastery than this instrumental self-relation in turn gives way to the possibility of self-contemplation, of an abandonment newly regarded as expressive. Though the theme is addiction, it’s hard not to hear some reference to the emergent same-sex subculture of New York in the following passage, which describes a lower Manhattan theater of exactly the sort where that subculture flourished:

The Demon of Intemperance had taken possession of all our faculties, and we were his alone.

A wretched scene! Half-a-dozen men, just entering the busy scenes of life, not one of us over twenty-five years, and there we were, benumbing our faculties, and confirming ourselves in practices which ever too surely bring the scorn of the world, and deserved disgrace to their miserable victims! It is a terrible sight, I have often thought since, to see *young men* beginning their walk on this fatal journey! . . . To know that the blood is poisoned, and that the strength is to be broken down, and the bloom banished from the cheek, and the lustre of the eye dimmed, and all for a few hours’ sensual gratification, now and then — is it not terrible! . . . [It] saps the foundations, not only of the body’s health, but places a stigma for the future on their worldly course, which can never be wiped out, or concealed from the knowledge of those about them.²²

Alcohol discriminates finely; it assaults young blood, manly strength, blooming cheeks, and bright eyes. Its symptoms, scarcely distinguishable from those associated with onanism in the mass reform literature of the time, appear in whole numbers of men at once. Seeing such men in public, you recognize them by an

epistemology of stigma. This is where they hang out. I have often thought about it.

Alcohol becomes a figure for self-incoherence in general; any "Demon" that has "taken possession of all our faculties" will do. "I sicken as I narrate this part of my story," he says at another point. "The recollection comes of the sufferings of my poor wife, and of my unkindness to her. I paid no attention to her comforts, and took no thought for her subsistence. I *think* I never proceeded to any act of violence — but God only knows what words I spoke in my paroxysms of drunken irritation."²³ Franklin has problems of self-characterization: "God only knows what words I spoke." Whitman heightens his difficulty with autonarration by a number of odd voicing devices: the first scene, for example, is told in the omniscient third person until the narrator says of the main character, "Reader, I was that youth" — a device later repeated in the interpolated tales. Drunkenness, however, allows or requires Franklin to treat his problems of self-characterization as part of his self-characterization. He is a person subject to "paroxysms," self-sickenings, involuntary amnesias, alien thrills of retrospection. These forms of internal heteronomy take on special significance because they contrast with the confessional performance of the narration itself, which is organized by a metalanguage of choice, responsibility, and association through affinity and self-characterization rather than through kinship and status.

At the end of the novel, when Whitman strives for closure within the voluntarist rhetoric, Franklin's internal recognition problems suddenly find an equivalent in his double. He sees in the street a "tipsy loafer" begging, "going through his disgusting capers":

Pausing a moment, and looking in the man's face, I thought I recollected the features. A second and a third glance convinced me. It was

Colby, my early intimate, the tempter who had led me aside from the paths of soberness. Wretched creature! . . . His apparel looked as though it had been picked up in some mud hole; it was torn in strips and all over soiled. His face was bloated, and his eyes red and swollen. I thought of the morning when I awoke upon the dock, after my long fit of intemperance: the person before me was even more an object of pity than myself on that occasion.²⁴

Since Franklin's friendship with Colby had been the paradigmatic instance of affinitive, voluntary association in the novel, Franklin can only repudiate him at some cost, leading him rather inconsistently to say, in the penultimate paragraph, "I would advise every young man to marry as soon as possible, and have a home of his own."²⁵

The later Whitman's perverse self-characterization is not so far removed from the bourgeois propriety of the temperance novel as one might expect. Nor is his insistence on bringing sexuality into public view, given the peculiar nature of *Franklin Evans's* public. Whitman's commitment to voluntarist culture never completely relaxed. Like *Franklin Evans, Leaves of Grass* imagines a stateless society, constituted in the public sphere through performative discourse. The significant difference is that the poetry imagines this associational style as yoked to — and explicated by — the contemplative or self-abandoning moment in the dialectic of individualism rather than its instrumental or self-mastering moment. Where *Franklin Evans* had imagined civil-society association as organized by voluntarism and self-mastery, condensed in the image of a pledging association, Whitman in the 1850s and 1860s imagined non-state association as called into being by desire, by contemplative recognition, by the imperfect success of selfing.

Unfortunately, this difference has been obscured by the central tradition of Whitman criticism. With its obsessive discourse

about Whitman's so-called self, Whitman criticism has provided the most extreme instance I know of the ideology of self analyzed by Vincent Crapanzano. Crapanzano has argued that pragmatic features of discourse tend to be perceived, in middle-class American culture, in a referential language of character. These texts are no exception, since their pragmatics are uniformly taken as indices of Whitman's "self" and their peculiarities are taken to be peculiarities of that self. (Sometimes with a great deal of unintended comedy, as when Malcolm Cowley explains that Whitman had an abnormally developed sense of touch.) "Self" seems to be a concept without which it is impossible to do Whitman criticism. In a long tradition of Whitman criticism, from Quentin Anderson's *Imperial Self* to recent essays by Doris Sommer and Philip Fisher, Whitman has been regarded as a prophet of "the liberal self," a self that regards itself as universal, that does not "recognize difference." In my view, this reading of Whitman gets almost everything wrong, though it's a misreading partly developed by the late Whitman, as it were, himself.

