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# Whitman's Ecclesiastes: The 1860 "Leaves of Grass" Cluster

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David Haven Blake

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**ABSTRACT** In the 1860 "Leaves of Grass" cluster, Whitman struggles to understand his relation to the physical and metaphysical world. David Haven Blake argues that, rather than seeing this understudied cluster as a refined and polished entity, scholars should regard it as a set of partially developed themes that are best approached with a variety of interpretative frames. Reminiscent of the Book of Ecclesiastes, the cluster provides a spiritual and emotional EKG, a record of Whitman's struggles with time, doubt, vanity, and the nature of the universe.

**KEYWORDS:** maternal imagery in *Leaves of Grass*; organization of poems in Romantic poetry collections; Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" cluster; "As I Ebb'd"; symbiosis between life and death

☞ **AMONG THE CLUSTERS WALT WHITMAN USED** to organize the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, the least studied and perhaps most puzzling is the one he called "Leaves of Grass." With its self-referential title and amorphous themes, the cluster has neither inspired volumes of commentary like those surrounding "Calamus" and "Enfans d'Adam" nor contributed a new phrase, like "Chants Democratic," that succinctly expresses Whitman's aesthetic and political values. And yet, there is good reason to examine this largely forgotten cluster, for it captures Whitman in the midst of an aesthetic project that he would several times revise before disbanding it altogether. The cluster invites not a comprehensive interpretation but a series of approaches to its half-formed themes and vision.

As a title for Whitman's book, *Leaves of Grass* is justly famous for conveying the organic and democratic nature of the poetry, especially as it appears on the printed page. As a title for a cluster within that book, however, "Leaves of Grass" seems curiously redundant, if not underwhelming. Twentieth-century poets have sometimes titled books after a section or sequence of poems, suggesting that something in "Life Studies" or "An Atlas of the Difficult World" conveyed the book as a whole. But if Whitman meant to signal an especially close relation between the cluster and his book, that

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signal pretty much failed. Whitman's thinking remains murky, and in the absence of a clear connection between the cluster and book, the title seems almost an afterthought, a convenient way to organize a collection of assorted poems.

The history of the cluster only adds to the puzzlement. Whitman hoped that the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* would become a new American bible, and he wrote over one hundred new poems to flesh out this ambition, transforming the thin 1855 and 1856 editions into a 456-page volume.<sup>1</sup> On the inside front cover of the Blue Book, his heavily annotated copy of the 1860 edition, Whitman compared the number of words in this new *Leaves of Grass* with the number of words in the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*, *Paradise Lost*, and, most notably, the Bible and the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> To organize his material, he introduced four clusters of untitled, numbered poems and added a fifth section, "Messenger Leaves," in which he dedicated individual poems to such readers as a pupil, a president, a prostitute, and a cantatrice.<sup>3</sup> Many of Whitman's most prominent poems remained unclustered—"Walt Whitman," "A Word Out of the Sea," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and "Sleep-Chasings" all stand on their own—but the four new clusters account for 105 poems. As Jason Stacy has pointed out, Whitman chose to number each stanza in his book, thus inviting readers to cite passages from the clusters as they would a biblical verse: Calamus 3:3, Chants Democratic 14:5, *Leaves of Grass* 12:8.<sup>4</sup>

The 1860 "Leaves of Grass" was the fullest, most coherent version of the cluster that Whitman would create. The twenty-four numbered poems mix new and old compositions, moving from a moment of piercing self-doubt to a final poem in which Whitman bids his readers "*So long!*" As the cluster has received so little attention, I list the poems below by their 1860 title, the title Whitman eventually assigned them, and the year in which they first appeared in *Leaves of Grass*:

"Leaves of Grass 1": "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" (1860)

"Leaves of Grass 2": "Great Are the Myths" (1855)

"Leaves of Grass 3": "Song of the Answerer" (1855)

"Leaves of Grass 4": "This Compost" (1856)

"Leaves of Grass 5": "Song of Prudence" (1856)

1. Whitman envisioned himself involved in "The Great Construction of the New Bible" in his notebooks. See *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier, 6 vols. (New York, 1984), 1:353.

2. *Walt Whitman's Blue Book: The 1860–61 "Leaves of Grass" Containing His Manuscript Additions and Revisions*, ed. Arthur Golden, 2 vols. (New York, 1968), vol. 1, inside front cover.

3. Taking my cue from the table of contents (which lists them as single poems), I do not count "Says" or "Debris" as clusters. For a different view of "Debris," see Kenneth M. Price, "'Debris,' Creative Scatter, and the Challenges of Editing Whitman," *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*, ed. David Haven Blake and Michael Robertson (Iowa City, 2008), 63–67.

