

Round Song: Narrative Bibliography and the Living Archive

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**Abstract**

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Working with literary archives, “Round Song” seeks to establish a critical methodology of *narrative bibliography*. The critic as bibliographer is able to witness the production of literature as a communal process, represented by materials pertaining to all stages of composition and execution. In the pursuit of both textual meaning and literary argument, the narrative bibliographer is in a unique position to tell the stories of how books enter the world. Through this practice the archive becomes a poetic space of cultural memory, expanding the possibilities of criticism to make arguments not just about texts, but also about the readers of texts. In three chapters, each focusing on a specific American text, “Round Song” engages the archives of Stephen Vincent Benét, Thomas McGrath, and Walt Whitman. An introduction outlines the stakes of the methodology and also the significance of American poetry for democracy.

## Acknowledgements

When Herb Blau passed away in May, I knew there was no choice but to finish this dissertation in honor of his memory. Without any false apprehensions of living up to his expectations, I humbly submit the following work.

While the focus of my project is on the archive, the motivation comes from a deep desire to live in a world where relationships are the true mark of a good life. In light of that “fervid and tremendous IDEA,” to use the words of Whitman, I am grateful to have worked with the members of my committee throughout my graduate program. Professor Leroy Searle, Professor Mona Modiano, and Professor Paul Remley were not only instrumental to this dissertation, they confirmed that criticism and care are still alive and well in the academic profession.

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For my family, who despite moments of exasperation that I was not yet finished, never once revoked their love and support. For my wife, Anna, you made me understand what it meant to be happy, and gave me the strength I needed to believe it could happen. For my friends, who despite a diversity of occupations, from scholar to carpenter, all wanted me to pursue what mattered most.

## Introduction: The Life of the Archive

Where is the stranger, the reader, in the half-light of the buried life?

– Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*

In framing the following chapters as a project of Textual Studies, I wish to suggest a method of archival research, a method that uses an expanded idea of the archive to situate a practice of *narrative bibliography*. The fundamental premise of this method is that the research is of more value as a PROCESS than the resolved content of whatever argument might emerge from the evidence. I will attempt to demonstrate the poetic nature of this process, and to connect this poetics of the archive to a new way of thinking about the imaginative possibilities of literary criticism outside of the traditional uses of “secondary source” material. In all of the examples assembled here, Rukeyser’s metaphor of the *life* of poetry is embraced, first by the poets and then, as I will show, by readers who may reside in the obscurity or “half-light” of a “buried life,” to the editors, scholars and critics who may bring it into a fuller and expanding daylight.

Before establishing the critical enterprise through this introduction, which will use two primary texts to do so (Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry*, and Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days*), I would like to acknowledge a system of academic authority that I have often resisted and on occasion disparaged, since it has also provided examples of my main themes pertaining to the vitality and endurance of poetic life that includes sharp and focused critical debate and disagreement. Inherent in my idea of narrative bibliography is the demonstrable, if sometimes fragile evidence that reading, particularly reading poetry, institutes and encourages communities, more broadly, to borrow a term taken from Tom McGrath and others, *communitas*, which can supplant throw-away clichés we may associate with sound-bite progressive politics.

My own background, growing up in a small town of 7,000 people, and then leaving to attend a small liberal arts college of 1,200 students only confirms the poverty of slogans. Sustaining communities, bringing together exemplary poetic lives, mentors and fellow students, can show us the sting of sincere criticism, which at its core initiates the promise of real progress, as well as the support of open-ended and expanding projects like those explored in this dissertation. This is what I have also found in the expanded model of the archive, whether from friends, editors, publishers, or simply the athletic readers of a democratic public. And like Whitman, I believe the future is dependent on that ideal.

As Whitman seeks to qualify his athletic readers, so does Rukeyser. She presents the triad of poet-poem-reader, only to offer an enhanced conception of the audience as *witness*, “which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence” (*LP* 187). In explaining the activity of a poem, moving from the consciousness of the poet, through the medium of the poem, to the experience of the witness, she presents a process (the poem is not an object; “the poem is a process”) that signals what Joseph Grigely, who calls the textual *event*. The poem on the page is merely one event in the process; for Rukeyser, and Grigely’s conception opens the same door, each reading of the poem by the witness can be a separate event in the life of the poem, since the witness is not a static observer, but an agent of change for the poem, while also being changed by the poem. From here, it is not a stretch to understand the archive in the same light (or half-light): the archive is at once the medium of change for the witness, while the witness, through her experiences and acts of “giving evidence,” changes the archive.

More will be said in the ensuing chapters about the role of personal experience in the archive; but it is important here to stop and ask what is meant by “the act of giving evidence.” If

I am interested in the bibliographic history of Rukeyser's poetry, and I travel to a particular archive to look at versions of a manuscript, what am I after? Surely, I can find textual edits and revisions, perhaps even notes pertaining to the composition and some intriguing marginalia. But what if I find a notebook with this story jotted down, a story which she tells in *The Life of Poetry*, as it takes place in a café:

In one corner, a man was playing a guitar, and the stranger turned to watch him. The guitar-player was good; the stop and tremble of the strings touched everyone in that room. "You know," said the stranger, "I respect creative people, any kind; I never used to feel that way, but something happened—I know a man in the city I come from, a business associate (I'm a lawyer)—we've gone on fishing trips for twenty years—I know him fairly well, I'd say—big man, too: six foot four, weighs two hundred and forty pounds. Twenty years, and I just found out last month that he writes poems. I asked around; he's written books of them; very good, too they say. I'm going to get ahold of some. But I sure feel different about creative people."

"What is the name of your friend?"

"Wallace Stevens," said the stranger. (101)

Now consider the evidence I can take from this story. If I recognize it from The Life of Poetry, I can say, "Well, in looking for one thing, I have found another."<sup>1</sup> If I am interested in Rukeyser's attention to music and rhythm, I can say, "Look at the descriptions she uses for the guitar playing: *the stop and tremble of the strings*." If I am an admirer or perhaps a scholar of Wallace

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in looking for a manuscript, I have found a notebook—another textual event in the life of poetry.

Stevens, there is a host of useful information to be glossed, from his attitude toward poetic production to his imposing physical build. But this is all objective evidence—evidence pertaining to other objects of inquiry. Instead, when I read this story, I mentally put it in company with other stories of similar theme, like Ralph Ellison’s wonderful essay, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” which recognizes that what we assume often limits what we are able to see. Sitting in the archive, I have been transported from a specific bibliographic inquiry into a poetic space of cultural memory, so that when I return to my research, I am no longer the same witness.

*The act of giving evidence* therefore becomes a poetic act, part of the process of the archive which extends backwards and forwards in time, lending authority and credibility not just for a bibliographic fact (*this* story became part of *this* book), but for the stranger who becomes a witness. The value is transferred from the static “proof” to the creation of exchange, the dance (as Rukeyser is fond of saying), or the song. It might be better to measure in terms of energy rather than argument: “Exchange is creation; and the human energy involved is consciousness, the capacity to produce change from the existing conditions” (183). She is still writing about poetry, of course, but her point applies equally to the archive.

Before we get into the chapters, which deal with specific archives (or archives resisting specificity), it might be helpful to look at a text which is an archive in itself: Whitman’s *Specimen Days*. By his own words, “Incongruous and full of skips and jumps...”, the “huddle” of diary-jottings, war-memoranda, Nature-notes and observances, “all bundled up and tied by a big string;” it is as if he is describing an archive proper (only not tied up by a big string, rather set into cardboard boxes). Rukeyser calls Whitman a “poet of possibility,” and there is certainly something to that when holding *Specimen Days* in your hand, a book that in all likelihood would

have slim chance of being published today (except perhaps posthumously). As a printer, much was possible for Whitman, but the charm of *Specimen Days* is not that it is “the most wayward, spontaneous, fragmentary book ever printed;” the sense of possibility is most keenly apprehended in the poet’s intimacy with the form. Whether sitting bedside for a dying man’s final comfort, or describing moon-lit walks around the White House, there is nothing extemporaneous about the huddle.

At a cursory glance, that statement might seem like a contradiction. The opposite might seem more appropriate: the text is, in point of fact, entirely extemporaneous. There is no narrative arc; the only consistent structure provided by chronology. The resolution comes through Whitman’s special ability to make each section a text unto itself, while also an offering for company, a hand outstretched in recto and verso for what is around it. It is pleasurable to select an entry at random, and the experience of reading a contained unit can be achieved. But to read of his delight in bumble-bees, complete with excerpted verses from another “little volume,”<sup>2</sup> and then to move on to cedar-apples, and after that to his observations of two kingfishers, which he eventually becomes convinced recognize him and frolic for his enjoyment—the sequence instills a continuity of thought and feeling and presence that highlights the play of the poetic imagination.

This special ability is different from the craft of arranging, which good poets must do if their volumes are to have any coherence. The distinction is one of transfer, or exchange, to use Rukeyser again for analysis. In the exchange from one section to the next, a consciousness is

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<sup>2</sup> *Specimen Days* is also a gathering of verses, not as an anthology, but as a living integration with the form of his huddle.

created that allows the reader to move beyond the poem, into the space of the poetic archive, where we can see for ourselves “that burning central life” from whence poems are made.<sup>3</sup>

Literary criticism can participate and share in that same exchange, if it only has the vision to see *beyond the poems* as merely artifacts. This is neither to say that meaning does not happen in the poems, nor to argue against the kind of disciplined, close reading that probes the most exacting conditions of the art. But it is to comment on the kind of thing a poem *is*, an ontological comment that refuses to isolate the poem in time and space as a static work. I share Rukeyser’s disdain for criticism that specializes in dying, pulling the poem away from the life (not just of the poet, but of the medium and the reader, as well) in favor of an authoritarian hermeneutics:

We have used the term “mind” and allowed ourselves to be trapped into believing there was such a *thing*, such a *place*, such a locus of forces. We have used the word “poem” and now the people who live by division quarrel about “the poem as object.” They pull it away from their own lives, from the life of the poet, and they attempt to pull it away from its meaning, from itself; finally, in a trance of shattering, they deny qualities and forms and all significance. Then, cut off from its life, they see the dead Beauty: they know what remorse is, they begin to look for some single cause of their self-hatred and contempt. There is, of course, no single cause. We are not so mechanical as that. But there was a symptom: these specialists in dying, they were prepared to believe there was such a thing as Still Life. For all things change in time; some are made of change itself, and the poem is one of these. It is not an object; the poem is a process. (186)

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<sup>3</sup> The full passage from the end of *The Life of Poetry* reads: “Until the peace makes its people, its forests, and its living cities; in that burning central life, and wherever we live, there is the place for poetry” (229).

She is directly addressing the failure of New Criticism here, but she is also outlining a principle of any criticism: it must be part of the process. To try and imagine *Specimen Days* as Still Life is absurd; and even if one were to argue that it is not a “poem,” the rebuttal is in the same categorical challenge posed above. It only makes sense as *not* a poem if we assume a poem is the kind of thing that can be “cut off from its life,” if it is only of value when it is dead and memorialized by reified concepts that seem mainly to hinge upon self-hatred and contempt.

These are harsh critiques, but they are motivated by care and the conviction that poetry is not merely a practice but a great unused resource for peace and prosperity. We do not see a Prufrock on the beach—*I grow old... I grow old... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled*—just Whitman at his daily exercises, struggling with root and branch of the young sapling, pushing and pulling to strengthen an aged body. The metaphor of this “natural gymnasium” is fitting for the work a poem does: “I can soon feel the sap and sinew rising through me, like mercury to heat. I hold on boughs of slender trees caressingly there in the sun and shade, wrestle with their innocent stalwartness—and *know* the virtue thereof passes from them into me. (Or may-be we interchange—may-be the trees are more aware of it all than I ever thought.)” (*SD* 132). As Herb Blau often put it, *Do it as it must be done the only way you know how!* Or Longshot O’Leary (Tom McGrath) counseling for direct action: “But as long as someone is fighting back / It never goes quite away” (*Longshot* 13).

The contrary views of the poem, as object versus process, apply to the archive. In one, the old and yellowed and forgotten material is nothing more than record. Even as it waits to be digitized, if the resources are available, it remains a fixed sequence of classificatory numbers. In the other, at the risk of failure, the witness is wrestling with a possibility of consciousness. In the world of library science, access does not necessarily mean activity. The argument, sympathetic

with emerging trends in the Digital Humanities, for libraries to improve access to materials through digitization assumes the purpose of research is confirmation and verification (as opposed to discovery). As a historian told me recently, she no longer needs to travel to the Biblioteca Nacional de España because she can access all the materials online. But when I questioned her about what she might *not* be seeing, given the accuracy of finding aids, she admitted that her research has become limited to what is confirmed by search results. Contrast this with what an F. Scott Fitzgerald scholar told me at the Society for Textual Scholarship meeting this past March: despite his numerous publications generated out of archival research dealing with manuscript studies, the material that has meant the most to him has been the serendipitous, the bizarre, that which does not fit into conventional criticism.

Why should that song not be sung? This is not an argument to supplant one form of criticism with another, but to gesture toward an understanding of the archive that privileges both access and *activity*. To put it in Aristotelian terms, what has traditionally been thought of as *actuality*, the completion of some potential, can better be expressed as activity, so that it is not a movement from one state to another, but a continuous “activity of being,” wherein the possibility of a thing is realized through process and not stasis.<sup>4</sup> The work of an archive is not complete when it is fully digitized; its completeness is evidenced by the kinds of activity made possible through its use. Advancements in technology may very well increase the activity of archives, but the heralded Age of the Digital does not promise anything beyond changing user interfaces.

The question of how to read a work like *Specimen Days* is paramount. If we read it as a junk-box text, everything that did not make it into another, more important work, then we clearly

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted (indeed, for more than this reference) to Aryeh Kosman, [The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle's Ontology](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

misunderstand Whitman's poetic process. Indeed, the difficulty in naming it describes the challenge of reading in a relational mode. It is not quite a compendium (is anything truly "condensed" in Whitman?); it is more closely an appendix: "An addition subjoined to a document or book, having some contributory value in connection with the subject matter of the work, but not essential to its completeness" (OED). The classificatory problem is directly relevant to the argument of this dissertation. Where is the line drawn in the archive between "contributory" and "essential to its completeness?"

We need to be comfortable drawing some lines for the purpose of textual studies. It is not helpful to replace a bibliographic program with vaguely Derridean boundaries of an ever-expanding horizon of textual possibility. It is, rather, the presentation of a poetic landscape with material consequences for the bibliographer. We can find landmarks that correspond to particular texts, and we can confidently include descriptive details that are pertinent for bibliographic history. But what we cannot afford to do, and what Rukeyser identifies as one of the core problems facing poetry in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, is to indulge the "trance of shattering" that severs the poem from its *animus*. Whitman's poems live in the world, affected and effected by the social, political, and ecological memoranda, notes, observances, etc.

The poem, therefore, does not exist severed from the archive. Even before it is a *thing* (viz. "bibliographic fact," taking that term from W. W. Greg) that occupies a physical space in time (viz. a book), the poem initiates a set of conditions from which content is put to form. We see one manifestation of this in the printed text, perhaps relatively stable over time, or else altered (however slight) by versions, editions, reprints, etc. But those same conditions are also in the archive, and so part of the poem is there, too. I give one of Whitman's most anthologized

poems as an example: “O Captain, My Captain” (ironically, not in my Fourth Edition of the Norton Anthology of Poetry).

*August 12<sup>th</sup>.*—I see the President almost every day, as I happen to live where he passes to or from his lodgings out of town. He never sleeps at the White House during the hot season, but has quarters at a healthy location some three miles north of the city, a Soldier’s home, a United States military establishment. . . . I see very plainly ABRAHAM LINCOLN’S dark brown face, with the deep-cut lines, the eyes, always to me with a deep latent sadness in the expression. We have got so that we exchange bows, and very cordial ones. . . . Earlier in the summer I occasionally saw the President and his wife, toward the latter part of the afternoon, out in a barouche, on a pleasure ride through the city. Mrs. Lincoln was dress’d in complete black, with a long crape veil. The equipage is of the plainest kind, only two horses, and they nothing extra. They pass’d me once very close, and I saw the President in the face fully, as they were moving slowly, and his look, though abstracted, happen’d to be directed steadily in my eye. He bow’d and smiled, but far beneath his smile I noticed well the expression I have alluded to. None of the artists or pictures has caught the deep, though subtle and indirect expression of this man’s face. There is something else there. One of the great portrait painters of two or three centuries ago is needed. (*SD* 51-52).