Whitman's writing thematizes a modern phenomenology of self everywhere: "I celebrate myself and sing myself." But it almost always does so in order to make the pragmatics of selfing a mess: "And what I assume you shall assume." The second line can be taken as elaborating the indicatively modern and liberal problem of the other, the problem of mutuality — a problem frequently enough taken up by Whitman, as, for example, in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." But it can also be taken as thematizing the pragmatics of self-attribution. It announces that "I" and "you" bear no relation to content, action, choice, self-knowledge or mutual knowledge, the attribution of traits, the reciprocal confirmation of identity through action, or any other condition of selfing: "what I assume you shall assume."

Moreover, the impossibility of selfing is driven home in the

way the line parrots interpersonal drama while deploying the special discursive conventions of print-mediated publicity. Whitman's poetry, more than any other body of writing I know, continually exploits public-sphere-discourse conventions as its condition of utterance. In this case, it relies on a discourse context defined by the necessary anonymity and mutual nonknowledge of writer and reader, and therefore on the definitional impossibility of intimacy. Assuming what I assume, you have neither an identity together with me, mediated as we are by print, nor apart from me, since neither pronoun attributions nor acts of assuming manage to distinguish us.

From the first word of "Song of Myself" ("I") to the last ("you"), in every major poem he wrote, Whitman tries out an enormous range of strategies for frustrating the attempt to "self" his language, both by thematic assertion — "I resist anything better than my own diversity" — and by attribution problems: "My voice is the wife's voice, the screech by the rail of the stairs." I interpret the metadiscursive queerness of the poems as a provocation against the ideology of self-characterization. "To a Stranger," for example, invokes the communicative medium of intimacy — the medium to which character attribution is most indispensable — in a way that toys with the nonintimate, depersonalizing conventions of print publication:

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon
you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes
to me as of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,
All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate,
chaste, matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,

I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not
yours only nor left my body mine only,
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass,
you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone
or wake at night alone,
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again, I am to
see to it that I do not lose you.²⁶

When the speaker says “you do not know how longingly I look upon you,” we know that Whitman is not looking longingly upon us, that we cannot possibly *be* the self addressed in second-person attributions. But we also cannot simply fictionalize either the speaker or the scene of address, in the manner of Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” because the speaker himself indicates the genericizing conventions of publication. It is addressed “to a stranger,” and that we certainly are. He is not to speak to us, he says, and that he certainly does not. When the speaker says in the last line “I am to see to it that I do not lose you,” we are able to recognize his sense of difficulty simultaneously as (a) his personal commitment to me, whom he loves; and (b) his attempt to acknowledge our anonymity, our mutual nonknowledge, our mediation by print.

The same tension marks all the lines that grope for particularity: “You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me.” You can imagine that one of these recognizes you in particular, but the effort of imagination involved in being recognized both ways serves to remind you that this “you” is, after all, not you but a pronominal shifter, addressing the in-principle anonymous and indefinite audience of the print public sphere. At the same time, you know that you are not being addressed by a complacently generic you, of the kind I am using to address you in this sentence. In “To

a Stranger,” while we remain on notice about our place in non-intimate public discourse, we are nevertheless solicited into an intimate recognition exchange. Like so much of Whitman’s poetry, “To a Stranger” mimes the phenomenology of cruising.

Now, the first thing I want to say about this is that it connects with the contemplative, expressive side of individualism, which Whitman in the 1850s radicalized out of the dialectic visible in the 1842 novel. The language of *Leaves of Grass* presents challenges for the pragmatics of selfing in a way that bears out the speaker’s talk of inner divisions, shifting personal boundaries, cross-identifications, and so on. And this erratically selfed language frequently announces an erotics or even ethics of contemplative self-abandonment. Whitman’s poetry may in fact be the earliest instance of a theme that has come to be taken for granted in Euro-American culture: the idea of sexuality as an expressive capacity of the individual.

The second thing I want to say about the poem is that it links its erotics of self-abandonment to its own perverse publicity, to its use of a print public-sphere mode of address. A more famous example would be these lines, with which Whitman began the second poem of his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, a poem later given the title “Song for Occupations”:

Come closer to me,
Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,
Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.

This is unfinished business with me. . . . how is it with you?
I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper
between us.

I pass so poorly with paper and types. . . . I must pass with the
contact of bodies and souls.