4. Jason Stacy, introduction to *Leaves of Grass, 1860: The 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition*, ed. Jason Stacy (Iowa City, 2009), xx.

- "Leaves of Grass 6": "Song of the Answerer" (second section) (1855)  
 "Leaves of Grass 7": "Assurances" (1856)  
 "Leaves of Grass 8": "Miracles" (1856)  
 "Leaves of Grass 9": "There Was a Child Went Forth" (1855)  
 "Leaves of Grass 10": "Myself and Mine" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 11": "Who Learns My Lesson Complete" (1855)  
 "Leaves of Grass 12": "On the Beach at Night Alone" (1856)  
 "Leaves of Grass 13": "You Felons on Trial in Courts" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 14": "Unfolded Out of the Folds" (1856)  
 "Leaves of Grass 15": "Night on the Prairies" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 16": "The World Below the Brine" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 17": "I Sit and Look Out" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 18": "All is Truth" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 19": "Germs" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 20": "So Far and So Far and on Toward the End" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 21": "Vocalism" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 22": "What Am I, After All?" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 23": "Locations and Times" (1860)  
 "Leaves of Grass 24": "Now Lift Me Close" (1860)<sup>5</sup>

The cluster fell into two parts, with poems from the earlier editions dominating the first half of "Leaves of Grass" and new and generally shorter poems dominating the second. In 1867, Whitman broke the cluster into five sections of three to five poems that he distributed throughout the book. "Leaves of Grass" became not an orchestral movement but a series of related themes. Of the twenty-one poems that make up the 1867 cluster, twelve came from the 1860 version. The five sections carefully preserve sequences established in the earlier edition, and thus "Leaves of Grass" numbers 9–11, 14–16, and (with the exception of 20) 18–23 remain intact. In 1871, Whitman folded dozens of poems into the cluster, including contributions from "Messenger Leaves" and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*. The cluster buckled under the weight of fifty-one poems scattered over eight sections, and in 1881 Whitman abandoned it entirely.

### ☞ What is the grass?

The eventual disappearance of "Leaves of Grass," and its final incarnation as a literary catchall, has helped convince scholars that there was little to see in the original 1860 grouping. Arthur Golden described the cluster as being "rather vaguely defined," and Jerome Loving dismissed it as "curiously" titled and not "exactly distinguished."<sup>6</sup> Although he pays considerable attention to "Calamus" and "Enfans d'Adam," Jason

5. Whitman discarded "Leaves of Grass 20" after the 1860 edition; its title comes from later editors.

6. Arthur Golden, "Walt Whitman at Work" in *Walt Whitman's Blue Book*, 2:xxxv; Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 248.

Stacy does not even mention the cluster in the introduction to his facsimile edition of the 1860 text. Ed Folsom has encouraged scholars to recognize that the first six poems of the 1855 edition are titled “Leaves of Grass” while Whitman left the last six untitled.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to see these poems as forerunners of the cluster, however, because none of them appeared in the 1860 cluster, while four of the untitled poems did. Whitman seems to have thought that “Leaves of Grass” was so desirable a heading that, like the book itself, it could accommodate a wide range of content.

There are multiple reasons for thinking about the 1860 “Leaves of Grass” as an organized, if not wholly cogent, text. As a bookmaker, Whitman gave the cluster the same stature that he did “Chants Democratic and Native American,” “Enfans d’Adam,” and “Calamus.” All appear in bold capitals on the title page, and Whitman introduces the cluster, at its beginning, with an especially elaborate typeface.<sup>8</sup> After the communal swagger of “Chants Democratic,” “Leaves of Grass” establishes a markedly personal tone: the poet wanders the beach lamenting his failures and seeing “types” of himself in the washed-up debris and drifts. Although he goes on to include both private confessions and thematic declarations, Whitman ends the cluster on a similarly personal note, reminding his readers that what they hold in their hands is a man rather than a book. As if to emphasize the sense of closure—the moment, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith described it, when the poet “announces and justifies the absence of further development”—Whitman twice bids his readers “*So long*” and then expresses the hope that they will meet again.<sup>9</sup> While it can seem abrupt and unsuccessful in this position (particularly because Whitman repeats the gesture on the book’s final page), the poem demarcates “Leaves of Grass” as a conspicuously familiar and semi-discrete text.<sup>10</sup> Whitman underscored this perceptual close by following the cluster with “*Salut au Monde!*,” a platform poem in which he proudly observes and greets the world.<sup>11</sup>

The practice of organizing poems to create either an implied narrative or an extended investigation of a theme was well underway by the time Whitman began exper-

7. Ed Folsom, “What We’re Still Learning About the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* 150 Years Later,” *Leaves of Grass: The Sesquicentennial Essays*, ed. Susan Belasco, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price (Lincoln, Neb., 2008), 27.