That is not, of course, Whitman’s famous elegy. But imagine for a second that we encounter that scrap in an archive, stuck folded into some scribbled notebook. We know the poem well, from the exclamatory address, to the pallid image of Lincoln lying still on the deck. There is nothing

from the scrap that suggests an essential relationship to the poem, nothing the poem requires for its completeness.<sup>5</sup>

How, then, do we read the scrap? Does it contribute to the poem? If I am in that archive, the scrap undoubtedly changes my reading of “O Captain, My Captain,” as it indeed has, the metaphor (of the witness) active and alert. The fact of Whitman’s intimacy with the President, not only in diurnal presence, but in the shared bow, certainly adds a dimension to the poem which it did not have for me before. What I always thought of as mere elegiac convention, a weaker poem in my estimation, now bears a subtlety expressing more than bells and bugle trills. Mrs. Lincoln’s black dress and veil are almost prophetic, and the “deep latent sadness” of Lincoln’s eyes carries a dark portent through to the repetition of the poem’s “fearful trip.” And

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<sup>5</sup> O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
 The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
 The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
 While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
     But O heart! heart! heart!  
     O the bleeding drops of red,  
     Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
     Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
 Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,  
 For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,  
 For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;  
     Here Captain! dear father!  
     The arm beneath your head!  
     It is some dream that on the deck,  
     You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
 My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
 The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,  
 From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;  
     Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
     But I with mournful tread,  
     Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
     Fallen cold and dead.

all the dead soldiers, the scores of maimed and wounded visited by Whitman in the Washington hospitals, begin to speak through the “subtle and indirect expression of this man’s face.”

The archive changes the poet, the poem, and the witness. And while it is still useful for more direct bibliographic data—for instance, Whitman referencing in August of 1881 his “last touches on the printer’s copy of my new volume of ‘Leaves of Grass’—the completed book at last” (238)—it is more useful to a poetics of the archive to find the samples of his “common-place book,” jottings of poems and aphorisms, and knowing the value “in having a poem or fine suggestion sink into me (a little then goes a great ways) prepar’d by these vacant-sane and natural influences” (235). Instead of the critic’s “trance of shattering,” as bemoaned by Rukeyser, *Specimen Days* offers the chance to breathe life back into the poem, to reanimate a body of work through the gathering of both direct and indirect influences.

It’s a curious phrase: “vacant-sane.” I take it to mean a kind of healthy leisure, as opposed to a sanity of the void. The former fits perfectly with Whitman’s natural exercises, his peripatetic virtues, and his appreciation for the kind of “well-thumb’d” activity that takes its sweet time. If we cannot afford such leisure in the archive—meandering about in the boxes and folders, reading outside of our set purpose to confirm arguments we have brought to the reading rooms of Special Collections—than the vitality of our criticism suffers. It becomes formulaic, predictable, and bound too closely with ideologies which govern the next move

The immediate alternative is to allow the expansion of potential reference, the associative matrix, its active role. An example of this can be seen in the letters from the African-American writer Pauli Murray in the Benét archive, who credits the same passage in *John Brown’s Body* that inspired Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage” for her desire to write. Or more disturbingly,

the discovery in one of the McGrath collections of a newspaper article reporting on a killing, a man shot by McGrath, who was protecting his ex-wife and son. In the case of Benét, the letters were from a period after the publication of *John Brown's Body*, so they confirm nothing essential about the poem; but they do provide a material expansion of the textual association that makes visible Benét's deliberate attempt to limit his own scope, and his reluctance to call his long poem an epic (it was not, and could not be, all-inclusive). In my research on McGrath, I remember distinctly the haunting feeling of pulling that brittle article out of the folder, and the sense of uncovering a shadier life of the poet. Only on a later trip to North Dakota, in conversation with McGrath's close friend Dale Jacobson, who was staying at a house next door to McGrath at the time of the shooting, was I able to see how the life of the poem is inextricable from the archive. How can we talk about a poem's legacy without the archive?

“If there were no poetry on any day in the world,” Rukeyser muses, “poetry would be invented that day” (*LP* 169-170). When we feel the book in our hands, we say, “Here is poetry; here is the poem.” The archive, though, is a subtler object of inquiry. When we open the box in Special Collections, we can see and touch it. When our search results return digitized material, it is still tangible. But when we strike out upon the open road, in search of some connection to a poem that escapes its textual media, surveying a landscape or the idiosyncrasies of a small town, the poem is being invented on that day, as well. As the archive threatens to expand beyond the point of intelligibility, it is the responsibility of the narrative bibliographer to bring it back, striving toward a law, or series of laws, which will make it richer and more precise.

“I have found the law of my own poems,” was the unspoken but more-and-more decided feeling that came to me as I pass'd, hour after hour, amid all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon—this plenitude of material, entire absence of art,

untrammel'd play of primitive Nature—the chasm, the gorge, the crystal mountain stream, repeated scores, hundreds of miles—the broad handling and absolute uncrampedness—the fantastic forms, bathed in transparent browns, faint reds and grays, towering sometimes a thousand, sometimes two or three thousand feet high—at their tops now and then huge masses pois'd, and mixing with the clouds, with only their outlines, hazed in misty lilac visible. (*SD* 182)

Whitman was precise enough to be a mystic; his laws were not unto God but the democratic ideal, something I admire immensely. In the McGrath chapter, this question of the spiritual possibilities of the long-line will resurface, as critics attempt to contextualize McGrath's fierce agrarian ethos within the tradition of Whitman's natural influences. Rather than frame the laws of the archive in terms of religion or politics, there is an esthetic sensitivity that is at once beautiful and exact. A profoundly spiritual experience need not be articulated outside of logic; archival reverie can be truly sublime, from which strict laws can emerge and strive toward real ideals.

The spiritual and emotional pleasure Whitman describes in the passage above, recorded on his trip west in *Specimen Days*, across the Great Plains and finally to Denver and the Rocky Mountains, illuminates the sense of the archive as always in relation to the “plenitude of material”, depending upon it and presupposing it, as equally available to the poet as to the reader. The personal play occurring in the travel and research, the sensation of *uncrampedness* and the “grim yet joyous elemental abandon” is what liberates the possibility of poetic criticism. This is not out-of-step with some other bibliographic sympathies. In a fabulously titled monograph, *Bibliography: Tiger or Fat Cat* (Archon Books, 1975), Paul Dunkin writes with a stylish zeal that clearly indicates a creative enterprise in the archive. He insists, “Any definition of

Bibliography is a statement of personal experience and belief” (Dunkin 7). He immediately quotes Greg to ensure the reader of bibliography’s narrative dimension:

“For in the ultimate resort,” wrote Greg, “the object of bibliographical study is, I believe, to reconstruct for each particular book the history of its life, to make it reveal in its most intimate detail the story of its birth and adventures as a material vehicle of the living word.” (12)

It’s no secret to bibliographers; the story of a book is a good story in itself. This story, unfortunately, often plays second-fiddle to more SERIOUS academic research, those essays and articles that talk directly about MEANING and inform the hapless reader of all they are missing in a DIFFICULT poem. And they are right; the poem is exceedingly difficult when it is cut off from its life and artificially preserved to look like a brain in formaldehyde.

In Stephen Vincent Benét’s Foreword to Muriel Rukeyser’s first book of poems, *Theory of Flight*, which Benét selected as Editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, he prefaces her work with a comment that is at once complimentary and also critical:

There is little of the uncertainty, the fumbling, the innocently direct imitation of admirations which one unconsciously associates with a first book of verse. It is, some of it, work in a method, but the method is handled maturely and the occasional uncertainties are rather from experimentation than any technical insufficiency. (TF 5)

Rukeyser was twenty-one when her first book of poems was published (1935). Fourteen years and a devastating war later (a war that would take Benét’s life in the form of a heart attack while

working himself to death in staunch opposition to fascism), *The Life of Poetry* would argue for the value of poetry as a neglected resource for peace. What Benét recognized in his editorial selection was a commitment to method; however certain it may have been at the time, this commitment expressed a “remarkable power.” If we place Rukeyser in the same tradition as Whitman, poets of method, the argument for the archive need only demonstrate its function as a witness.

As we will see in the final chapter, it is fitting for Whitman’s archive to be digital, dispersed, as it were, in the ether. The first chapter deals with a traditional archive, housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. The second chapter looks outside of the physical institutions holding McGrath’s papers and into the everywhere-North Dakota of his poetic landscape. From the one to the many, and finally to the seemingly infinite. Each has its problems and setbacks, critical lacunae and professional oversights. But what I hope to demonstrate is that “the occasional uncertainties are rather from experimentation than any technical insufficiency.”

Without belaboring the point, I was motivated to undertake this project for the sake of methodological inquiry. Beyond the story an archive has to tell about a particular book, which is how it all started thinking about Benét’s John Brown’s Body, I began to imagine a form of writing to emerge out of the archive that is at once poetic and critical, illuminating relevant material not just to the work in question, but also to the method of research. In choosing three authors comfortable with the form of narrative poetry, I sought to integrate the narrative dimensions of archival research into the criticism, through a revaluing of the idea of *mimesis*. I agree with Rukeyser on this, when she writes, “Art and nature are imitations, not of each other, but of the same third thing—both images of the real, the spectral and vivid reality that employs

all means. If we fear it in art, we fear it in nature, and our fear brings it on ourselves in the most unanswerable ways” (*LP* 24). This “same third thing” both “spectral and vivid” is what I am after, and the particular bearing of the narrative dimension lies in the suggestive evidence that it is, as well, what the poets upon whom I have concentrated were after as well.

Art and nature are *in the spirit* of the real, a conception that offers an elusive resolution between Platonic and Aristotelian ontologies, though a Blakean relationship of contraries may get closer to the point of an intermediary, a third relationship of dynamism in reality. As we work to make meaning from a poem, we often seek out our affinities. Any teacher of poetry is familiar with this inclination; students take it upon themselves to read a poem for the most recognizable associations. With more forthcoming about Whitman’s “athletic readers” (in *Democratic Vistas*), there are a few telling moments in *Specimen Days* that shed light on the value of looking for disassociation in a text. First, in a lengthy section on Carlyle, Whitman defends his respect for the anti-democratic “moral physician:” “Nations or individuals, we surely learn deepest from unlikeness, from a sincere opponent, from the light thrown even scornfully on dangerous spots and liabilities” (*SD* 227). Such spots and liabilities are also exposed to Whitman by Emerson during a conversation and critique in Boston Common. According to Whitman, the “argument-statement, reconnoitring, review, attack, and pressing home” lasted a full two-hours; at the end of which, Whitman could only say, “Only that while I can’t answer them at all, I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory, and exemplify it” (245). The mediation here, between Carlyle and Emerson, is the resolve, the renewed commitment to exemplary method. There is no real conflict for Whitman; his praise of Carlyle is extensive and his profound sentiment for Emerson rings through to the end of *Specimen Days*.

The insight half-formed in these remaining paragraphs is to read these relationships more subtlety than opposition or even apposition—and in trying to put a finger on it, to gesture toward an entrance to the chapters that can expose necessary critiques within methodological adherence. As an aid, Rukeyser speaks to this same challenge to learn from the flaws in our relational models:

We cannot isolate the causal factors of a society and its culture without their relationships; and in our culture, with its demand for permanent patterns, we see a complicated danger, not caused by the flaws of any one method, but by the balance which has been attained, a balance of a perpetuated conflict, in which everything and every quality is set *against* another thing or another quality. (*LP* 64)

So, what then is the alternative? Where is the space of mediation, the real activity of the witness? Instead of criticism that is either for or against a text, the archive presents the possibility of new bibliographic narratives to tell the stories of how texts come into the world, and in doing so, breathe life back into the poems and their critics.

The context for Rukeyser's challenge, to break the "demand for permanent patterns," is her own narrative-poetic witnessing:

I see the truths of conflict and power over the land, and the truths of possibility. I think of the concrete landscapes of airfields, where every line prolongs itself straight to the horizon,<sup>6</sup> and the small cabin in the Appalachians under the steep

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<sup>6</sup> This, too, part of the continuous archive of her poetry past and present. Rukeyser enrolled in the Roosevelt School of the Air in order to conduct research for [Theory of Flight](#).

trail streaming its water down; of the dam at Shasta, that deep cleft in the hills filled with white concrete, an inverted white peak with the blue lake of held water over it, and, over that, Shasta the holy mountain with its snows; New York at night when the city seems asleep and even asleep full of its storm and its songs; the house in the desert and the pool wooden-lidded against the sand, where poems are being read to the gold miners by the woman who came there to die of tuberculosis twenty-three years ago. I think of the lines of marchers before the fascist meeting, and the brown breasts of the policemen's horses, the feeling of being pushed back against the buildings of your streets; of the joyful dawn over the rivermouth, a boat riding down in slimness and white, and seeing three feet beyond the bow, a boy leaning like an angel on the air, for a moment there until I saw the harpooner's nest of the seagoing fisherman; of the hilltop in Birmingham, where from among the porticoes and classic pillars one can discern sudden flowing red and gold as far below the steel is poured; of the dark-panelled room high in the Empire State Building where all afternoon the heads of their companies said, the day of Stalingrad, "We will let the meanings go," and I think of the wretched houses of Gamoca where the Negroes lived and were brave, who are dead now of silicon in the lungs. And of the pride of the Embarcadero, recalling the general strike among the lights, the night the Bridge was opened—that marvellous red-painted bridge over our western gate; and of the eyes of the animals in the Sierra, gleaming along the roads; and of the people under the northern mountains; everywhere one learns forever that the most real is the most subtle, and that every moment may be the most real. (65-6).

The passage reads like a series of mediating images out of which the poem is invented. It also reads like Whitman, working through a catalogue to arrive at some poetic revelation; a technique that also aligns Rukeyser with her beat contemporaries. The images are different, but the spirit is shared: art and nature imitating the most subtle and the most real. However dark—remember the “deep, though subtle and indirect expressions” of Lincoln’s face—there is no mistaking the promise and possibility of the archive.

## Chapter One: Cultural Memory and the Archive

*“There is a song in my bones. There is a song  
In my white bones.”*

— Stephen Vincent Benét, *John Brown’s Body*

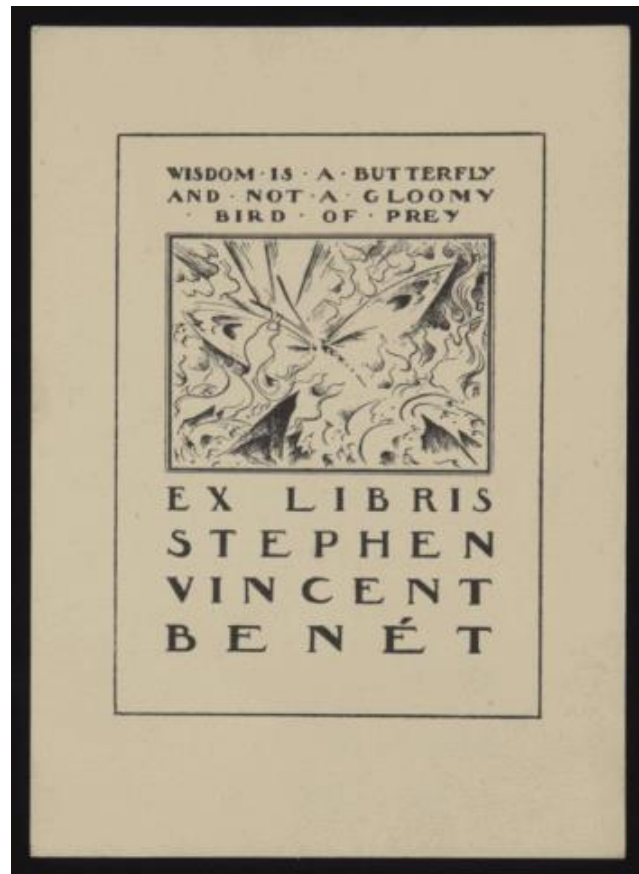
*John Brown’s Body* lies a-mouldering in the grave. Only this body is made mostly of paper, and the grave is an archive. This archive is not singular, like a casket, contained and covered and buried in the earth—although to be fair, most of the paper is stored underground, in boxes, measured by linear feet and catalogued more or less into obscurity. And this body, scattered in sheets and leaves and bound in various skins, sold or saved or discarded, depending on the value, depending on the market, depending on the audience—this body has always been a song. *Old John Brown’s Body lies a-mouldering in the grave...but his soul goes marching on ....*

*John Brown’s Body* is a classic American folk-tune, a round-song borne by the voices of Union soldiers marching toward Bull Run. As the subject of this chapter, *John Brown’s Body* is a 377-page poem about the American Civil War, written by Stephen Vincent Benét and first published in 1928 by Doubleday, Doran & Company. It takes its name from the Union marching song that rallied around the figure of John Brown, a militant abolitionist who raided a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia) in 1859, catalyzing hostilities between North and South, and eventually leading to the secession of Southern states in 1861.<sup>7</sup> History books tend to tell the story of the Civil War through political chronology and military statistics; but writing a narrative poem about the four-year contest between North and South that claimed over 620,000 casualties is a different project altogether. As an epigraph to the dense task of

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<sup>7</sup> Southern secession followed the victory of Abraham Lincoln, the Republican candidate in the presidential election of 1860. Primary source for historical information on the Civil War: Hansen, Harry. *The Civil War*. New York: Mentor, 1961.

recollecting this American cyclorama, let me use Benét's *ex libris*: "Wisdom is a butterfly, and not a gloomy bird of prey."