If I were to read these lines to you, you would know that I was quoting rather than soliciting; that would have been clear, if you hadn't already recognized the passage, when I got to the reference to paper and types. If you were to read the lines on the page, however, you would recognize a certain fictionality in the scenario from the first line, "Come closer to me," since the deictics of that line indicates exactly the kind of embodied sociality that modern public-print discourse negates. Reading the passage, you might be drawn into its erotic fantasy — pubic hairs on the ink rollers and so on — but you would still realize that the speaker references the speech situation itself in a way that is manifestly wrong, that there is no question of coming closer to this speaker *or not*, that part of what makes the passage kinky is not just that Ballard-like image of cold lead on skin, pre-come on the platen, but also the parasitic relation of one discourse context to another, a cultivated perversity at the metadiscursive level. In this as in so many other passages, Whitman wants to make sex public, and doing so involves jarring conventions of representation.

There are of course other poems that fictionalize their own discursive status. In a work like Browning's "My Last Duchess," the reader is expected to suspend recognition of the publication context of the poem in order to construct the fictional scenario of the duke's embodied speech, which includes several deictic phrases that, like "Come closer to me," are impossible references in the print context: "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall"; "Will't please you rise?"; "We'll go / Together down, sir," and so on. Whitman's method is different because he does not suspend awareness of the publication context, which therefore becomes the ground of his perversity.*

*In "To a Stranger," the effect of metadiscursive perverseness was heightened in revision. Where the published version ends with "I am to see to it that I do not

In sections 27 and 28 of "Song of Myself," the dialectic of sexual expressivism becomes explicit, as it does also in section 5, where Whitman turns a fictive internal I/you scenario — the soul's speech to the body — into an erotic relation: "the other I am must not abase itself to you." As in Thoreau, the self-relation of expressive individualism takes the form of a self-other relation, which is also to say that selfing becomes problematic even as the phenomenology of self is radically broadened. As in Thoreau, the internal problematics of the expressive self become difficult to distinguish from the paradigmatically liberal erotic dilemmas of recognition and mutuality. And, like Thoreau's, Whitman's interest in those dilemmas is strongest when they are not stabilized by heterosexuality, which is to say, by the modern ideology that interprets gender difference as the form of self-other difference.²⁷

The distinctive pragmatics of Whitman's poetry refigure the conventions of temperance fiction in a number of ways that are equally relevant to the valuation of sexuality. Whitman takes voluntarist culture as a context in which internal dissonances of appetite, the involuntary, or amnesia can be read simultaneously as expressive of a self *and* as selfing problems. What had been internal heteronomy in the addiction rhetoric of the novel becomes both the other of self-contemplation and a limit to the responsabilizing language of self. This dialectic is the core of the Whitmanian sublime.

lose you," the manuscript had continued with two more lines:

I listen to the different voices, winding in and out, striving, contending
with fiery vehemence to excel each other in emotion,
I do not think the performers know themselves — But now I think I begin
to know them.

By eliminating this referencej to the speech-mediated scene of the street, Whitman focused the reader's own impossible insertion in the poem.

69. Cooper, *The Spy*, p. 339.
70. See Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock, *Ira Aldridge: The Negro Tragedian* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993).
71. W.T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Black Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 8.
72. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–55.
73. Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 480.
74. The print, from the collection of the New-York Historical Society, is reproduced in *ibid.*, p. 490.
75. Simon Snipe [pseud.], *The Sports of New York, by Simon Snipe, Esq; Containing a Peep at the Grand Military Ball, "Hewlett at Home,"*... (New York, 1824). Thompson, who reproduces this excerpt, notes that the author of this pamphlet seems to write in a different style and with a different stance from the "Simon Snipe" of the 1823 *Sports of New York*; Thompson, *Documentary History of the African Theatre*, pp. 150–51.
76. Bond, *Negro and the Drama*, p. 18.

CHAPTER EIGHT: WHITMAN DRUNK

1. Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 265.
2. Walt Whitman, *Franklin Evans*, in *The Early Poems and the Fiction*, ed. Thomas L. Brasher (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 152.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 153–54; italics in original. Brasher's edition reads "have" instead of "lave."
4. The rhetorical weight accorded to mere italicization in that last phrase, "such a scene of *pleasure*" — like the conclusion's emphasis on the voice that speaks to the reader in these lines, or like the women's ability through "warbling" to lave Evans in happiness — indicates Whitman's characteristic (and characteristically faggy) attachment to voice as a limit case both of embodied self-mastery and of boundary problems.
5. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 139.

6. Whitman, *Franklin Evans*, p. 179.
7. These three quotations appear in *ibid.*, p. 180.
8. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Epidemics of Will," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 133–34.
9. Whitman, *Franklin Evans*, pp. 222–23.
10. Floyd Stovall, *The Foreground of Leaves and Grass* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974), p. 36.
11. Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (1905–99; New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), vol. 1, p. 93.
12. Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789–1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940), p. 201.
13. Whitman, *Franklin Evans*, pp. 126–27.
14. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1945), vol. 1, pp. 198–99.
15. Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," in *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 79.
16. Whitman, *Franklin Evans*, p. 212.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 167–68.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 234.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
26. Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 280.
27. This reading of Thoreau I have elaborated in "Thoreau's Bottom," *Raritan* 11.3 (Winter 1992): pp. 53–79; and "Walden's Erotic Economy," in Hortense Spillers, ed., *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and Nationality in the Modern Text* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 157–74.