8. The typeface for the “Leaves of Grass” title most resembles that of “Enfans d’Adam,” though the “Leaves” typeface is more ornate and elaborate. “Chants Democratic” and “Calamus” share a simpler typeface, and one wonders whether the similarities in these headings suggest a thematic correspondence as well.

9. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago, 1968), 36; *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Stacy, 242. Citations to the 1860 edition come from Stacy’s facsimile edition and will be given hereafter in the text.

10. According to Kenneth M. Price and Cynthia G. Bernstein, Whitman liked the phrase “*So long*” because it conveyed a sense of temporary departure among the “sailors, sports, and prostitutes” who used it. See “Whitman’s Sign of Parting: ‘*So long!*’ as L’envoi,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 9 (1991), 68. The poet ends the cluster, then, with the same expectation of resumed intimacy with which he ends the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (and every edition that would follow).

11. The 1860 *Leaves of Grass* is inconsistent in rendering the title of the poem; the table of contents refers to the poem as “SALUT AU MONDE,” but the poem itself reads “*Salut au Monde!*” The variance in the titles underscores a larger variance in the table of contents between poems that are listed in small capitals and others that are listed more conventionally in upper- and lowercase letters.

imenting with clusters in the 1850s. In his study of Romantic poetry collections, Neil Fraistat coined the term “contexture” to denote the ways in which a larger poetic whole is “fabricated from integral parts.”<sup>12</sup> Romantic poets were especially attracted to arranging individual poems in larger, harmonious units. Sometimes they brought poems together under a mood or theme (Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*), other times around specific settings (Clare’s *Poems: Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* or Longfellow’s *The Seaside and the Fireside*), still others around the dialogue created between lead and auxiliary poems (Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound, with Other Poems*). As Fraistat notes, however, many Romantic collections followed the path of Byron’s *Hours of Idleness*, in which each poem contributes to the poet’s evolving self-portrait. The notion that personality could be a unifying force, that it could transform disparate poems into an integrated book, meshed well with Romantic organicism.<sup>13</sup> When Whitman tells his readers that they should regard his poems as a “flushed and full-blooded” man, he exploits an important organizing principle of nineteenth-century collections of verse (242). As Fraistat explains, “The more a poet brought himself to the reader’s attention—say, in a preface or notes—the more his miscellaneous poems appeared to be related statements of his own preoccupations and talents.”<sup>14</sup> With no preface or explanatory letters, the 1860 edition limited the kinds of personal apparatus Whitman employed in his earlier books, but it continued the practice of asserting the author as a unifying force. From “Proto-Leaf” to “*So long!*,” the poems collectively signify the hefty, Byronic-looking author whose image appears across from the title page.

Roy Harvey Pearce interpreted the “Leaves of Grass” cluster as an autobiographical narrative in the introduction to his 1961 facsimile edition of the book. According to Pearce, the cluster primarily concerns the poet’s struggle with what it means to make poems in the language of his age. “Poetry is a means of exhausting man’s powers to know the world, and himself in it,” Pearce writes, and the cluster narrates Whitman’s effort to confront the reality of the world as he completes his work. The poet struggles with hope and doubt in the cluster’s early poems but ultimately finds both resolution and freedom “in the miraculousness of the real.” The archetypal power of the autobiography, Pearce implies, resides in the poet’s coming to realize that he must give himself over to his “vivified sensibility” and, by extension, “give himself over to his readers.” When the poet “lapses into desperate sentimentality,” as Pearce thought he did in the cluster’s final poem, it is because he has been unable to bear “too much reality.”<sup>15</sup>

Pearce’s interpretation is indicative of an age in which critics made lucid and elegant meaning out of ruptured modernist texts. Writing before Stanley Fish explained how readers’ expectations *produce* formal unities, Pearce presents a compelling

12. Neil Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985), 4.

13. *Ibid.*, 31. Fraistat discusses these examples on pp. 26–39.

14. *Ibid.*, 30.

15. Roy Harvey Pearce, introduction to *Leaves of Grass: Facsimile Edition of the 1860 Text* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1961), xxix, xxx, xxxi, xxxii.

sequential narrative about the poet's vocational choice, a narrative that snugly fits within what Pearce describes as the book's larger humanistic progress from "a poetry of diffusion to a poetry of integration."<sup>16</sup> Pearce's ingenious discussion creates continuity at the expense of difference; it so emphasizes "Leaves of Grass" as a cogent narrative that it suppresses the manifold themes and images that the cluster struggles to realize and represent.