From the Benét Family Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.<sup>8</sup>

*John Brown's Body* is an American story, but its archive expands across the Atlantic, reaches into the Paris suburbs (Benét composed the poem in Neuilly-sur-Seine while on a Guggenheim Fellowship), and returns with the transnational memory of narrative poetry. Inasmuch as this chapter is about the book, it is also about the *life* this book initiates—a life that does not proceed teleologically, but is better captured in the round. Benét gave the original manuscript a subtitle—"An American Cyclorama"—written in pencil on a yellowed cover sheet,

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<sup>8</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.

which expresses his desire for the audience to be placed at the center of the work.<sup>9</sup> In a cyclorama, the spectator becomes participant, and must construct a narrative from the encircling presentation of visual data. It will not be immediately clear where the story begins or where it ends; the reader of Benét's work must sing her own song from the interwoven scenes of a surrounding war. Fragments of cultural memory might be written on the walls in ekphrastic fashion, but the reader becomes the poet, the Chaucerian dreamer who tries to make sense of this famous American event.

In a spirit sympathetic with Walt Whitman—who insists in *Democratic Vistas* that reading is akin to “a gymnast’s struggle”—Benét affirms the desire to make performers of his audience: “I wrote ‘John Brown’s Body’ because I wanted to make live again certain sights and sounds and houses. I do not like to call it an epic. It is, really, a cyclorama.”<sup>10</sup> The distinction here might come down to form—Benét was not writing in the epic mode, which tends toward metrical consistency—but might also pertain more to what he wanted from his readers. From a textual note that prefaces the “Invocation” of *John Brown’s Body*, we know Benét read Whitman’s *Specimen Days and Collect*, which contains a revised version of the 1871 publication of “Democratic Vistas.”<sup>11</sup> He likely would have read this passage:

Books are to be called for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in the highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the

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<sup>9</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.

<sup>10</sup> “Says Poets Must be Free of Machines,” December 11, 1929. A news clipping found in a first edition copy of *John Brown’s Body*, which I purchased at a used bookstore in Seattle, WA. No further citation is available.

<sup>11</sup> “The account of the defeated Union army pouring in Washington after the first Bull Run is founded on a passage in Whitman’s *Specimen Days and Collect*.” (Benét “Note”).

book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does.

That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-trained, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers.<sup>12</sup>

Like Whitman beckoning the athletic reader, Benét wanted his cyclorama to touch the spectator and inspire common participation in the living history of national identity. A book trying to do as much as *John Brown's Body* can never be “the complete thing,” and so it must rely on its audience to not only fill the gaps and piece together the fragments, but also to understand the intimacy between the construction of narrative and cultural memory. These readers interrogate the poem, wide awake and ready for the “hints, the clue, the start or frame-work” of a literary commons. In this collective space the round-song of *John Brown's Body* becomes an archive.

## II. The Living Archive

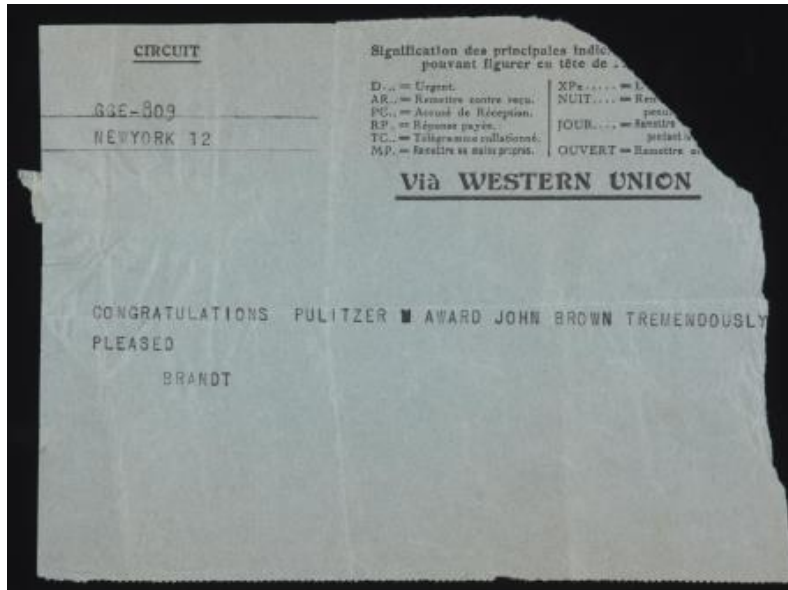
The living archive of a book is a principle of inquiry, illuminating past and present, navigating diverse histories of cultural production. It is not limited to the printed word; it might include a song, or an event, or a site. For instance, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, which has 26 linear feet of Benét material catalogued online (and more that has yet to be digitally processed), is a site in the living archive of *John Brown's Body*.<sup>13</sup> Thinking cartographically—again in the words of Whitman, “traveling by maps yet unmade”<sup>14</sup>—we might also plot Gettysburg, marked by a battle, an address (Lincoln's famous speech), and a National Military Park. The map is constructed through memories, notes, digital reproductions and other fictions of the archive. Even in the service of criticism (whether literary

<sup>12</sup> Whitman, Walt. *Democratic Vistas*. Ed. Folsom. Iowa City: U I P, 2010; p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.benet>.

<sup>14</sup> The full passage reads: “—Thus we presume to write, as it were, upon things that exist not, and travel by maps yet unmade, and a blank. But the throes of birth are upon us; and we have something of this advantage in seasons of strong formations, doubts, suspends—for then the afflatus of such themes haply may fall upon us, more or less; and then, hot from surrounding war and revolution, our speech, though without polished coherence, and a failure by the standard called criticism, comes forth, real at least, as the lightnings.” *Democratic Vistas*, p. 34.

or historical), manuscripts, royalty statements, and the delicate remains of a telegraph excite the imagination and ultimately become part of the bibliographic narrative. The archive of *John Brown's Body* achieves a kind of mimesis with the poem; it is a cyclorama wherein the spectator becomes the poet, responsible for bringing the song back, digging up the body, doing her best to make sound argument from fervid pursuit.



Original telegraph from Benét's agent announcing Pulitzer Prize for *John Brown's Body*.<sup>15</sup>

Stephen Vincent Benét (1898-1943) was 30 years old when he won his first Pulitzer for *John Brown's Body* (he would win a second posthumously for *Western Star*, unfinished at the time of his early death at the age of 44). A letter dated May 15, 1929 and signed by Frank D. Fackenthal of Columbia University, announced the award for Poetry and the prize money of \$1000. By this time, *John Brown's Body* had over 100,000 copies in print, its early success largely due to a 45,000-copy special order that came in June 1928 from the Book of the Month

<sup>15</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.

Club. According to the royalty statements of Doubleday, Doran & Co., *John Brown's Body* sold 115,331 copies by the end of the 1929 fiscal year.<sup>16</sup>

It was a popular song that made a popular book. By the time of Benét's death in 1943, there were over 500,000 copies of *John Brown's Body* in print.<sup>17</sup> A decade later, the book now being published by Reinhart & Co. (formerly Farrar & Reinhart—John Farrar was Benét's roommate and close friend at Yale, Class of 1919), *John Brown's Body* was still selling in the thousands, with the regular edition priced at \$3 (US), up from the 1928 hardcover price of \$2.50. There was a discounted Educational Edition in circulation and occasional radio broadcasts; Benét was a familiar name to Americans well into the 1960's.<sup>18</sup> In 1957, Dr. Charles Fenton, an English professor at Yale, applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship to write a biography on Benét, which was published by Yale University Press in 1958 and followed by a 1960 Yale Press publication of the *Selected Letters* of Stephen Vincent Benét, edited by Professor Fenton.<sup>19</sup> Other than Fenton's two publications and a collection of essays on Benét's life and work, edited by David Garrett Izzo and Lincoln Konkle (2003), which also takes advantage of the Benét archive, there is not much evidence of use in the Beinecke collection.

At this point, the archive might be employed to offer a sense of hermeneutical authority, augmented by the evidence of rare use, with the possibility for criticism enriched by the promise of revelation. Benét's popularity after *John Brown's Body* might justify the expenditure, the costs of travel and the time spent sifting through boxes, trying to find a reason why beloved books fall out of favor. This very question is motivation, armed with the intrigue of a forgotten

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<sup>16</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.

<sup>17</sup> An Editorial from *Life Magazine* in 1943 ("Stephen Benet: The ultimate objectives of free men are to be discerned in their arts and letters") mentions this figure to demonstrate Benét's popularity and influence at the time of his death. (April 5, vol. 14, no. 14). Widener, P267.2.10.F.

<sup>18</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.

<sup>19</sup> Working in the Beinecke reading room, I found Fenton's notes, along with his letters to Rosemary Benét, Steve's wife, who was also a writer and his literary executor (with the help of Benét's agents, Brandt & Brandt).

text and the excitement of a literary puzzle to solve. What was discovered, however, confirmed something far more significant than a national audience that once had the patience to read long poems; it was the way a book like *John Brown's Body* functions as a medium for cultural memory. And not in the most obvious sense, as a means for retelling a historic event (such as we are accustomed in epic poetry), but as a bibliographic fact that initiates an archive. In this space of the living archive, sought in special collections and more free-ranging catalogues, not limited by institutional access, we begin to map the overwhelming value of literary production.

### III. Narrative Bibliography

The archive is logically an argument, constructed in the living space of a literary commons. It seeks inclusion and struggles against any attempt to confine the imaginative and deeply democratic spirit of its narrative potential. Looking to *John Brown's Body* directly, the poem's "Invocation" immediately calls upon an "American muse..."

...whose strong and diverse heart  
 So many men have tried to understand  
 But only made it smaller with their art,  
 Because you are as various as your land.... (3)

This expansive voice recognizes the impossibility of its task, and yet continues because the purpose of the poem will not be realized by the final page; Benét's desire to "make live again" must necessarily extend beyond the published (and publishable) text, reaching into diverse hearts and homes, measuring success by the prospects of its various archival vistas. Viewed in this light, *John Brown's Body* is an excellent example of two principles of literature: memory and mediation. The book itself mediates between the historical event of the Civil War and its

collective (and often conflicting) memories, providing a physical vessel for the process of cultural recollection and a living archive for the imagined community of the poet: “So, from a hundred visions, I make one” (6).

The literary commons of *John Brown’s Body* gave American readers a chance to participate in the collective recollection of their history and look ahead with the eyes of a poet.<sup>20</sup> Readers like James Brinkenhoff, who wrote to Benét from an army hospital at Camp Robinson, Arkansas, speaking in the second person: “You began to believe again that the world is a good place, and that everything will turn out alright in the end.” Or Betty Blake, who wrote to Benét from New York in 1936:

Although I never had the benefit of a High School or College education, I have always inherently felt that, synonymous with a beautiful garden, a beautiful dance, a beautiful home, – are books and stories wherein the author has so “welded” the words and thoughts therein, as to make their perusal comparable with things of beauty. You will have to condone this poor effort of mine to express my thoughts – but I am certain you will understand just what I am trying to convey.<sup>21</sup>

These could be dismissed as platitudes of an adoring public; but after handling hundreds of letters, and leaving thousands more for another trip to the Beinecke, the “nostalgic touch” (another phrase from Mr. Brinkenhoff) of these readers, sending their notes of praise, criticism, and affection to a man they will never meet, is overwhelming. Whatever the task of a poet, it should not escape the critic that a work of literature comes to life in the round-song of its readers.

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<sup>20</sup> Throughout his short career, Benét would attract readers from all walks of life, an ability that would distinguish him as a man of letters and make him a good deal of money. He frequently made contributions to charitable causes. (Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.)

<sup>21</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.

It is no exaggeration that thousands of letters were left unread after a week spent in the Beinecke. While the intention was to find material pertaining exclusively to *John Brown's Body*, it soon became a burdensome restriction. First of all, the correspondence is arranged alphabetically, so it would require scanning every single folder to find letters related directly to *John Brown's Body*. By the end of the first day, after hours of hunched-back work, the surface was barely scratched. Moreover, while the majority of folders were alphabetized according to the last name of the sender, the most rewarding and provocative material was found in the miscellaneous folders, bulky from the scores of cards and letters sent by strangers.

Where does a book begin and end? Research on *John Brown's Body* resurrected simple questions befitting entry-level English classes. No longer could the delusion be maintained that *John Brown's Body* would hand over a neat and orderly archive to synthesize into an original work of literary criticism. And beyond the myth of a singular archive, which had clung to the research like some romantic vapor to a Wordsworth poem, emerged the speculative potential of a living archive. Browsing through letters from Benét's athletic readers confirmed the power of literature to accomplish what Whitman extols in "Democratic Vistas:"

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. Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance (in some respects the sole reliance,) of American Democracy.<sup>22</sup>

Published as part of Whitman's *Specimen Days and Collect*, cited in the prefatory "Note" to "John Brown's Body," this appeal for American "archetypal poems" must have inspired Benét to answer the charge. Working in the quiet reading room of the Beinecke—across landscapes and

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<sup>22</sup> Whitman, Walt. Democratic Vistas. Ed. Folsom. Iowa City: U I P, 2010; p. 6.

regions, accents and dialects of an American literary commons—the round-song of *John Brown's Body* was recollected. If Benét's papers were arranged by year, or if they were catalogued according to a list of published works, it would have been easier to construct an analytic bibliography of *John Brown's Body*.<sup>23</sup> But the bibliographic intent, surveying data corresponding to a published text, produced in its rupture an imaginative narrative that mediates the plurality of the archive. By failing to isolate material pertaining exclusively to *John Brown's Body*—or rather, failure marked by not finding a clear and distinct body of evidence—a living archive was constructed that became more and more persuasive as an argument of literary criticism.

#### IV. Vistas of the Book

Benét gave his life for democracy, literally working himself to death by championing its cause during the height of World War II. A longer study of *John Brown's Body* would show how the poem's spiritual strivings, in the Whitmanian tradition, celebrate the contradictions of its American muse. As excerpted earlier, Benét was well aware he might make the heart of that muse smaller with his art. And as critics, we could evaluate the success of those efforts according to the poem's invocative critique. But one of the valuable lessons learned in the archive is to suspend judgment on the work, while sorting through the bibliographic facts of its production and literary heritage. In the space of this deferral, we can take the time to look at the contents of unmarked folders, or folders that promise distraction and discord, containing miscellany with nothing but a letter of the alphabet to gather it all together.

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<sup>23</sup> In their short *Introduction to Bibliographical and Textual Studies*, Williams and Abbot define "analytic bibliography" as a branch of bibliographic investigation concerning "the physical embodiments of texts as evidence of the process that produced these embodiments and of the relations between them." I seek to expand this definition to include "physical embodiments" beyond the manuscript or printed book, such as letters, notes, and textual ephemera that add to the narrative "of the process that produced these embodiments" (6).

In one such folder, the following letter was sent by Mr. Daniel R. Bulfin of St. Louis, Missouri, dated 11 September in an unspecified year, addressed to Mr. Stephen Vincent Benet:

Dear Sir –

Am one of the 120,000,000 atoms inhabiting this great country, am utterly unknown to you & of no importance to anyone; run a stud poker game, very much against my inclinations, & share in the “take off” in order to live.

Am 41 years of age, Irish, & regarded a failure, but never a “Babbitt”.

Love literature, but have no talent I guess for the thing I would like to do most – “write”. –

Lost my job last night but did not mind as I came to my little cubby-hole room with a copy of “John Brown’s Body” at 11 p.m. & now at 9 a.m. have just finished it.

Read the advance notices & criticisms but they, glowing as they are, fail utterly to do it justice, so I will not attempt it, except to thank you for the best nights pleasure I’ve ever had.

All Americans, North & South, can unite in singing your praise, you do justice & render homage & glory to all.

Millay, Wharton, Tarkington, Hergesheimer, Benet, <I put you last only because of your youth> who will say they are not superior to the Fords, Du Ponts, Rockefellers etc., not I, I would sooner have “John

Brown's Body" to my credit than all the wealth of the "super-Babbitts" combined.

An ardent and obscure admirer

[Signed] Daniel R. Bulfin

P.S. They have the Greek, the French, the Norse, & now the American "Epic" poems.

The gallant & glorious dead, after some sixty odd years, have been fittingly remembered in an equally glorious manner.<sup>24</sup>

Here is Daniel Bulfin, one of 120,000,000 Americans; atomized, ardent, and obscure; fired from his job; holed up in his little cubby with a copy of *John Brown's Body*, which he would rather have to his credit than all the wealth of America's giants of industry; comparing Benét's book to the popular writers of the day and then, in postscript, to the epic poems of all time; staying up all night to finish it; composing (with steady hand and legible script) stylish and inspired praise for a man to whom he means nothing.<sup>25</sup>

Picking up the letter again, I felt the weight of it in my hand, looked closer at the cursive slanting across the page, listened to the cadence of sentences moving from the blunt beginnings of pronoun-lacking verbs to the pronunciation of literature's value against the "Fords, Du Ponts, Rockefellers etc.;" this letter was not merely a chip to cash in, a mark of scholastic authority; it was a living document in the living archive of *John Brown's Body*. Daniel Bulfin shares in the literary commons of Benét's poem, participating in the democratic vista of its bibliographic narrative. His prose even resonates with Whitman, who would rather see the "actual ships" of

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<sup>24</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét.

<sup>25</sup> The American writers to which Bulfin refers are, in order of his letter, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Wharton, Booth Tarkington, and Joseph Hergesheimer. The "Babbitt" reference is from a Sinclair Lewis novel of that same name, published in 1922. Bulfin seeks to distance himself from the main character, George Babbitt, who represents conformity and complacency within corporate America.

commerce “with all their cargoes, scuttled and sent to the bottom,” than lose the “little ships” of literature that transport the “precious minims” of our collective memory “over wide, century-stretching seas” (*DV* 307).

Bulfin is part of that memory moving forward through time, losing sleep in his cubby-hole to finish a 377-page poem, adding his voice to the vista of *John Brown's Body* becoming an archive. Imagine Benét losing sleep in those final days before his heart attack, writing tirelessly on behalf of his convictions, motivated by an American audience struggling again to find a national identity amidst devastating war. A resolution passed by the Executive Committee of the Council for Democracy on March 18, 1973, mourns the loss of Benét “not only as a wise and kindly friend, modest and indefatigable in his labors for our organization, but also as an incomparable spokesman for America at war.” The resolution goes on to eulogize his generosity—“he gave largely of his time and strength writing, under the auspices of the Council”—and to distinguish both his talent and character in light of his work:

When other men, stirred by the war, wrote what they thought of as “propaganda” the effect was often synthetic, unnatural, and hollow. When Stephen Benet wrote it the effect was genuine and eloquent, for it came from the very center of his being. This nation already recognizes his stature as a literary artist; we would especially express, from intimate observation, our sense of his stature also as a prophet of democracy, whose contribution to the United Nations and to the enduring cause of freedom was great because to him the democratic truth was a profound and stirring reality.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Benét. Benét served on the Executive Committee of the Council for Democracy at the time of his death.

As a “prophet of democracy,” Benét would appeal to common readers like Daniel Bulfin, Betty Blake, and James Brinkenhoff, in addition to future writers such as Pauli Murray and Robert Hayden. Only in America could an infantryman, an uneducated woman, an Irish gambler, and two prominent African-American writers be free to sing equal parts in the round-song of our literary commons. For this “democratic truth,” Benét took on Whitman’s challenge for a “Poet of the Modern” to emerge and address “the important question of Character, of an American stock-personality” (*DV* 269).

Throughout *John Brown’s Body* there are characters that carry the question of national identity, such as Mr. Brua, a prisoner held by John Brown during his raid on Harper’s Ferry, who risks his life to save one of Brown’s men shot during the stand-off at the armory. The poet fixes his gaze upon the scene: Mr. Brua carries the body of the wounded man to a nearby hotel, calls a doctor for him, and then remarkably walks back through the exchange of bullets to take his place again amongst the other prisoners.

I know no more than this of Mr. Brua  
 But he seems curiously American,  
 And I imagine him a tall, stooped man  
 A little yellow with the Southern sun,  
 With slow, brown eyes and a slow way of talking,  
 Shifting the quid of tobacco in his cheek  
 Mechanically, as he lifted up  
 The dirty, bloody body of the man  
 Who stood for everything he most detested  
 And slowly carrying him through casual wasps

Of death to the flyspecked but sunny room  
 In the old hotel, wiping the blood and grime  
 Mechanically from his Sunday coat,  
 Settling his black string-tie with big, tanned hands,  
 And, then, incredibly, going back to jail.  
 He did not think much about what he'd done  
 But sat himself as comfortably as might be  
 On the cold bricks of that dejected guard-room  
 And slowly started cutting another quid  
 With a worn knife that had a brown bone-handle. (38-39)

The narrator's description celebrates the "curiously American" contradictions of Mr. Brua's actions. That a man might risk his life for another man is not unique to America; but the manner in which Mr. Brua, "a little yellow with the Southern sun," walks casually through a gun-fight to pick up "the dirty, bloody body of the man / who stood for everything he most detested," echoes the progressive vision of a country determined to reinvent itself when necessary.

Despite the outcome of the Civil War, Benét was well aware of the lasting racial and economic inequalities that were not eradicated by the surrender of General Lee at Appomattox, Virginia—inequalities that would erode the democratic oath that freedom is a right for every American, not just the privileged few. In its more characteristic tenor, criticism, confronting such tensions, is immediately prone to skepticism and suspicion: what is celebrated does not, indeed, repair persisting inequalities, as if in noting this obvious circumstance it could be attributed to Benét's lack of insight or treated as a shortcoming of the poem. But Benét wrote *John Brown's Body* to ensure the osseous song of fierce independence would become part of America's literary

commons. We hear that song in the book and in the archive, recollecting our histories while making new collective memories, an ideal that contributes to the shaping of judgment. And it is not only the critic's task, or work for the solitary scholar. The living archive, like a good book, strives toward a vista of athletic readers.

#### V. Freedoms as Absolutes

Benét's poem is a revisionist history of sorts, following a few main characters on each side of the War, and introducing minor characters like Mr. Brua throughout; and the appeal was clear for readers like Daniel Bulfin, who were moved by the identification of the poet with soldiers from North and South, held awake in the middle of the night by a story told through the minor voices often marginalized in standard discourse. Not only Mr. Brua, a sympathetic Southerner, but also Cudjo, the negro servant of the Wingate family, who remains in Wingate Hall after he has already been freed by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, remains long enough to help his Mistress bury the Wingate silver, and long enough to fight the fire that ultimately destroys the family home. Benét gave him voice and status, when in many versions of this story, Cudjo would be just another house-nigger. In *John Brown's Body*, however, Cudjo has dignity in free verse:

Cudjo buried the silverware  
 On a graveyard night of sultry air  
 While the turned sods smelled of the winter damp  
 And Mary Lou Wingate held the lamp....  
 What he buried was Wingate Hall,  
 Himself and the moon and the toddy-sippers,

The river-mist and the dancing-slippers,  
 Old Marse Billy and Mary Lou  
 And every bit of the world he knew,  
 Master and lady and house and slave,  
 All smoothed down in a single grave.  
 He was finished at length. He shook his head.  
 "Mistis, reckon we's done," he said.  
 They looked at each other, black and white,  
 For a slow-paced moment across the light. (348-349)

We are first introduced to this character at a ball in Wingate Hall, where Cudjo watches the "dancing gentry" and the poet-narrator tells of what this "flawless servant without a fault" knows of the guests, entire genealogies whispered on the grapevine of "a hundred devious pedigrees" (43-45). He knows much, this Wingate bondsman, though he would never share his secrets and conspicuously does not judge; "and the bond would hold / On either side until both were cold" (45). So, in the "slow-paced moment across the light," when Cudjo and Mary Lou Wingate look at each other after burying the sliver and its soon-to-tarnish representations, we understand the strength of this bond that persists beyond Republican rhetoric, into the solemn and sacred space of the southern family. Our problem may very well center on the inability to recognize the practical and moral complexity of such an idea, when it seems more obvious to later vision that it was materially grounded on the injustice of slavery. But so too with Benét, who recognizes that injustice as well as later readers, but can still recognize the dignity of honoring loyalty even when so shadowed by an inherently cruel idea.

Contrast Cudjo with Spade, a runaway slave who swims his way to freedom from the shores of starvation and exhaustion, only to be escorted by an armed “special deputy” to a work-gang where he meets another negro named Ginger and begins to question him:

“Don’t we uns get paid? We ain’t none of us slaves no more,

The President said so. Why we wuhkin’ like dis?”

Ginger snickered. “Sho’ we uns gets paid,” he said,

“But we got to buy our stuff at de company sto’

And he sells his old shovels a dozen times what dey’s wuth.

I only been here a month but I owes twelve dollars....” (228)

Benét chose to write in slave dialect a number of times in *John Brown’s Body*, with alterations in tone for each character, displaying further sensitivity toward a story he could not tell alone—and without any more embarrassment than Twain, realizing that the telling of the story falls to him. In addition to Cudjo and Spade, there is also an episode between a slave couple in their cabin, where the man talks of freedom and the woman warns him against the folly of thinking: “‘You got no call to be thinkin’, little black boy, / Thinkin’s a trouble, a h’ant lookin’ over de shoulder” (80). While this scene only lasts a few pages, the poem itself is framed by a haunting “Prelude” (following the “Invocation”), subtitled “The Slaver,” which takes place on a slave-ship headed for the New World. This trope of cargo-as-chattel to signify the plight of African-Americans would be sung again in poems such as Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage.”

Hayden explicitly cites *John Brown’s Body* as inspiration for his writing career, as does the prominent African-American writer Pauli Murray. Furthermore, both poets highlight a

particular passage from Book Eight (the final book), as delivering a charge which they felt called to answer:<sup>27</sup>

Oh, blackskinned epic, epic with the black spear,  
 I cannot sing you, having too white a heart,  
 And yet, some day, a poet will rise to sing you  
 And sing you with such truth and mellowness,  
 –Deep mellow of the husky, golden voice  
 Crying dark heaven through the spirituals,  
 Soft mellow of the levee roustabouts,  
 Singing at night against the banjo-moon—  
 That you will be a match for any song  
 Sung by old, populous nations in the past,  
 And stand like hills against the American sky,  
 And lay your black spear down by Roland’s horn. (347-348)

Benét was remembered after his death as a great advocate and supporter of young writers, especially poets. Much of this was due to his stint as an early judge of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, one of the most influential publications for emerging poets in the United States. Over his short career, Benét would encourage dozens of young poets and maintain extensive correspondence with emerging writers. One such writer was Pauli Murray, who was motivated to write to Benét after reading *John Brown’s Body*.

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<sup>27</sup> Letters of Benét & Murray (Beinecke, YCAL Za Mss. Benét), and from an email (16 Oct 2010) from Professor Kim Benston, Haverford College: “I’m not as familiar with his work as I should be; as with many others, JB’sBODY has made the longest-lasting impression on me, but to some extent I’ll admit that’s also a function of its influence on poets like Crane and (for me, esp) Hayden (who to some extent modeled his own quasi-epic masterpiece, MIDDLE PASSAGE, on JBB—after reading the line O, black-skinned epic, epic with the long black spear, I cannot sing you now, having too white a heart, Hayden thought perhaps he’d be the bearer of that black-speared epic!).”

Pauli Murray first wrote to Benét in 1939, beginning a four year correspondence cut short by his death. In addition to a published writer, she would go on to become a lawyer, a professor, and an ordained priest. She was 29 when she sent this to Benét:

For a long time I have admired the vigor of your poetry, and the magnificent work you did in JOHN BROWN'S BODY. I have not seen a similar kind of sturdiness in any of the younger poets.... JOHN BROWN'S BODY has been particularly close to me, in that I am a southerner, born in Maryland, reared in North Carolina, a Negro, and with a keen sensitiveness about the traditions of the south.<sup>28</sup>

She goes on to cite the passage and “its deep impressions made on me through eight years,” writing out the first few lines, “Oh, blackskinned epic...”, as the reason for her letter. She also assumes Benét is a southerner; and in reply, he addresses a MR. Murray (Pauli is short for Pauline). They would learn of their mutual mistakes in a meeting that occurred at the Benét residence in New York.

From that same address, 220 East 69<sup>th</sup> Street, three years earlier, Benét had sent a letter on behalf of Atlanta University, a predominantly African-American institution, asking personal contacts for contributions.

I never expected to write a letter asking for funds for a University and I probably never will again. Maybe I should have written a different sort of letter -- given statistics and talked about the buildings. But no statistics can estimate what an intelligent teacher, a well prepared pastor, a trained social worker, an understanding and able business-man can do to raise the level of a community.

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<sup>28</sup> Beinecke, YCAL Za Mss. Benét.

Particularly, in the case of a race, still haunted, in spite of its noteworthy achievements, by ignorance, poverty, prejudice and lack of opportunity.<sup>29</sup>

In 1936, 71 years after the Civil War, Stephen Vincent Benét signed his name to a letter typed on personal stationary, honoring the memory of what his country had to endure so equal opportunity might take sincere hold in American democracy. And we should acknowledge that part of the idea of a living archive is what follows in later generations, with accomplishments such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, among other changes in the pursuit of civil rights that were, in their time, as fervently supported by the descendants of the poets Benét inspired. While the “h’ants” themselves might have changed—from the slave-driver or the patroller—the elusive promise of freedom that could not be had from a symbolic crossing of state lines (as Spade discovers), or even by official writ of President Lincoln, remained a ghostly shadow “lookin’ over de shoulder.”

For Benét, the promise of freedom was an absolute. Immediately after his sudden death, dear friend and agent Carl Brandt wrote to Rosemary Benét, offering these condolences:

Steve is probably the greatest human being I’ve ever known. That he is also a great artist, is immaterial. It is true, possibly, that my reason for being is that I could, in small ways, be of use to him. He has given me the courage, in my time, to know the freedoms which were his absolutes. All I can hope for is to live up to his vision.<sup>30</sup>

But it is not simply a humanist disposition that marks *John Brown’s Body*; it is something far more “curiously American,” to recall the phrase Benét uses to describe Mr. Brua. Absolutes tend to exclude and freedoms sometimes fail due to their lack of discipline. What makes Benét’s

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

cyclorama so compelling is that he stands there with us, not above us as the omniscient narrator-poet, but as a participant, identifying with the characters he animates, breathing his own life into the song.

## VI. Free of Machines

My first encounter with *John Brown's Body* was in a small, used bookshop in Haverford, PA. This particular edition was in excellent condition, with the original dust-jacket intact.<sup>31</sup> Beyond the material attraction of the book, the song was lodged somewhere in my cultural consciousness, strangely familiar despite the fact of not being able to place it exactly in context, or recall precisely where I had heard it before. I bought the book for \$20.

Years later, *John Brown's Body* still sitting more or less unread, I was browsing the poetry section of a bookstore in Seattle, Washington. I saw a thin binding, sufficiently weathered to catch my eye, with block lettering drawing me toward another book of Benét poems, a small volume called *Tiger Joy*. Written in faded ink on the recto of the front paper, was this “Hearty Epithalamium,” an autograph inscription, dated 1926:

Ten thousand dullards, pink-and-white  
 Can mix uninteresting features,  
 It took ingenious gods to plight  
 Such slender, darleling, arrogant creatures!

Since finding this inscription, I have read *John Brown's Body* with the last line of the Epithalamium in mind: “Such slender, darleling [sic], arrogant creatures.” It is as if Benét, two years before the publication of his most celebrated work, described the very condition that led to

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<sup>31</sup> I have since learned that books of American literature from the early-to-mid part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fetch a much higher price with the original dust jacket, often adding value in the tens of thousands to a work. Thanks to Sandra Kroupa, Special Collections Librarian, Suzzallo Library, University of Washington for this insight.

its task. Our history confirms the slightness, the sweetness, and perhaps above all else, the hubris of trying to perpetuate culture beside the bloodied bodies of those hurled down to the House of Death.<sup>32</sup>

For a lover of epic poetry, however, such arrogance can be mediated by rhythm and meter. Benét favored certain features of the Homeric long-line, even though he resisted the “epic” appellation. Still, writing from Paris on a Guggenheim Fellowship at the height of modernism and within a stone’s throw of that much celebrated coterie of “lost generation” poets, he was clearly not part of the expatriate in-crowd. Despite the magnitude of his project and the diversity of his poetic voices, there is scant evidence of close fellowship between Benét and the major modernist poets of the age.<sup>33</sup> While he may have been on the fringe of avant-garde writers such as Pound, H.D., Stein, and Eliot—and likely considered by many of the American artists living in Paris as a more conservative writer, part of the literary establishment represented by his Yale pedigree—his poetry pushes up against strict formalism and conventional metric patterns, varying beat and rhyme to guard against narrative drowsiness, and often shading the lines between blank verse and free verse to find the most appropriate form for distinctly American voices.