Poems in collections have what Fraistat calls an inside and outside meaning; they function both as discrete pieces of writing and parts of complex aesthetic arrangements. The two meanings, Fraistat explains, have an inverse relationship, in that the more we emphasize a work's integration within a larger structure, the less weight we place on its internal significance.<sup>17</sup> Pearce was at such pains to justify "Leaves of Grass" with the 1860 edition that he paid little attention to the content of individual poems. For example, in order to align "Leaves of Grass 4" with the cluster's conflicts about vocation, Pearce completely neglects the poem's stated occasion—the poet's repulsion at and eventual acceptance of the rotting earth.

Perhaps the best approach to the 1860 "Leaves of Grass" is to see it not as a refined and polished entity but as an emerging aesthetic arrangement that Whitman eventually elected not to pursue. Mindful of the ways in which it tempts our critical acumen, I propose that looking at the cluster as a set of partially developed themes and possibilities will be more valuable than fitting it into a single interpretive frame. Whitman wrote most of the poems that went into the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* without the idea of clusters, and as late as April 1859, he was contemplating other ways to organize his poems.<sup>18</sup> With no archival commentary to guide us through "Leaves of Grass" as we have for "Calamus" and "Enfans d'Adam," we find ourselves in a similar position to that of the Emily Dickinson reader who comes to wonder whether scholarly interpretations have illuminated her fascicles or simply imposed their own critical schemes. My hope is to sketch some of the larger thematic issues that come out of the 1860 cluster, while appreciating the conversations created when we see these poems in relationship with each other. Rather than trace a narrative through "Leaves of Grass," I view the cluster as a spiritual and emotional EKG, a record of the poet's struggles with time, doubt, personal failings, and the nature of the universe. If "Enfans d'Adam" suggested the early chapters of Genesis and "Calamus" a gospel of love and camaraderie, then we might think of "Leaves of Grass" as Whitman's Ecclesiastes, with its preacher divided between lamentation and praise.<sup>19</sup>

16. Fish's famous comments first appeared in *Is There A Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Baltimore, 1980), 105; Pearce, introduction, xxxix.

17. Fraistat, *Poem and the Book*, 11.

18. Fredson Bowers, *Whitman's Manuscripts: Leaves of Grass (1860): A Parallel Text* (Chicago, 1955), Lxxi.

19. The phrase "evangel-poem of comrades and of love" (11) comes from "Proto-Leaf."

### ☞ The flag of my disposition

One of the most striking aspects of “Leaves of Grass” is how often it places the poet alone in cosmic, meditative settings. The *I* in these poems is singular—more akin to the personal voice of “Calamus” than the expansive, bardic *I* of “Chants Democratic”—and yet the scenery and themes are arranged for universal effect. Whitman walks the shores of Paumanok (“Leaves of Grass 1”), shudders at the earth’s capacity to grow “sweet things” out of pestilence and death (“Leaves of Grass 4”), walks the beach again (“Leaves of Grass 12”), gazes into the prairie night (“Leaves of Grass 15”), and wonders about the world beneath the sea (“Leaves of Grass 16”). In a direct echo of Ecclesiastes 4, he “look[s] out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all the oppression and shame,” and from this promontory of compassion, he sees, hears, and is silent (“Leaves of Grass 17”; 236). Even the poems with urban settings lead the poet to contemplate abstractions—time, space, reality, and prudence in one poem (“Leaves of Grass 5”), the nature of human and environmental miracles in another (“Leaves of Grass 8”).

Whitman, of course, pursues these themes in multiple works, but grouped together in “Leaves of Grass,” such poems reveal a poet who is actively questioning his place in the world. “Leaves of Grass 23” expresses this reflective, searching spirit in the cluster’s penultimate poem:

Locations and times—what is it in me that meets them all, whenever and  
 wherever, and makes me at home?  
 Forms, colors, densities, odors—what is it in me that corresponds with  
 them?  
 What is the relation between me and them?

(241)

If one had to describe the “Leaves of Grass” cluster with a single phrase, “the relation between me and them” would be a good candidate. Much of the cluster’s ponderousness revolves around the poet’s correspondence with the world and the idea that “The Soul is of itself” and “All verges to it” (“Leaves of Grass 5”; 211). The poet feels “at home” in “Leaves of Grass 23,” as he does through much of the cluster (241). In “Leaves of Grass 9,” for example, the child goes forth every day and—from apple trees to schooners to sea-crows—the objects he encounters become a part of him. He is not only at home in “Leaves of Grass 12,” but he also recognizes that he himself is a house and that “the studs and rafters are grown parts of me” (229). Alone at night by the sea, he understands that “A VAST SIMILITUDE interlocks all,” that vegetables, minerals, fishes, and nations of men and women are compactly held together by “the clef of the universes” (229–30).

Despite this spiritual confidence, Whitman chose to begin the “Leaves of Grass” cluster by associating the identification of correspondences with despair. In what would become “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” he walks along the ocean “seeking types”

and is “seized by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot” (195). Gripped by “the old thought of likenesses,” he suddenly understands his own terrible insignificance:

At once I find, the least thing that belongs to me, or that I see or touch, I  
 know not;  
 I, too, but signify, at the utmost, a little washed-up drift,  
 A few sands and dead leaves to gather,  
 Gather, and merge, myself as part of the sands and drift.

(196)

Whitman originally published this poem in the April 1860 issue of *The Atlantic* under the title “Bardic Symbols,” though under pressure from the editor James Russell Lowell, he dropped two of its most graphic lines.<sup>20</sup> The title enhanced the poem’s already strong suggestion that washed-up debris was a fitting image for a poet overwhelmed with alienation and self-doubt.

The poem’s urgent despair hangs over the 1860 “Leaves of Grass” and brings into stronger relief the poet’s efforts to manage “the relation between me and them.” It is tempting to join Pearce in seeing the rest of the cluster as depicting the poet’s gradual recovery from this crisis on Paumanok’s shores—as if “Leaves of Grass” were a narrative that reconciled the poet with the world. But Whitman’s struggles are too brief and scattered among the twenty-four poems to create a sense of evolving conflict and resolution. In fact, Whitman follows this “sobbing dirge of Nature” with psalm-like praise for the greatness of heroes, myths, nations, youth, old age, life, and death (“Leaves of Grass 2”; 199). When the poet announces in “Leaves of Grass 7” that he does not doubt “that there is far more in trivialities, insects, vulgar persons, slaves, dwarfs, weeds, rejected refuse, than I have supposed,” we see a remarkable change from the despondency that marked the opening poem (217). But the lines do not indicate personal progress so much as they depict the poet’s fluctuating moods. The cluster is rooted more in temperament, in the “flags of disposition,” than in a protagonist’s growth.

Whitman would eventually place “As I Ebb’d” in the “Sea-Drifts” cluster, using that context to highlight the poem’s setting rather than theme. As “Leaves of Grass 1,” however, the poem establishes a moment of dramatic doubt that casts a shadow over the cluster and modifies the poet’s declaration of “absolute faith” (“Leaves of Grass 6”; 217). In “Leaves of Grass 7” Whitman claims, “I need no assurances. I am a man who is preoccupied, of his own Soul” (217). Originally published in 1856, the poem repeats the phrase “I do not doubt” in fifteen of its sixteen lines. It envisions a providential world in which even “wrecks at sea, no matter what the horrors of them—no matter whose wife, child, husband, father, lover has gone down—are provided for” (218). Whitman might have brought the poem into the 1860 cluster hoping that these lines would soften the castaway imagery—“the voices of men and women wrecked”—in the opening poem (196). But with the image of ooze exuding from dead lips still fresh in our

20. Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 222.

minds, we might wonder whether the poet assures himself too earnestly. Perhaps Whitman's certitude is simply an act of will—another example of his well-known tendency to resolve philosophic tensions through declaration and fiat.<sup>21</sup>

The cluster does not question the universe, however, so much as it laments a prodigal self. Whitman's self-censure can at times take on a comic ruthlessness. In "Leaves of Grass 13," he publicly humbles himself, confessing that he has been "sly, thievish, mean, a prevaricator, greedy, derelict," a man as "ruthless and devilish" as felons and convicts (231). The poet's profession that "all is truth" in "Leaves of Grass 18" begins with a rebuke for his failure to see the similitude around him: "O me, man of slack faith so long! / . . . Me with mole's eyes, unrisen to buoyancy and vision—unfree." "I feel in myself that I represent falsehoods equally with the rest," he confesses, "And that the universe does" (237). That last line is deceptive, for it foregrounds not a duplicitous universe, but the vanity of spirit and mood. Indeed just three lines later, the poet withdraws further into himself and concludes that "there are really no liars or lies after all" and "that truth includes all" (237). The Whitman who emerges from the 1860 "Leaves of Grass" cluster is inconstant and conflicted. A poet of temperament, he recalls the Emerson of "Circles," the moody sage who described his own "infirm faith" as a "vast ebb of a vast flow!" "I am God in nature," Emerson explained, "I am a weed by the wall." Whitman's spirit contracts and expands; he is a mole-eyed prophet in a vision-filled world.<sup>22</sup>

### ~ The white hair of old mothers

For all his struggles with the relation "between me and them," Whitman has little trouble accepting the knowledge that he must submit himself to time. Though he contemplates the human inability to understand them, his faith in eternity and the cycle of life and death does not waver. His attitude resembles that of the preacher in Ecclesiastes who comments that God "hath made everything beautiful in his time," but he has also created the universe "so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end" (Eccles. 3:10). In contrast to Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson, Whitman takes comfort in contemplating an eternity he knows he cannot grasp. In "Leaves of Grass 15," he looks into the prairie night sky and absorbs "immortality and peace." He accepts that he cannot have the knowledge he desires and serenely comments, "I see that I am to wait for what will be exhibited by death" (234). The vast similitude he describes in "Leaves of Grass 12" includes the past, present, and future; it is the "clef of eternity" (230).