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<sup>32</sup> Thanks to Robert Fagles for his translation of the *Iliad*, from which I adopted the final phrase of this sentence. I am also reminded of the famous photograph of the battlefield at Gettysburg with bodies of Union and Confederate soldiers strewn lifeless and bloated on the ground.

<sup>33</sup> The letters catalogued in the Benét Papers (Beinecke) do not suggest substantial correspondence between Benét and the avant-garde in Paris. But given his proximity to these massively influential poets while writing *John Brown’s Body*, and with further research, it may, indeed, prove a rich topic for another paper. For instance, it appears this comment, made by Henry Seidel Canby in *The Saturday Review of Literature* (vol. XXVI, no. 13; March 27, 1943; “In Memory of Stephen Vincent Benét”) addresses the tension of poetry during the modernist period: “For Stephen Benét wrote his epic *John Brown’s Body* at a time when the reading of poetry among intelligent laymen had reached its low point, perhaps for all time. He wrote when his contemporaries among the poets had intellectualized their poetry beyond emotional understanding except by the elite. He wrote when poetry was making a new language for itself, and that language threatened to become unintelligible to the general audience without which poetry sooner or later becomes mere specialization.” (Houghton, AC9 B4356 LZ999)

I have cited a short stanza, scribbled on a wedding gift for friends, which exhibits Benét's playfulness and humor—who writes a wedding poem that begins by invoking masses of fleshy dullards?—along with his sense of tradition and duty, represented in his choice to use the rare (or downright obsolete) verb form of “plight,” defined as a “pledge” or a “fold” (OED), the latter definition as a “plait” or “pleat.” There is a doubleness in the use of this archaic word; first, that whatever “ingenious gods” are responsible for our mixture of “uninteresting features,” they have fashioned us as a kind of pledge, knowing full well our inadequacies, but sending us forth nonetheless, so that we might thrive according to the conditions of such a pledge, matching an oath with an oath. In that same motion, casting us out from the fire and forge, enfolding us with qualities beyond mere survival instincts—embracing us as the slender, darling, and arrogant creatures we are; and in such self-recognition, often the work of poets (and of course the philosophers, forgotten as they may be) to make us aware, we come to see our plight, and know it well.

The American Civil War was a collective plight for a young nation seeking to move forward with its radical experiment of democracy. In Benét's family, the memory of that war would be kept alive by Benét's grandfather and namesake, who fought for the Union (eventually retiring as a brigadier general)<sup>34</sup>, and then passed down to Benét's father, Colonel James Walker Benet, to whose memory *John Brown's Body* is dedicated. Benét himself had such desire to serve in the United States Military that he hid the fact of his poor eyesight during a physical examination for World War I recruits, by memorizing the eye chart. As the story goes, he was

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<sup>34</sup> The archives at the Houghton contain a letter from Stephen Vincent Benet (1827-1895), then a captain stationed at Frankford Arsenal, for a subscription to the *Daily Globe*, dated January 2, 1866. The archives at the Beinecke contain Colonel Benet's autobiography, typed and bound in blue Moroccan leather, but never published. The full dedication to *John Brown's Body* reads: “To my mother / And to the memory / Of my father.” Colonel Benet passed in 1928, the year it was published. The Arlington Cemetery website was also consulted for this note: <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/svbenet.htm>.

assigned to the mess hall and told to peel potatoes, when an officer walked into the kitchen to find the young private holding a potato right up in front of his face, straining to see his own work.<sup>35</sup> Benét received an honorable discharge from the Army, and embarked on a writing career that would strive to serve his country in other ways.

My second copy of “John Brown’s Body,” also a first edition, cost \$5 without the dust-jacket. Flipping to the “Note” which proceeds the “Invocation” of the poem, printed verso on the dedication leaf, I found an old clipped newspaper article that had been laid inside the book, titled (seemingly incomplete because of the cutting job), “Says Poets Must Be Free of Machines.” This is all I know, other than a small date written in pen on the upper left corner: “Dec. 11 1929.” There is no *ex libris* or inscription of any kind in the book. The full text of the clipping reads:

The machine age may produce many benefits for mankind but the field of poetry must remain free of it if it is to continue as an art according to Stephen Vincent Benet, author of “John Brown’s Body,” who spoke recently at the Harvard Union on qualities which make a writer “a first-hand man of letters” instead of a second-hand one.

Mr. Benet chose for his subject the provocative “Poetry and the Machine,” and explained that it was of no consequence that the present day tendency of critics was to proclaim at regular intervals “the rediscovery of the American scene by authors of the day” if the product by which such authors were judged did not contain “the four elements of earth and water fire and air, mixed with his ability to notice things and a dual ability as discoverer and detective.”

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<sup>35</sup> This episode is repeated in various sources, none of which are definitive, and it has become part of Benét’s oral history.

“An author may criticize,” Mr. Benet said: “he may satirize, but unless he mixes these elements he is but a second-hand man of letters. ‘The rediscovery of the American scene’ is a constant, continuing process. If I may be permitted to illustrate from my own experience, I wrote ‘John Brown’s Body’ because I wanted to make live again certain sights and sounds and houses. I do not like to call it an epic. It is, really, a cyclorama. I write because I want to write and sometimes I write because I have to write. It may be a phrase or a word that gives me an idea and the result is a poem I have been obliged to write.”

Mr. Benet did not hold out much hope that the extreme forms that have appeared in poetry in recent years would survive a great while. He thought eventually “modern poetry” would return again to conservative forms which, however, need not effect the degree to which their content might be construed as “modern.”

Benét must have been thinking a good deal about machines at the time. His book ends with the strange image of John Brown’s body as a host, out of which grows “revolving steel” and “the spinning wheel...the new, mechanic birth...The great, metallic beast / Expanding West and East, / His heart a spinning coil, / His juices burning oil, / His body serpentine” (376). A single letter separates this image of John Brown the host and John Brown the ghost, whose specter not only haunts the pages of Benét’s poem, but also the shadow-histories many of us accept passively instead of placing ourselves in the center of the cyclorama.

A book like this asks so much of us as readers. It is not always great poetry, but the elements are all there. And before the machines would work toward a future destruction unparalleled in World War II, a War that would take Benét’s life in the form of a heart attack

during a tireless campaign for democracy, he understood that no matter what or how we might feel about the challenges confronting the book in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the onslaught of corporate interests in our media, the way digital technology is changing literacy, IT IS HERE. I think of Daniel Bulfin, or Betty Blake, James Brinkenhoff or Pauli Murray, and I hear each of them sounding out these words from the final pages:

Stand apart

From the loud crowd and look upon the flame

Alone and steadfast, without praise or blame.

This is the monster and the sleeping queen

And both have roots struck deep in your own mind,

This is reality that you have seen,

This is reality that made you blind. (366-377)

## VII. The Four Elements

Writing from the outskirts of Paris, Benét needed to ground his deeply American story in characters that would allow his poetic process to access the terrain and territories of the Civil War. By surrounding himself in a foreign culture, Benét could refine his own vision for the “American Cyclorama” he sought to compose, without the familiar distractions of home; and he could also fine-tune the specific qualities of place and landscape that mark the characters of his poem within the general context of North versus South. Standing apart from contemporary American culture, he could be more precise in the construction of a new form for cultural memory.

*John Brown's Body* has an extensive cast of dramatic characters, but follows closely the separate stories of two main soldiers, Jack Ellyat of the Union Army and Clay Wingate of the Confederacy. These soldiers never meet, but are connected through their mutual presence at the first Battle of Bull Run and Gettysburg, and also through peripheral characters that weave Ellyat and Wingate together within three degrees of separation. This intra-narrative weaving is necessary to express the profound interconnection of the Civil War, famously captured in the stories of brothers fighting on opposite sides, but more subtly portrayed by Benét through minor characters like Luke and Jim Breckinridge, descendents of the “curious and most native stock, / The lanky men, the lost, forgotten seeds / Spilled from the first great wave-march toward the West / And set to sprout by chance in the deep cracks / Of that hill-billy world of laurel-hells” (84). Jim Breckinridge captures Jack Ellyat at the end of Book Three (“Ellyat’s tune”), after Jack has already escaped a previous capture and fallen in love with one of the heroines of the story, a beautiful, young “hider” named Melora Vilas. Whereas Jim Breckinridge captures Ellyat after the Melora episode, his cousin, Luke, comes back into the fold in Book Six, culminating with a chilling confrontation that results in the death of Shippy, a Union spy smuggling papers out of the South in his boots. Luke and Shippy have been competing for the same woman, a chambermaid named Sophy, and Luke intends to scare Shippy off by shaking him down with some fellow Confederate soldiers. As it turns out, Shippy does have something to hide, and Luke’s cold prank becomes deadly. The sergeant who presides over the scene is none other than Clay Wingate.

*John Brown's Body* is full of moments like these, where a series of relations unfold until it seems that everybody and everything in the poem is interconnected. Of course, the Civil War itself was bound from the beginning, if we take the raid at Harpers Ferry as a starting point, by

such concatenation. We merely need to remember that the Colonel called in to stop the attack on the federal armory was the same man who would take control of the Army of Northern Virginia and eventually surrender that control to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox.

Having read the poem in its entirety with a class of university freshmen, the characters most persuasive to my students were not the male protagonists, but rather, the two female protagonists: Sally Dupré and Melora Vilas. Like their male counterparts, each young woman represents a side of the war; Melora falls in love with Jack Ellyat (eventually giving birth to their love-child), while Sally positions herself amongst the Southern Belles in competition for Clay Wingate's attention. As readers, we expect this political identification, especially as it becomes clear that each lady is meant to play a romantic role with their respective soldiers. But these ladies defy not only their Northern versus Southern parts; they also begin to defy the very traditions upon which our expectations depend, both politically and romantically. And we cannot help but feel, as the story moves along, that each of these heroines alters the way of thinking for the men they adore.

Ms. Dupré's character is cast in opposition to Lucy Weatherby, a very obvious straw-girl for the debutante attitude which Sally finds repulsive. Lucy is conceited and entitled, and while we can at times sympathize with her insecurities, we ultimately tire of listening to her narcissistic monologues as she showers herself with false praise and privileged expectations in winning the affection of young Wingate. It is hard to read with patience, reminding oneself of old adolescent conceits, when we find Lucy "cuddled up in her bed...with a smile on her mouth:"

I was pretty tonight [...] I was pretty tonight.

Blue's my color—blue that matches my eyes.

I always ought to wear blue. I'm sorry for girls

Who can't wear that sort of blue. Her name is Sally  
 But she's too dark to wear the colors I can,  
 I'd like to give her my blue dress and see her wear it,  
 She'd look too gawky, poor thing. (170)

Not surprisingly, my students could associate with Lucy immediately, familiar with the “popular girl” archetype, the one who always has a smile on her face and seems impossibly cheerful even on the grey days. We discover darker sides of Lucy to be sure, namely the insecurity of a girl who has no sincere sense of self, against which the strength of Sally is pitched to high acuity. Sally is “too dark” for Lucy’s blue dress; but Lucy’s soul is too shallow for the kind of sturdy feminism that permeates throughout Benét’s book.

By stark contrast, Ms. Dupré shares more with her fellow heroine, Melora, than any of the Lucy Weatherbys of the South. Sally is given some of the most beautiful and powerful lines of the entire work; her voice is both lyrical and fierce, and there is a reminiscence of the kind of western ruggedness associated with the poetry of Robinson Jeffers:

*I have read, they have told me that love is a pretty god  
 With light wings stuck to his shoulders.*

*They did not tell me*

*That love is nursing a hawk with yellow eyes,  
 That love is feeding your heart to the beak of the hawk  
 Because an old woman, gossiping, uttered a name. (174)*

The name, of course, is Clay Wingate, and as Sally competes with Lucy for Clay’s favor, giving her heart to the hawk, her resolve stays strong and her conviction profound. She is not afraid of violence—she does not cry false tears like Lucy Weatherby when her first “beau,” Curly, is

killed—and threatens her enemies with a stern vengeance: “They hurt you, darling, they hurt you and I not with you, / I nowhere there to slit the cloth from your burning, / To find the head of the man who fired the bullet / And give his eyes to the crows” (248). Sally is no flag waver with ribbons in her hair; she is defiant and proud and suggests an admiration for Southern virtues that ensures we understand just what she judges to be worth fighting for as the war drags on too long.

Ms. Dupré’s temper is matched with a philosophical edge that makes her wise beyond her years. When a friend of mine lost her husband traumatically in a house fire, I gave her this passage to read<sup>36</sup>:

[...] If I had to wear grief for a lover,  
 I wouldn’t wear black.  
 I would wear my best green silk and my Empire sacque  
 And walk in the garden at home and feel the wind  
 Blow through my rags of honor forever and ever.  
 And after that, when I married some other beau,  
 I would make a good wife and raise my children on sweet  
 Milk, not on poison, though it might have been so.  
 And my husband would never know  
 When he turned to me, when I kissed him, when we were kind,  
 When I cleaned his coat, when we talked about dresses and weather,  
 He had married something that belonged to the wind  
 And felt the blind  
 And always stream of that wind on her too-light bones,  
 Neither fast nor slow, but never checked or resigned,

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<sup>36</sup> In memory of Bradley Hays.

Blowing through rags of honor forever and ever. (167-8)

There are a few remarkable lines in here; Sally's oath to raise her children on "sweet milk, not on poison, though it might have been so," confirms an ethic of independence and care, a sense of both sovereignty and duty. And the image of the blind wind with its "always stream," the awareness of her past and present and future all borne by her fragile body, but strong enough to persist in love and not only the symbolic malaise of grief; this too-dark Sally is instead too tough and tender to be bothered by the pretty blues of an Old South that must expire in the wake of this war. The refrain that echoes through Clay Wingate's preceding section warns (and reminds) its readers: "This is the last, this is the last, / Hurry, hurry, this is the last" (165).

The Old South with its Wingate Halls is not the only thing passing away. John Vilas, Melora's father and pioneer of the "wilderness stone," also sings a dirge for a way of life coming to an end. Having continually moved his family farther west in search of the wild places, wishing to hide from the war surging around them, he eventually loses his daughter to the wounded Jack Ellyat and his son to the Union conscription. Despite his attempts to remain unbridled by the customs of an ordinary world, he must acknowledge his powerlessness against the forces of a wilderness stone which he has sought and touched in life. This is the hiders' philosopher stone "that turns good money into heaps of leaves / And builds an outcast house of apple-twigs / Beside a stream that never had a name" (142). The anonymity of the wild and a selective disengagement—not from life itself, but from the mean trappings of a botched civilization—John Vilas invokes Thoreau, "half-oriole and half-fox" (143).

But Thoreau never had a wife and daughter; so when John Vilas sees Melora falling in love with Jack, he can only speak from his own wild epistemology:

I know this girl,

This boy, this youth, this honey in the blood,  
 This kingly danger, this immediate fire.  
 I know what comes of it and how it lies  
 And how, long afterwards, at the split core  
 Of the prodigious and self-eaten lie,  
 A little grain of truth lies undissolved  
 By all the acids of philosophy.  
 Therefore, I will not seek a remedy  
 Against a sword but in the sword itself  
 Nor medicine life with anything but life.  
 I am too old to try the peddler's tricks,  
 Too wise, too foolish, too long strayed in the wood,  
 The custom of the world is not my custom,  
 Nor its employments mine. (142)

It is hard not to be haunted by John Brown's ghost in these lines; not the violent zeal of Brown's prayer—"And Joshua's sword is on the wall / With space beside for mine" (33)—but the stony determination of the American patriarch who is driven to a tragic fate. For even in John Brown's martyrdom we feel the uneasy tension between a radical will to transform powers outside of the self, and the spiritual ecstasy of giving oneself up entirely to powers out of our control. John Vilas does not lament his fortune in the woods; he gives Melora his blessing and prayer:

I prayed to life for life once, in my youth,  
 Between the rain and a long stroke of cloud  
 Till my soaked limbs felt common with the sky

And the black stone of heaven swung aside,  
 With a last clap of water, to reveal  
 Lonely and timid, after all that wrath,  
 The small, cold, perfect flower of the new moon  
 And now, perhaps, I'll pray again tonight,  
 Still to the life that used me as a man  
 Uses and wears a strong and riotous horse,  
 Still to the vagrants of no fortunate word. (256-7)

It sounds so beat, this prayer to the “perfect flower of the new [hip] moon,” sounding the way for the bleary-eyed prose of Kerouac and Ginsberg’s ecstatic sutras: “vagrants of no fortunate word.” The “hidden place that hiders know” is inevitably a temporary refuge; Melora is giving birth to a child that ruptures the secret sanctuary of the Vilas way of life, and in doing so binds John Vilas to the book’s other two Johns, Brown and Ellyat (Jack is a nickname).

For a contemporary reader, these engagements of sentiment may seem oddly displaced, as the sentiment of any time is actually displaced in later times, but that does not diminish their pertinence. To use a cliché, this is as American as apple pie, this legacy of fathers fighting to hold on to something that matters, and in doing so, pushing this country forward into a new vision struggling for semblance of a nation—and that is not a cliché. And despite whatever makes this struggle “curiously American,” the process of national identification requires cultural re-semblance, which is why no effort to tell the story of the Civil War can be complete without capturing images from both sides of the conflicting memory, without either a genteel or puritanical insistence on an exactingly, punishing judgment of rightness. And even with the scales of narrative justice being well balanced between North and South, the pursuit of a

complete retelling is a chthonic enterprise, seeking to dig up old bones and feuds and feelings that are unearthed along with the materiality of the dead (“At first we talk of the dead, we write of the dead, / We send their things to people when we can find them, / We write letters to you about them, we say we liked him, / He fought well, he died bravely, here is his sword, / Here is his pistol, his letters, his photograph case; / You will like to have these things, they will do instead” (167)). The archive is both gravesite and mausoleum, facilitating in the dual purpose of caring for the deceased: to bury and remember. *John Brown’s Body*, more than completion—recall Benét’s recognition of his artistic limitations, first in the “Invocation” and later when he trumpets the “blackskinned epic” to come—strives toward its own archival discovery. The poem must lay things to rest at the same time it calls forth a new generation of readers to continue forming the cyclorama around them, seeing the Civil War not as it was (an impossible task), but as it must be in the renewed memory and resurrected haunting of John Brown’s ghost.

Let the history books count fatalities and record military victories; the voices of *John Brown’s Body* carry a distinct register of historical experience, especially those of the female characters. This experience is not meant to arrest the memory of the Civil War in the period of its duration—a distinction beside the dichotomy of fact versus fiction – but allows readers to contemporize the drama. This is not achieved by taking a character out of context, or trying to put ourselves into another place in time (although both can be helpful strategies if used with discipline). What is at stake here is the poetic potential of the archive (*poiesis* in its classical sense), wherein readers are encouraged to participate in the creation of not only the work at hand—the American cyclorama—but also the very function and use of that work outside of the bound text.

Returning to the wilderness stone to close this chapter, the promise of John Vilas to himself and to his family, pushing ever forward through wild places, past the roads of commerce and custom, hidden amongst the last forgotten creatures who have escaped the tyrannous bloodlust of civilization—what lies unbounded and free as a skin never meant for parchment and the annals of history, or leaves which live and die by the season, never to touch the woof and warp of industry—the final image of John Brown’s machine body serpentine is first tempered against the wilderness stone and its reckless persistence: “And yet, what I have sought that I have sought / And cannot disavouch, although it is / The double knife that cuts the giver’s hand / And the unwilling taker’s” (337-8). The “double knife” is an easy metaphor for reading, and for the gymnastic activity required by *John Brown’s Body* to derive such a solemn certainty as John Vilas does for his decision to return to the East with Melora and her child in search of Jack Ellyat. In the double identification with John and Melora Vilas, a curiously American version of Prospero and Miranda, we are also asked to take one final look in Book Eight at the world which father and daughter encounter on their way out of the woods:

The time had bred odd voyagers enough:  
 Disabled soldiers, tramping toward the West  
 In faded army blouses, singing strange songs,  
 Heroes and chickentheives, true men and liars,  
 Some with old wounds that galled them in the rains  
 And some who sold the wounds they never had  
 Seven times over in each new saloon;  
 Queer, rootless families, plucked up by the war  
 To blow along the roads like tumbleweed,

Who fed their wild-haired children God knows how  
But always kept a fierce and cringing cur,  
Famished for scraps, to run below the cart;  
Horsedealers, draft-evaders, gipsymen;  
Crooked creatures of a thousand dubious trades  
That breed like gnats from the débris of war;  
Half-cracked herb-doctor, patent-medicine man  
With his accordeon and his inked silk hat;  
Sellers of snake-oil balm and lucky rings  
And the old, crazy hatless wanderer  
Who painted "God is Love" upon the barns  
And on the rocks, "Prepare to Meet Thy God"  
Lost tribes and maverick nations of the road—  
The shiftless people, who are never still  
But blow before the wind unquietly  
And will so blow, until the last starved cur  
Yaps at the last fat farmer, and lies down  
With buckshot tearing at his ravening heart,  
For the slow years to pick his carcass clean  
And turn the little chapel of his bones  
Into a dust so sifted by the wind  
No winds that blow can sift it any more. (333-4)

There is a haunting feeling that the poor, “last starved cur” is a warning for those “slender, darelins, arrogant creatures” who would forget their place amongst the hierarchy of beings. For those of us distracted to the point where we think our accomplishment bodies (to steal a phrase from Ginsberg) are worth more than the profits of those who send us to die on their behalf. For those of us who believe a glorious memory can make up for the miserable complacency of a corpse refusing to rise from the battlefield. For those of us rich enough to feel good about our position relative to the sufferings of the less fortunate, Benét’s list of outcasts and misfits is not a judgment against the “debris of war;” it is ekphrastic as a cyclorama, painting its politics in the round. Is this the beginning or the end of the story?

So, when the crowd gives tongue  
 And prophets, old or young,  
 Bawl out their strange despair  
 Or fall in worship there,  
 Let them applaud the image or condemn  
 But keep your distance and your soul from them,  
 And, if the heart within your breast must burst  
 Like a cracked crucible and pour its steel  
 White-hot before the white heat of the wheel,  
 Strive to recast once more  
 That attar of the ore  
 In the strong mold of pain  
 Till it is whole again,  
 And while the prophets shudder or adore

Before the flame, hoping it will give ear,  
If you at last must have a word to say,  
Say neither, in their way,  
“It is a deadly magic and accursed,”  
Nor “It is blest,” but only “It is here.” (377)

Final judgment is so elusive that we barely have time to celebrate the impending reunions of our dual lovers: Jack and Melora (with child) of the North; Sally and Clay of the South. There is life on both sides of the war, with also the loss of both the Vilas and Wingate ways of life. Here again is the double knife, cutting the giver and the taker, each to be left with a minor certainty of the final pronouncement. Cast in half-light, the body of John Brown is our witness, and through the body becoming an archive, the poet and reader are steadfast (“without praise or blame”), marching on in round-song.

## Chapter Two: North Dakota and the Poetic Archive

Sometimes at evening with the dusk sifting down through the trees  
And the trees like a smudge on the white hills and the hills drifting  
Into the hushed light, into the huge, the looming, holy  
Night; --sometimes, then, in the pause and balance  
Between dark and day, with the noise of our labor stilled,  
And still in ourselves we felt our kinship, our commune  
Against the cold.

In that rich and friendly hour  
When the hunting hawks whirred home, we stilled our talking  
And silence sang our compline and vesper song.

It was good singing, that silence. From the riches of common work  
The solidarity of forlorn men  
Firm on our margin of poverty and cold:  
Communitas  
Holy City  
Laughter at forty below  
Round song  
The chime of comradeship that comes once maybe  
In the Winter of the Blue Snow.

- Tom McGrath, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*

South of Sheldon, ND, the small town where Thomas McGrath grew up on his family's farmland, is an even smaller town called McLeod (pop. 25), deep in the Cheyenne National Grassland. On a dark night in warm summer, I sat in the Sand Dune Saloon – named for what lies beneath the thin surface of top-soil covering the grasslands, and claiming fame for its connection to former Major Leaguer (and Seattle Mariner) John Olerud, whose grandparents opened the bar in the 1920's – drinking beer with a clientele composed entirely of ranchers. The proprietor of the Saloon, when he found out I was from Seattle, was quick to show me an old photograph on the wall of a young Olerud posed in uniform between his grandparents. The ranchers, when they found out I was in North Dakota researching a poet, were quick to buy me round after round of heartland beers.

I paid for one beer that night, the first one I ordered at the bar as every Stetson-hatted head turned my way, suspicious of a stranger. And at closing time, with all the ranchers slowly shuffling across the worn threshold of the door sill and out to their familiar trucks to take them into the empty night of still Great Plains – when the proprietor found out I was planning to pitch my tent behind the one-room church and schoolhouse down the street, insisted I stay right there in the bar, on the couch in back, and just make sure to shut the door on my way out come morning.

Upon return to Seattle, I sent the Sand Dune Saloon a copy of Tom McGrath's *Selected Poems*, postmarked General Delivery: McLeod, ND. And since the Saloon doubles as the post office, I figure it made it there. In my letter thanking the proprietor for his hospitality, I suggested he might enjoy McGrath's poem "Trinc," which is a praise poem to beer and the rewards of a solid work-week. Because my experience at that Saloon in McLeod confirmed why I set out to find McGrath's archive in the first place: to prove that "North Dakota is everywhere."

An archive is not about biography; it is a landscape, a region, a locality with a history and character unique to its bibliographic narrative. In this chapter, I set out to describe the particular methodology of *narrative bibliography*, grounded in the theories and practices of textual studies. Critical to my endeavor is to show what this methodology *looks* like, with the intentional stress on the materiality of an archive, represented here by letters and other textual ephemera of McGrath's archival landscape, the *everywhere* of his North Dakota. Since that memorable night in the Sand Dune Saloon, which marked the end of my first research trip, I have returned to Fargo and Grand Forks, interviewing two old friends of Tom McGrath: Dale Jacobson and Carol Pearson. Their stories are also part of this archive.<sup>37</sup>

An introduction to the primary text of this chapter, by means of a quick story: Alan Swallow and his editor, Michael Anania, were arguing in the back of a Chicago taxicab about how to print McGrath's first two books of his life-poem, *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.<sup>38</sup> McGrath wrote the manuscript on 8.5 x 11 sheets turned lengthwise, "landscape" format. But to print a wide-format book is expensive, and Swallow (being the fiduciary-minded publisher), was willing to cut corners on cost by tucking-in the margins so the work would fit into a standard size book.<sup>39</sup> Mr. Anania disagreed, and the conversation was heated enough to catch the attention of the cab driver, who turned around with his elbow resting on the front bench-seat, asking in

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<sup>37</sup> I am much indebted to Mr. Jacobson and Mrs. Pearson for their time and generosity.

<sup>38</sup> For the term and category of the "life-poem," in addition to sincere friendship and encouragement, I would like to thank Dr. Paul Jaussen.

<sup>39</sup> Remembering Swallow during his years at Louisiana State University, McGrath writes:

And Cleanth Brooks would talk, at the Roosevelt Tavern,  
Where we went to drink beer. And Katherine Ann Porter sometimes.  
(They've probably changed all the names now.)  
And down the street Alan Swallow was handsetting books  
In an old garage. A wild man from Wyoming,  
With no tradition. (81)

earnest, “You guys talkin’ bout Tom McGrath? He’s the best poet in America.” Swallow decided to go with the wide format.<sup>40</sup>

*Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is McGrath’s best-known work, published in various stages across 35 years, beginning in 1962 at Swallow Press (Chicago, IL) and ending in 1997 at Copper Canyon Press (Port Townsend, WA). It starts in Lost Angeles, travels to North Dakota, New York, Portugal, Greece, and finishes in Moorhead, MN, where McGrath held a position teaching English and creative writing.<sup>41</sup> The book travels as much through space as it does through time, so the reader constructs the poem’s landscape in both the physical world and also in the cosmology of the imagination.

In his short essay, “Tom McGrath’s Vision and the Hornacle Mine,” Bernard Engel suggests that McGrath’s use of Hopi mythology in *Letter* is ultimately a means of proposing a temporality that does not divide neatly into past, present, and future, but one in which we eventuate our futures by inhabiting all past and present events (Stern 84-85). To call the poet’s vision “future-oriented” would be correct, but only insofar as that future becomes manifest through a dwelling in the infinite potentialities of the past. It is not that our past has failed us, but that we have failed our past by not seeing clearly enough the vision by which we could eventuate our futures.

The project is one of recovery. We do not need new memories, only to remember the future which was possible through our collective understanding of the past and present, represented most clearly throughout the poem in the image of the “round-song” and “cantrip circle” of *communitas*. The song is as much about praise as it is about despair. If McGrath wants desperately to recover the possibility of that “Holy City,” he is not blinded by his own

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<sup>40</sup> Thanks to Ted Kooser for this story.

<sup>41</sup> Moorhead State University.

ideological optimism (despite his Communist sympathies, there is never a single note of fanaticism). Engel captures this determined poetics precisely: “But though this means that triumph is never attained, it also means that defeat is never total. McGrath will continue to cry out his summons” (Stern 90).

Time is music. Each word and note marks the interval, and the tone emerges from the persistent beat, heard in nature as clear as in the knocking of a metronome. But McGrath’s music is not always pretty bells and whistles, classic resolutions after variations of theme. Thomas Matchie calls it “adiatonic or without scale” (Matchie 19). He relates this observation to Hopi music and the preeminence of the Kachina in *Letter*. McGrath notably said that “in a small way the whole poem is a kachina” (Matchie 15-16), and *Letter* needs to be sung in contemporary bardic fashion. But rather than call his poem “a-” anything, which seems to reflect more the inability to name it precisely, as our civilizing urges once tried to classify Native American music according to Western standards—there is a more persuasive reason to understand the poem *in place*, a place it creates across time and space in the *everywhere* of North Dakota. This is not to argue against specificity of landscape; on the contrary, to offer a more robust task for the reader to place herself in the appropriate landscape, and see both the material and ethereal qualities of that place. For instance, what Natalie Curtis says about hearing Hopi music properly:

To seize on paper the spirit of Hopi music is a task as impossible as to put on canvas the shimmer and glare of the desert. Hopi music is born of its environment. The wind sweeping among the crags.... Its echo is heard in the song of the Hopis yodeling through the desert solitudes. There, in that wild land, under the blaze of an Arizona sun, amid the shifting color of the tinted sands and purple-blue of the sharp-shadowed rocks, must the songs be heard to be heard truly. (18)

Matchie includes this passage in his essay, and I'm struck by its poetry, mediated through a cultural critique, and therefore suggesting an authentic experience which ethnographic studies cannot capture. Is her point that only a Hopi Indian can appreciate Hopi music? Not exactly; but her comment is ultimately a precursor to that wonderful line from the 1992 film, *White Men Can't Jump*, uttered by Wesley Snipes and directed at Woody Harrelson who claims to love Jimi Hendrix: "Look man, you can listen to Jimi but you can't hear him. There's a difference man. Just because you're listening to him doesn't mean you're hearing him" (IMDb). Of course, it turns out that white men CAN jump by the end of the film, and the point is not that only a black man can really hear Jimi Hendrix, but that there is a real difference between listening and hearing; and in order to do the latter, you need to feel some things through the music that resonate with a particular cultural experience.

This *feeling* becomes a political and poetic act. By the end of Curtis's passage, the "shifting color of the tinted sands and purple-blue of the sharp-shadowed rocks" might as well be written in verse. And another "shifting" occurs within the eco-political stakes of the critique: if Hopi music can only be "heard truly" in this particular place, the charge is not only to preserve Hopi culture, practices, and beliefs, but the very landscape that engenders the music's meaning and affect. That same charge applies to McGrath's North Dakota. But in addition to the preservation of culture and landscape, there is also recovery and restoration of the round-song, which itself becomes a place of purpose in the poem. The physical utopia does not exist; the Holy City is a region of the heart and mind, working through the body as an agent of change to cross the distances of both eons and city blocks (or rural fields, shifting sands): to make the "cantrip circle" of the round-song.