Building off a series of poems from the 1856 edition, the cluster establishes the theme of time near its beginning. In "Leaves of Grass 4," Whitman marvels at the way diseased bodies produce the compost for new life and is terrified at the earth's patience as it "turns harmless and stainless on its axis" and "grows such sweet things out of such

21. On this point, see Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman: The Political Poet* (New York, 1989), 124.

22. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York, 1983), 406.

corruptions" (211). In the next poem he declares that every gesture and every consummation lives beyond its moment and will forever affect "all of the past, and all of the present, and all of the future" (212). Shifting perspectives in "Leaves of Grass 6," he praises the way that "Time, always without flaw, indicates itself in parts" (215). We cannot understand time in the flowing aggregate, but we can understand it in the individual moments that, added up, create eternity. "I know at a given time," he writes in "Leaves of Grass 7," "there waits for me more, which I do not know" (217).<sup>23</sup>

Whitman's reflections on time resonate with the cluster's varying portraits of motherhood. Scholars have focused on Paumanok's association with the father in "As I Ebb'd," seeing it as a foil to the maternal ocean hissing the "low and delicious word DEATH" in "A Word Out of the Sea" (277). But with "Leaves of Grass" as its context, the poem's portrait of the "fierce old mother" becomes more pronounced and helps set up a series of maternal images that radiate throughout the cluster. In "Leaves of Grass 9," Whitman offers what is presumably an autobiographical passage about "His own parents, / He that had fathered him, and she that conceived him in her womb, and birthed him." After the turbulence of the opening poem, the mother emerges as a source of domestic calm and constancy:

The mother at home, quietly placing the dishes on the supper-table,  
The mother with mild words—clean her cap and gown, a wholesome  
odor falling off her person and clothes as she walks by.

(222)

The poem employs the mother not as a Romantic symbol but as the kind of carefully detailed figure we might find in a genre painting (a fitting tribute, one might add, to Louisa Van Velsor Whitman's Dutch heritage).<sup>24</sup> The poem's realism channels the maternal anger from "Leaves of Grass 1" into the caustic, abusive father, leaving the mother to appear as solely a humble, nurturing life force.

"Leaves of Grass 9" quite literally domesticates the fearsome oceanic mother that the cluster establishes early on. By the time Whitman returns to the beach in "Leaves of Grass 12," the ocean has become less an existential threat than a source of contentment. "The old mother" still "sways to and fro, singing her savage and husky song" (229), but rather than alienate the poet, the scene fills him with ease. He exchanges the promise of erotic pleasure for maternal immediacy:

I suppose the pink nipples of the breasts of women with whom I shall  
sleep will touch the side of my face the same,

23. "Leaves of Grass" numbers 5, 6, and 7 were positioned next to each other in the 1856 *Leaves of Grass* as "18—Poem of the Last Explanation of Prudence," "19—Poem of the Singers, and of the Words of Poems," and "20—Faith Poem." "Leaves of Grass 4" originally appeared as "9—Poem of Wonder at the Resurrection of the Wheat."

24. On Whitman and Dutch genre painting, see Roberta K. Tarbell, "Whitman and the Visual Arts," in *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David S. Reynolds (New York, 2000), 153–204, esp. 161.

But this is the nipple of a breast of my mother, always near and always  
divine to me, her true child and son, whatever comes.

(230)

There are, of course, many ways to approach this remarkable statement, but here I want to focus on what it contributes to Whitman's meditations on time. The mother-ocean intensifies the poet's attachment to the earth and helps him accept his limitations. Like Wordsworth, Whitman becomes nature's "true child and son," though as the metaphor suggests, that relationship can also seem infantile and regressive. The maternal sea takes and gives the poet's identity, reminding him that he is part of an interlocking system that simultaneously denies, overwhelms, and supports him. The poem's confidence is a marked shift from the fear that the mother aroused in "Leaves of Grass 1." "I suppose I am to be eligible to visit the stars," Whitman writes, before concluding, "I believe I shall find nothing in the stars more majestic and beautiful than I have already found on earth" (230).