According to the OED, “cantrip” is of unknown origins. Relating to witchcraft and necromancy, a “trick or mischievous device,” McGrath would have likely favored the final part of the definition: “any whimsically mad, eccentric, or extravagant piece of conduct” (OED). The round-song and round-dance, used more or less interchangeably in *Letter*, is not a matter of witchcraft, but the effects might well be described as magical. Matchie calls McGrath a “shaman,” participating in Whitman’s efforts designed to capture and disperse the transformative power of the word. If there was a communist spell to cast, McGrath surely would have used it; *Letter* is full of disdain for the trappings of our capitalist society and mean materialism (no reverence for the means of production, just consume consume consume...). But *Letter* does have plenty of charms, along with the scores of charming letters that are part of its archive.

As we are invited to participate in the round-song as readers—what Matchie terms a “liturgical rite” of the poem, “to join in the chorus...for purposes of bringing on the future” (Matchie 19)—McGrath also invited his friends to join the epistolary life of the poem. The title of the poem invokes an “imaginary” friend, but most of the names and characters in the poem are quite real. The invocation in the title is in reference to the poem’s first epigraph from Thoreau:

Whenever I see my Friend I speak to him;  
 but the expected, the man with the ears,  
 is not he. They will complain too that you  
 are hard. O ye that would have the cocoanut  
 wrong side outwards, when next I weep  
 I will let you know.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The lines are from Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. McGrath apparently turned the prose into verse.

The capital “F” Friend is an idea, worthy of pursuit in the larger spirit of comradeship. The epigraph longs for an openness and invitation for a new relational model, one that is clearly more socialist and less capitalist (we increasingly expect “the man with the ears,” who will turn our most substantive hopes and dreams into an easily marketable “app” for the “next big thing”). But as much as the longing is for a more just and egalitarian economic system, it starts at home, in the living rooms of friends, where wrong sides are welcomed and praised. In the multiple collections of McGrath’s papers, each contributing to the spirit and form of his overall archive, there was an overflowing abundance of real friends contributing to the imaginative work of the poem.

It is easy to distinguish, faced with boxes and folders full of letters, between fan mail and professional correspondence (editors, agents, publishers, etc.). But what is harder to tell apart is where the line is drawn between a friend and a fan, or between a comrade and a clear stakeholder in publication. McGrath would be quick to point out: “Follow the money!” And the injunction is well taken; those with invested capital have a clear motive to finish the project and move the product. But to ignore the sincere and personal investment of McGrath’s friends in *Letter* would be to miss a substantive opportunity to ask real questions about literary production. If we recognize the book for what it is, a fundamentally social technology, then the archive becomes an invaluable resource for literary research and scholarship. Despite the value of this resource, it is rare, even in a graduate program for literature, to encounter sincere pedagogical investment in showing students how to look beyond the divide between literature and theory, where there is a vast and fertile plain for criticism.

When friends or colleagues ask me why I need to drive to North Dakota for my research, or what I am looking for, I tell them it is less about *what* I am looking for, and more about the

*looking* itself. In order to mediate the daunting task of reading *Letter*, let alone forming a work of criticism about it, the archive can provide a space of refuge and deferral, where critical judgments (and hermeneutical anxieties) can be temporarily suspended and the reader can immerse herself in the subtle life of the poem.

Dear Tom –

Day before yesterday I got a letter from Bob Bly, and in it he said he'd help me get a review of Letter into print if I'd send one to him. And, as I've been in bed with a cold for the past two days, I had plenty of time to re-read the whole book again (croaked out whole passages to Carolyn, who likes it, though she feels she should somehow be “into” poetry to really understand the poem – I told her that isn't so). Finished it about 2 am this morning, and though I gain a great deal with each reading, I feel there's something really momentous I'm missing – not from any lack of poetic understanding, but from just not reading carefully, deeply enough. I guess I want to know the poem so well that my mind's eye can encompass in one look the whole landscape of the poem. It's good that I enjoy reading it so much, or it could get to be a chore!

Here is an old friend, croaking out whole passages to his wife, and refusing to rest for the sake of the poem. Here we see the immediate fellowship expressed between literary comrades and the manner by which a poet's work is promoted amongst colleagues, reaching into the poetic establishment to call upon Robert Bly (a longtime advocate for McGrath's legacy). We see the gymnast's struggle between poem and reader, the failure “from just not reading carefully, deeply enough.” But also the lovely sentiment of wanting “to know the poem so well that my mind's

eye can encompass in one look the whole landscape of the poem,” reinforcing the impact of *Letter* as an expansive, “momentous” enterprise.

Of course, there is no guarantee in friendship that one’s friend will be a good or insightful reader. It is likely that many of McGrath’s readers did not fully understand the poem, or have a complete grasp on the scope of the work. But recalling Whitman, it is *not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does*. Perhaps the most telling comment in the letter above is Carolyn’s feeling that “she should somehow be ‘into’ poetry to really understand the poem.” The tragedy of poetry in America is not that we suffer for great poets, but that we suffer for great *readers* of poetry. Because of the lingering effects of modernism and the perception that poems must be difficult to be any good, readers have been turned away from poetry, believing themselves to be inadequate to the demands of great poems. Regardless of whether McGrath’s friends were reading *Letter* “correctly,” the archive contains overwhelming evidence that they were at least *reading* it. And for McGrath, it did not matter if his friends could gloss every allusion or explicate every theme; it was enough that they kept their coconuts wrong side outwards.

## II. Intellectual Proletariat

In the first part of *Letter*, McGrath depicts well enough his own experience at the mid-century equivalent in his own peregrinations from college to college. But like Whitman, McGrath did not presume upon the moral weight of his own experience, save to tell it intelligently. In a letter exchange with Dale Jacobson, touching on these matters—including the difficulty of distinguishing the labor of social change from that of academic complacency—Jacobson’s generous reply was that “. . . an education . . . is more about a way of life than a path

to action” but always confronts us with a difficult distance. The *distance* referenced is a major theme of Jacobson’s long-poem, “Factories and Cities,” and can be traced back to McGrath’s dedication of *Letter*: “And for all of us / Together / A little while / On the road through.” It is what we have to travel, cross, transgress at times, and never quite reach the end of: “this historical juggernaut we are condemned to roll forward or be crushed by,” in Jacobson’s words.<sup>43</sup>

As a poem obsessed with work, it might be easy to misinterpret *Letter* as an ode to manual labor. Indeed, the sections dealing with Cal, one of the boy-protagonist’s early heroes, is full of pathos for the farm-hands and rues the brutality of an overseeing uncle. But the patient reader discovers in the later parts a higher calling to the work ahead. As Engel puts it, “One of the things is that the poem wants to discover and control the past in order to do something about the future.” While McGrath makes use in the later parts of *Letter*, as a particularly critical metaphor, the mythos of Hopi practice and prophecy, it is to invoke the idea that poet and reader alike are involved in building a new and better world (NDQ 85, 36).

In his response to concerns over the probity of my academic resolve, Jacobson summoned Tom McGrath and William Blake in the same breath:

Certainly, wouldn’t you say, making widgets someplace is doing little beyond earning a living, as they put it, producing for the current system, adding surplus labor value to the one percent? I don’t want to suggest that social change happens in or because of Higher Education, and education and teaching add wealth to the wealthy too, but they let you do other things also, and sometimes, teaching (within limits) allows you to raise doubts and even consciousness. [...] If Blake can have purpose, then it seems to me we should not underestimate intellectual contribution, particularly from someone who is, as Tom would say, already

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<sup>43</sup> November 11, 2012.

awake. So few seem to be, in my view, among academics, or even among poets....<sup>44</sup>

The point here and in *Letter* is not to focus on the kind of job one has, but in the labor we share willingly to make the round-song and build the kachina, or some augur of a better world. The awareness attributed to Blake, echoing famously from “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”—“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite”—is not only the province of intellectuals, academics, and poets.

When McGrath was asked about his audience in a letter from Frederick Stern, Professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he introduced the term “intellectual proletariat” to describe who he had in mind when writing: “I once had an audience of the ‘intellectual proletariat’ and some proletarian intellectuals & hip workers. It was that audience I thought of if I thought of an audience at all.”<sup>45</sup> Even in these vague and potentially confusing categories, we get a sense of who McGrath is writing for, and this was reaffirmed by Jacobson during our conversation. There was a visceral appreciation for engaged readers from all walks of life, whether fitting the style of progressive college student or union laborer; the emphasis was on those who made it a priority to read with a purpose, and often.

McGrath’s own story is as rich as this potential audience, which is no coincidence. Spending his young years on a farm, becoming a Rhodes scholar, serving in the military during the Second World War, organizing dock workers in New York, teaching, writing poems and prose and screenplays, blacklisted by the Committee on Un-American Activities, living abroad in Portugal and Greece, killing a man to protect his family – McGrath’s biography can be both

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Undated letter. McGrath Papers, OGL #308, Elwyn B. Robinson Dept. of Spec Coll, Chester Fritz Library, UND.

alluring and alarming as a means of framing a life-poem such as *Letter*. But ultimately we have to find North Dakota, as McGrath himself returned to it in order to write:

In 1962 my wife and I left New York and drove to North Dakota to spend the winter in the abandoned family farmhouse. This move has something to do with the poems which I was writing then, and especially with the long poem, Letter.

Sometimes an institution, like a university library or historical society, makes examining an archive easy on you, puts everything you want to see in folders and boxes, catalogued and described, measured according to linear feet. But even then, the manuscripts are messy, the handwriting illegible, and the little phrases you find suggest a life outside of the spiral-bound notebook: “These reveries of a sleepy harp.” The actual dynamics of the work unsettle the idea of the archive as easily contained.

The challenge was augmented when I found something familiar, a passage in a notebook that I recognized from a printed text, the published book: “A poor man’s watch always runs fast. The rich man’s watch sweats money...” Where is *that* from? And the struggle to adapt the archive to the text begins.<sup>46</sup>

### III. Letters of (Mis)Direction

Dear Tom,

The fog is thick, the seagulls have all died of depression, and I’m writing 6 hours a day. In other words, Trish has gone to New York for a couple of weeks....Seeing how she and I think you’re the best poet in the five state, five country, five universe area, I think she should be able to turn up something for you. Also: she told me on the phone yesterday that during

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<sup>46</sup> From 2.II.3: “And time runs fast on a poor man’s watch” (154).

the course of a four hour lunch at the Algonquian with her new editor (Houghton Mifflin bought a prose book she's doing on Grandma Hampl and the End of An Era), as they were talking about poetry (and as this guy is the editor of HM's poetry series) say- Trish says, "And Tom McGrath, what do you think of his poetry?" "Well, uh, actually, you see, I..." "You mean you haven't read Tom McGrath?" says Trish over her lobster Supreme, choking discretely with surprise into her linen napkin. "Jim and I think he's the best poet in the country." Whereupon (after dessert, of course) she marches him over to the Gotham Book Mart and buys him the last copy of LETTER. Now if we can just get him to read it...

The comradeship covers a wide expanse, a five-universe one it seems, or at least from the forlorn Midwestern fields to the "lobster Supreme" of haute literateurs in New York City; and what I learned from my grandfather, who went door-to-door after he returned from the War, is that "nothing happens without a sale." McGrath's poetry is of the kind that when you look at it, the first response very well might be: *so what is it?* Is it modern? Is it political? Is it communist? Is it radical? Is it populist?

McGrath knew what Herb Blau often referred to as *difficult poems* that "smack you in the face when you try to read them"—and what these difficult poets were up to, clearly respecting their work. In particular, McGrath's penchant for Hart Crane (with whom he would have sympathized in trying to reinvent an American mythology), is resonant in the denser sections of *Letter*, especially those with complex historical movements and layered critiques of blind over-industrialization. There are many parts of *Letter* that I truly don't understand. But the thing which drew me back to the poem whenever I would get lost in the elusive symbolism is the

unmistakable voice that carries the long-line across states, countries, and potential universes, to which a reader attending to the round-song dimension of the work makes her own contribution.

In trying to understand what kind of poem I was reading, I turned to the letters of McGrath's physical archive that explicitly dealt with *Letter*. If I was unable to form an articulate position about the poem, how could I write about it? So with the help of McGrath's friends, I began to read *Letter* through the letters. "The fog is thick, the seagulls have all died of depression, and I'm writing 6 hours a day." And so I heard one of my favorite dark lines from the poem: "Nightmare, nightmare, struggle, despair and dream...". Many of McGrath's friends and former students, young writers like Dale Jacobson he helped find confidence and camaraderie, felt like he was writing *Letter* for them. Not mistakenly either, because he *was* writing it for them, those proletarian intellectuals and hip workers who were ceaseless in their support for McGrath and what another "Comerado" called "the great Orozco mural of Letter."

Tom – Comerado –

I have just finished the great Orozco mural of Letter – re-reading first part and intro during the gnarled Marxist psyche to all those shock-of-recognition ignitions in Part II. Of course, toward the end of the long reading, tears started to scald the pages a bit while "Night pure crystal coiled (Tom McGrath) in my ear like song" It's an overwhelming experience and won't – can't be gainsaid by the various Holy Roller's (Ginsberg etc) and Fauntleroy's Pitter Patterers (need I name them to you?)!

There is a clear protest here against the voices of poetic success, earned either through the pop-culture machine or the delicate "diplomacies" of publication and marketing, two avenues which

McGrath more or less barricaded with his political beliefs and relentless class consciousness. The reference to Orozco is not just in the content, but in the commitment as well. Where fancies might be favored and fondled within certain poetry circles, McGrath would easily be left off the guest list at the awards banquet. And if it were only his “gnarled Marxist psyche” that attracted certain readers to the fierce indictments of capitalism, we might understand why the more lyrical crowds could cover their ears. But Longshot O’Leary’s (one of McGrath’s poetic pseudonyms) organized labor poems were not being scalded with tears; passages such as the one excerpted above from *Letter*, which closes out Part One, were filling a spiritual need for his readers.

McGrath’s attraction to mysticism discussed earlier in this chapter, like Whitman’s, did not cloud his understanding of how to mediate poetic experience; McGrath was able to arouse the political passions while measuring his call-to-arms through poetic tradition. Section 5 closes Part One with the image of the coiling song, preceded by this stanza:

Now, though the Furies come, my furious Beast,  
 I have heard the Laughter.  
 And I go forward from catastrophe to disaster  
 Indifferent: singing:  
 My great ghosts and the zodiac of my dead  
 Swing round my dream.

In one episode from the young protagonist’s life, he and his brother lie in ambush for a banker coming to try to take the family farm. They hide in the bushes on one side of the coulee—a landscape noun often repeated throughout the poem—armed and ready to defend their home against the daemonic messenger of capitalism. The stage is set for tragedy; but Laughter finds the poet in memory. There is always vengeance for a ruined state, the furious soul-searching of a

young boy who holds death in his hands: “Agrarian Reformers” (312-313). The “kulak-cum-banker” never comes—“(we have waited a long time for the Kulak / To come into our sights!)”—and so he is spared his assault by the children of revolution, but the catastrophe still turns toward disaster.

Everything in *Letter* comes with a coaxial moment: the potential tragedy of the Kulak is turned upon the same grief of a “Corporate Structure” that ruins a good mind with profit. There is a necessary callousness with which we must live if we are to keep our Beast at bay. If there is rage in *Letter* it comes as a refuge, a resting place where catharsis is understood alongside the clear-cut coulees of transgression. It speaks to honesty, even in the more elusive sections, which made McGrath stand apart from his contemporaries:

...In McGrath you can see stated a perception about recent events, which the New Age prefers not to enter: he perceives a long grief come upon us, not allayed by Mailer and Lowell’s jocular appearances at rallies in Washington cathedrals, nor comforted by Kerouac’s sentimental prose, a grief which Ginsberg’s advocacy of drugs for everyone in the fifties does not interrupt but deepens...for Mailer, Lowell, Ginsberg, Kerouac are all shoots from the wealth tree, which got so much fertilizer during World War II and has shown such a fantastic growth record since.  
(Bly 132)

Robert Bly joins the Commerado in criticism of Ginsberg, adding perhaps some Pitter Patterers of his own.<sup>47</sup> This “long grief come upon us” is long indeed, and I would argue still very much upon us. Who cannot be shaken, those who are “as Tom would say, already awake,” by the perverse reaches of consumer capitalism? How can I not slip into a fit of rage when I read in the local newspaper about companies making billions in profits excused from paying state taxes,

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<sup>47</sup> Or could be referring to the very same ones. Oh! What is left unsaid in all the letters of the Poetic Archive!

while lobbyists ensure legislation to protect and extend the tax breaks that deprive the state of more than enough revenue to bridge the widening gap in education funding?<sup>48</sup> These companies may have started in our community and once been good neighbors, but when the kulak-cum-banker seeks profit at the expense of social welfare, the “wealth tree” has been growing poisoned fruit.