The cluster's maternal imagery ranges from the planetary to the personal and encompasses an array of meanings. The mother is both the setting and the symbol of Whitman's knowledge of death—and of the faith that knowledge generates. She is the wholesome giver of life, a patient force of domestic and providential succor. In "Leaves of Grass 14," Whitman brings this imagery to the level of human anatomy, thus linking his real and symbolic mothers with generation and time. "Unfolded out of the folds of the woman, man comes unfolded, as is always to come unfolded," Whitman writes. "A man is a great thing upon the earth, and through eternity—but every jot of the greatness of man is unfolded out of woman" (233). With its celebration of childbirth, the poem would have been a natural candidate for "Enfance d'Adam," but in the "Leaves of Grass" cluster, it reinforces the maternal symbiosis between life and death. As the poem proceeds, motherhood becomes the central generative force behind friendship, poems, embraces, justice, and sympathy. In the same way that he can intimate eternity only through time's individual parts, the poet can glimpse the universe's design in the physical world—whether in the planet's capacity to purify itself or in the vaginal folds of mothers.

In the midst of such reflections, Whitman offers a startling shift of consciousness in which he abruptly focuses on the preservation of time. "It is ended—I dally no more," he announces at the beginning of "Leaves of Grass 10," before giving himself a spiritual pep talk about his project, his stature, his charge to the world. "After to-day I inure myself to run, leap, swim, wrestle, fight." He resolves "To speak readily and clearly—to feel at home among common people" (224). The cluster soon returns Whitman to his solitary musings, but in "Leaves of Grass 10" he remembers his public role and defines himself in relation not to the cosmos but to friends, enemies, theories, schools, and eminent men. The change creates what we might call a post-loafing poem in which Whitman seizes the day not to love but to work: "I will follow up these continual lessons of the air, water, earth," he writes, "I perceive I have no time to lose" (226).

The poem intersects with the cluster's matrilineal sense of time in that Whitman expresses his determination in masculine terms. If God produces eternity and women produce life, then poetry, as Whitman presents it here, is the work of men. "I henceforth tread the world, chaste, temperate, an early riser, a steady grower," the poet declares, as if he has just read *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Whitman has no time to lose because he must continually impregnate the mother and ensure the survival of his works: "Every hour the semen of centuries—and still of centuries" (226). The seminal image powerfully recalls the distinction between poets and singers that Whitman makes in "Leaves of Grass 6," when he writes that "The words of the singers are the hours or minutes of the light or dark—but the words of the maker of poems are the general light and dark." Singers may attend to the moment, but poets are like God in creating large swaths of time. "The singers do not beget," he tells us, "only THE POET begets" (215). Whitman's emphasis on that biblical word "beget" (he uses it again in "Leaves of Grass 10") characterizes the poet as a patriarch creating future lines. Nurtured by the "mild words" of human mothers, cast away by the "Crook-tongued waves" of mother death (222, 198), the poet forsakes the nipples of lovers for his consummation with time.

### ☞ A uniform hieroglyphic

Whitman's resolve brings us to the final topic I want to explore in the 1860 "Leaves of Grass"—his candid disappointment with the impact of his work. If poets beget and singers do not, then the cluster generally depicts Whitman as a would-be poet who finds himself very much alone—removed from social attachments, meditating in natural landscapes, and speaking to isolated, often abstract listeners rather than confidantes or crowds. Whitman's reservations about *Leaves of Grass* flicker in and out of "Calamus," but as many commentators have noted, it is in "As I Ebb'd" that the poet explicitly acknowledges his frustration. "I wish I could impress others," he tells the drifts, "as you and the waves have just been impressing me" (195). The speaker's failure to make an *impression*, with its connotations of both emotional impact and the mark printer's type makes on a sheet of paper, is at the heart of his dissatisfaction with the audacity of his poems.<sup>25</sup>

Opressed with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,  
 Aware now, that, amid all the blab whose echoes recoil upon me, I have  
     not once had the least idea who or what I am,  
 But that before all my insolent poems the real ME still stands untouched,  
     untold, altogether unreach'd . . .  
 With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written or  
     shall write,  
 Striking me with insults till I fall helpless upon the sand.

(196–97)

25. See Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 127.

As if it were not clear enough already, Whitman considered heightening the poem's connection to *Leaves of Grass*. In the bottom margin of the Blue Book, he imagines himself crying to the ocean, while "the least wave obliterated all my poems."<sup>26</sup> The poet was supposed to be a biblical father begetting new descendants; a brood of native, athletic poets would rise and eventually justify him as the "bard of the future" ("Chants Democratic 14"; 187). "As I Ebb'd" shows the remnants of that dream, with Whitman fearing that even his poems would be claimed by the encroachments of time.

The poem establishes a dramatic context for the cluster's meditation on the poet's work. "Leaves of Grass 20," for example, has none of the existential struggles that make the opening poem so exceptional, and its tone is more measured than agitated. In many ways, however, "Leaves of Grass 20" responds to the same revelations that Whitman dramatized on Paumanok's shores—the realization that he was not influencing others as much as he had hoped. The poet warns that whether he continues to sing his book and complete what he started is contingent on public support:

Whether I shall make THE POEM of the NEW WORLD, transcending all  
 others—depends, rich persons, upon you,  
 Depends, whoever you are now filling the current Presidentiad, upon you,  
 Upon you, Governor, Mayor, Congressman,  
 And you, contemporary America.

(239)

With its appeal to the rich and powerful, the poem may remind scholars of Whitman's unpublished essay about the 1856 presidential race, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" But where the essay sought the aid of "editors of the independent press" and "rich persons" to reproduce and distribute Whitman's thoughts, the poem makes future editions of *Leaves of Grass* contingent on the actions of the privileged and influential.<sup>27</sup>

Whitman dropped the poem from later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, and it is easy to guess why: the poem conveys a stunning lack of commitment to the book's democratic values. Whitman's deference to cultural elites diverges from the emphatically populist sentiments we find in much of his work. For all its oddity, however, "Leaves of Grass 20" meshes well with the 1860 cluster, expressing the vexations of a man who has hinged his aesthetic identity on the ability to beget future poets. Rooted in temperament, "Leaves of Grass 1" turns personal rejection into a metaphysical dirge. "Leaves of Grass 20" approaches such disappointment in practical terms: *I will only continue doing this if the rest of you respond.*

The importance Whitman places on external affirmation appears again in "Leaves of Grass 22." Radically changing his tone, the poet who wanted to impress others and cling to his father's breast now happily compares himself to a child seeking recognition:

26. *Walt Whitman's Blue Book*, 1:197.

27. "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York, 1982), 1323.

What am I, after all, but a child, pleased with the sound of my own name?  
 repeating it over and over,  
 I cannot tell why it affects me so much, when I hear it from women's  
 voices, and from men's voices, or from my own voice,  
 I stand apart to hear—it never tires me.

(241)

The poem diverges from “Leaves of Grass 1” in which “the real ME” stands apart, mocking the poet’s blab and insolence. Here the poet takes pleasure in both speech and distance as if they fortified his sense of identity. He is not Adam in the garden but one of the gathered animals waiting to hear its name. As we know from the cluster’s opening, however, Whitman can construe that position differently. A shift in mood, and he becomes a child chasing after wind.

My discussion has stressed the centrality of “As I Ebb’d” to the “Leaves of Grass” cluster, for the poem is so extraordinary that it can bring other poems into temporary orbit around it. Whitman might have seen the 1860 cluster as an opportunity to focus on our spiritual relation to the planet; in such an interpretation, the poet would act as prophetic teacher offering his students “these continual lessons of the air, water, earth” (“Leaves of Grass 10”). With the crisis on Paumanok serving as “Leaves of Grass 1,” however, the 1860 cluster introduces the natural world instead as the site of Whitman’s confrontation with his own vanity. The variance between Whitman as a geo-spiritual prophet and a deflated, anxious bard surfaces in the enigmatic title “Leaves of Grass.” Readers have good reason to see the cluster’s title as a reference to individual poems, the different leaves or pages comprising what Whitman describes as a “bouquet” of sprigs growing out of the book’s main branch (“Leaves of Grass 10”). But there is an equally good case for wondering whether the 1860 cluster reflects on the reputation of *Leaves of Grass* as a whole and the underlying question of whether the poet could steel himself for the labors ahead.



Although the wavering between providential confidence and spiritual malaise in the “Leaves of Grass” cluster never rises to the kind of sustained creative tension that a formalist would admire, the combination held promise for future development, and it might be useful to speculate why Whitman’s attention to the cluster dwindled over the next decade. One possibility is that, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Whitman faced a choice: he could either strengthen or soften the cluster’s exploration of torment and doubt. Whitman chose the latter, and when he moved “Leaves of Grass 1” out of the cluster (giving it the new title “Elemental Drifts”), he effectively contained his misgivings to that poem’s moody drama of self. (The final position of “As I Ebb’d” as the second poem in “Sea-Drift” would further isolate the poem from other meditations on personal inadequacy.) Poems such as “Leaves of Grass 18” still referred to moments of “slack faith,” but they did so without the kind of context that “Leaves of Grass 1” had provided.

It is hard to imagine a less auspicious time to emphasize oneself as a hyperbolic, self-involved poet than in the years after the Civil War. Whitman's 1867 revision of the "Leaves of Grass" cluster better suited his new persona as a steady paternal wound-dresser, an icon of American values. In transferring "As I Ebb'd" out of the cluster, however, Whitman sacrificed the ambivalence and sense of conflict that the 1860 "Leaves of Grass" was beginning to formulate. The new cluster became even less coherent, and Whitman's interest in it declined. By 1871, the promise of "Leaves of Grass" was scattered across the book like washed-up winrows and sea-raff.

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