And who, knowing the value and virtue of friendship, would compromise integrity for the interests of outside influences? The political commitment to an agrarian reform runs through McGrath’s work. But eventually a family would force McGrath into uncomfortably territory, all-too-familiar for a struggling poet. As testament to the honesty extending from his poetry into his relationships, and vice versa, there were letters in the archive both sweet and sour. Having constructed McGrath as the great singer of noble-fisted Labor, I was humbled to find signs of his own trying-to-make-do.

Dear Tom:

Your ms. came today. I wish it were you instead...if you think of this book as a possible source of income, then disregard whatever I may say. You have to be your own judge of relative values, of course....Taken as a whole, the book seems to me to be a mishmash. I don’t see any point to it....In short, you have done all this before – many times as a matter of fact – and this collection is one of the least significant.

Honest criticism in the face of material necessity. McGrath’s friends knew he was doing something lasting for American poetry, and pushed him ever onward toward *Letter*. But he now had a wife and son, “new obligations” that caused him to consider taking a teaching job across the Red River at Moorhead (MN) where he would be given more classes. You can hear the

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<sup>48</sup> “High-tech expects breaks while education funding suffers,” Brier Dudley, *Seattle Times*, 27 January 2013.

tension though, the attempt at humor despite grave circumstances, and the guilt associated with prioritizing money over community.

Dear John:

I'm sending along the signed contract but hoping that there was a mistake somewhere and that you will tear this one up and send me one with a bit more money.

Dear John:

I promised to write you a letter before or around April to say whether or not I was coming back to NDSU....The money is less important than the hours, to me, but now I have to begin to think more about money than in the past—I'm sure you understand that I'm not trying to play poker on this. To complicate things I'm still a local patriot—hard lines for an internationalist!—and I hope and believe that there is a Dakota renaissance (never could spell) in process....This has been a hard letter to write. As you can see, my feelings are mixed—if I don't come back I'll feel a bit like a deserter; but I have new obligations.

Despite McGrath's distaste for discussing financial matters, and a definite resistance to the values associated with the accumulation of wealth, he was frank and sincere when it came to livelihood. Teaching poetry workshops on the cusp of what would soon become a burgeoning industry of MFA programs in Creative Writing, McGrath was a generation behind writers like Cleanth Brooks (his teacher at Louisiana State University), Elizabeth Bishop and Theodore

Roethke. These poets set the example for future writers who would never make a living selling their poems, instead earning a salary from academic appointments.<sup>49</sup>

This institutional affiliation would cause problems for McGrath, a one-time member of the Communist Party and clear sympathizer, as evidenced by letters such as this one:

Dear Mr. McGrath,

We operate a CP [Communist Party] bookstore here in Aberdeen.... We plan to run a candidate for the U.S. Senate in South Dakota in 1974 against George McGovern and the GOP candidate.... We would like to talk to you about N-S Dak. politics. If you have any immediate suggestions on our campaign, we'd be eager to hear them.

This in 1974, years after McGrath was interrogated by the Committee on Un-American Activities and blacklisted from teaching. In his essay, "Thomas McGrath: Another Agrarian Revolt," Glenn Sheldon is quick to reference the top entry in *Modern American Poetry: An Online Journal and Multimedia Companion to Anthology of Modern American Poetry*: "McGrath's Statement to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), McGrath's Radicalism, About World War II, About McCarthyism, About the Vietnam War." Sheldon explains how these entries reveal "much about how McGrath is perceived and has been received by critics and readers" (Sheldon 100).

There is no doubt the overtly political poems are easier to read, irascible, rambunctious, and mostly irreverent of American neo-liberal capitalism; but as is often the case, accessibility pigeonholes a poet into promotion of their "greatest hits." Going back to the critical comment

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<sup>49</sup> In Chapter XI of *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge warns any aspiring writers: "But woefully will that man find himself mistaken, who imagines that the profession of literature, or (to speak more plainly), the *trade* of authorship, besets its members with fewer or with less insidious temptations, than the church, the law, or the different branches of commerce" (159).

about McGrath's manuscript that has "done all this before," we can imagine the aging rock-stars who are incessantly playing the same hit songs over and over again to please a narrow-minded crowd. And while the demands of financial stability would rear its ugly head (or heads, that foul hyrda), forcing McGrath to write uncomfortable letters asking for more money, and publish new volumes of poems without any point to them, it is ultimately the conviction of his political beliefs that allow readers to fully appreciate the task undertaken in *Letter*. His refusal to cooperate with the HUAC underscores the commitment to both his poetry and his profession. Without the latter, *Letter* would become an even more daunting task. But he risks it all to set the only example he can:

In the first place, as a teacher, my first responsibility is to my students. To cooperate with this committee would be to set for them an example of accommodation to forces which can only have, as their end effect, the destruction of education itself.... In a certain sense, I have no choice in the matter—the students would not want me back in the classroom if I were to take any course of action other than the one I am pursuing.

Secondly, as a teacher, I have a responsibility to the profession itself. We teachers have no professional oath of the sort that doctors take, but there is a kind of unwritten oath which we follow to teach as honestly, fairly and fully as we can. The effect of the committee is destructive of such an ideal, destructive of academic freedom.... A teacher who will tack and turn with every shift of the political wind cannot be a good teacher. I have never done this myself, nor will I ever. (Sheldon 101).

McGrath was teaching at the Los Angeles State College at the time, from where he would subsequently be fired, following his HUAC testimony. McCarthy's crazed and paranoid patriotism is the initial backdrop of *Letter*, a laughable lunacy if it all weren't so deadly serious. The first lines of the long-poem locate the incipit event, and already know what it will take to persevere long passes, dark mountains, and months of snow...

– “From here it is necessary to ship all bodies east.”

I am in Los Angeles, at 2714 Marsh Street,

Writing, rolling east with the earth, drifting toward Scorpio,

thinking,

Hoping toward laughter and indifference.

“They came through the passes,

they crossed the dark mountains in a month of snow,

Finding the plain, the bitter water,

the iron rivers of the black North.

Horsemen,

Hunters of the hornless deer in the high plateaus of that country,

They traveled the cold year, died in the stone desert.” (*Letter 3*)

McGrath did not need a Hippocratic Oath to substantiate his values as a teacher, and he certainly was not going to let Senator McCarthy's fear-mongering prevail upon his poetic sensibilities. Instead, McGrath looked to ship the dead weight of his era back to the graveyard of crony politics and capitalism. Writing from 2714 Marsh Street, at the far edge of poetic vision (all the California poets looking still farther west toward the Orient), he turns his attention back to the

“black North” and a pseudo-autobiographical childhood: “– And at the age of five ran away from home” (4).

McGrath’s communal message is not of the manifesto genre, though it is manifestly allied with the “So be it” ethos which still preserves a self-determination to do things right. The argument here is to show just how integrated his work in *Letter* was with his work in life. Similar to Stephen Vincent Benét, who gave dozens of young poets an outlet in the Yale Younger Poets Series, McGrath gave young and predominantly regional poets a chance to publish in “little magazines” such as *Crazy Horse* and *Dakota Territory*, both of which he helped to start. The second of these, lesser known, is the “DT” referred to in the following letter:

Dear Tom:

Just a quick note to thank you for your issue of DT. You really gave us some fine poems from young people whom I hadn’t seen before and I’m really glad for that....Just wanted you to know I appreciate your effort in getting this issue out...it’s lovely and good of you to help the kids Tom. I guess I put my money there too....Tom, come down...there’s always room here for you.

There’s always room within the poem, the long-line extending across Dakota plains into the “light of speech” (13). The stories are pseudo-autobiographical, but the characters live in eternity. The likes of Cal, “one of the bundle teamsters, / My sun-blackened Virgil of the spitting circle” (22), and from the fields into a New York labor movement with Showboat Quinn extolling, “The fuckin’ proletariat / Is in love with its fuckin’ chains. How do you put this fuckin’ / Strike on a cost-plus basis?” (31). *Letter* is full of so many voices it becomes its own archive, cataloguing poets such as “Dreamy” Don Gordon, Cleanth Brooks, “Robert Bly of the Misty Isles,” Jim Wright, and others, along with folk heroes from all walks of life.

One of the most memorable rabble-rousers in the poem is Bill Dee. His full story is told late in Part Two, as the poet rattles “along in his ancient car,” heading to Dee’s “squatter” cabin (252). In this section, bardic recollection celebrates the autonomous spirit, a recurring ethical practice within the structure of *Letter*, and a function of the round-song. Here, Bill Dee explains the modernizing shift from horse to tractor—technological progress in capitalist terms, but to the “last of the old bronc-stompers,” a carnivorous trick to give the banks better margins. Ironically, because this agro-business model of industrialization eventually chased small farmers off their land, the depleted population and abandonment of an old way of life has allowed Dee to live comfortably within the liminal space of overlapping histories. Truly anachronistic, Bill Dee escapes the temporality of the page and carries the imagination into the Dakota landscape. And if Dakota is everywhere, so is Bill Dee, an outlaw charm for *Letter*’s agrarian initiation.

#### IV. Archival Criticism

Part Two, Book V, Section 3, pages 250-258 in the Copper Canyon full-text edition (1997), is copied below in entirety.

#### 3. And the people?

“First they broke land that should not ha’ been broke

and they *died*

Broke. Most of ‘em. And after the tractor ate the horse —

It ate *them*. Most of ‘em. And now, a few lean years,

And the banks will have it again. Most of it. Why, hellfar,

Once a family could live on a quarter and now a hull section won’t do!

Half of the people gone left the country; the town’s dyin’;

And this crop uh hayseeds gutless – wouldn't say shit and themselves  
Kickin' it out their beds. It's hard lines, buddy!"

Bill Dee speaking his piece: hard times

In the country.

Bill Dee: last of the old bronc-stompers

From the gone days of Montana mustangs we used on the farms  
For light work and for riding and the pure hell of having  
Outlaws around...

The same Bill Dee of the famous removable

Eye: which he'd slip in your shot glass sometimes – O blinding and sobering  
Sight!

– “Just take a swally uh *that* and say what yer innards

Perdick fer the follyin' winter! Take a *glass* eye view of the world 'n  
*Change yore luck!*”

Not only a glass eye: a gab

Nine miles longer than a telephone wire.

A sense of style:

Could roll cigarettes on a bucking horse in a high wind –

But only one-handed of course...

Was the greatest success I know

Out of the old days still alive

alone

but alive –

Had decided he wanted to be a bronc-snapper and a cowboy and *made* it –

On the last ranch on the hither side of the moon.

And lived there

Still: on the Bonesack.

(Ranch in the Sand Hills.)

And a small cabin

Built there: of elm and cottonwood made: squatter –

“Ain’t a hell of a lot, but it’s more ’n’ some got: *’n’ hol’ that, Tiger!*”

He rattles on as we rattle along in his ancient car,

And that’s where we’re heading: down to the Hills in the late-winter day.

Under the thin snow the Hills show no sign

Of natural order.

Sand from a postglacial delta, the winds

Pushed them into no pattern, and now the grass half-holds

These random structures: holds for our lives’ long moment only,

Perhaps.

Under the noon-high sun the blow-outs’ sandwhite

Eyes glare back at the cold light.

The sun clots

In the bunched buckbrush, is caught in a patch of briar and bramble –

And a deer jumps out of the light, flies over a fence, sails

Across the top of a hill like a puff of cloud!

“*That one,*

I’m savin’ a while yet,” Bill says: as if it were something he owned.

Scrub oak on the hills; chokecherry; staghorn sumac

By the river’s edge...

and there the ancient and moving order

Of the living water: now ranged in its wintry keep.

Where the bluff drops

Steeply down toward the ice are the sedgy halls and freeholds

Of mink and muskrat on the swampy ground and then the river.

“Old Sheyenne got better fishin’ each year,” Bill says.

“Them honyhocks around here just too *lazy* to fish. They druther

Buy them damn *froze* fish in them plastic bags.

Why, hellfar, you remember that place where that spring comes in –

Nigh my cabin? Used to take fish out of there with *scoop* shovels –

Gunnysacksful! ’n’ people with pitchforks spearin’ the big uns!

They don’t fish there no more – nobody but me. Why, boy,

We get you some whoppin’ Northerns ’n’ the best-eatin’ goddamn Walleyes –

Takes an illegal net to illegal fish, ’n’ I *got one!*”

Illegal fish flesh and fowl – about all that he lives on.

And into the Hills' lost places: now, following  
The river, and again buckjumping over the iron, faceless  
Ranch roads: opening the gates in fences, kittycornering and quartering  
The waste...

Dead houses here in the bottomlands:

and eyeless

Schoolhouse, abandoned, crumbles;

Undenominational forever,

A church is stumbling into an empty future, lofting

A headless and rotting Christ on the cracked spool of a cross:

Unspinning god at a loss in the psalm of the man-eating wind.

“Ever’body here got blown out in the last of the dusters.

Should never have been farmed no-way. The country’s sure empty. But me –

I like it this way.

And the animals comin’ back! Why, hellfar,

They ain’t only pheasant and grouse – man, there’s wild *turkey*.

There’s deer, there’s foxes, there’s – last night I swear I heard a coyoot –

Heard it or dreamed it...They’re comin’ back sure – the old days.”

Dreamed it; no doubt. And dreamed the old days as well: doubtless.

Another fast dreamer...

At last we arrive at the shack.

Here's Uncle Chaos come to meet me halfway!

Seems so:

Near the house an antique car is racing into the ground  
And releasing its onetime overpriced atoms into the void  
At the speed of rusty light.

Over the doorway a splintering  
Rack of flinty deer horns starts no fires in this wind.  
Hung from the wall, abandoned gear goes into the weather:  
Worn spurs and rotting saddles and bridles  
emblems

Of the gone days.

Indoors, deerskins cover the floors,  
The bed, the few chairs.

There's a new shotgun.

A rifle

My father gave him – 25-20 Winchester brushgun.  
Traps, snares, spears and fishing tackle: the illegal  
Net...

Ground zero

Bill Dee

at home on the wind,

Adrift and at home in the universe

alone...

alive...

And the others –

I think of Tiger Good in his shack on the Maple River

Trapping and hunting his way through the big freeze of the Thirties;

Of the squatters in Troop Number Nine's log cabin here on the Sheyenne;

Of that nameless one who lived as a hermit here in the Hills;

And of Moonlight John: his home a demounted two-door car-body

Beside Route 46.

Froze to death there in a three-day blizzard:

Winter of the blue snow...

mavericks

loners

free men

And what's to show for it?

For Bill Dee in winter a treeful

Of moonlight.

The snow and the river.

The lonely meat roads he follows

Tracking illegal deer.

Feuds with the game wardens.

And in summer

Forty acres of butterflies fenced by vertical sun.

Now: mackerel sky: the cloudy bones of the wind;  
Slow air climbing the light and the little stair  
Of dustmote, waterdrop, iceflake weightless celestial blue...  
Nights with the winter moon caught in the stars' far  
Houses...

And noon blazing cold in its cage of fire...

\* \* \* \* \*

“Seems like it was right here somewhere – place we went wrong.”  
– And the voice of the dead fisherman (still then alive in the future!)  
Tears at my ear, at my heart, like a mad bird screaming  
Or keening ghost...

Lost...

Sunk with all hands...

Here.

Somewhere...

My grandfather saw the beginning and I am seeing  
The end of the old free life of this place – or what freedom  
There was: the round song at least: the solidarity  
In the circle of hungry equals.

Or if there was nothing else –

Resistance...

And of Bill Dee and those others...

survivors merely,

Anachronistic.

Nothing to build on there, though they keep  
(Still!) the living will to endure and resist.

Alone.

Alive.

Outlaws.

Riding a cold trail.

Holy.

\* \* \* \* \*

If New York holds history locked in its icy museums

stony

Keeps no wind can shift or shake

its falling walls

Spalling

unspelling the rebel names while the prisoners sleep

In the night-rock...

If Los Angeles' windless calm is only

End of the continental drift

decaying granite

no house

Will stand

and change *there* merely the empty alternatives ranging

The sounding void...

then what star steers and stands, what mansion

Founded on fire brightens towards us what sea will call us

Saying: here is the road to the ancient future light?

Exhaust these four: what's left?

Nothing.

Nothing?

Man is the fate of his place, and place the fate of the man

And of time

A beginning then

to know one's place.

At least

That.

The first rule of the “Dakota is everywhere” principle is that in order for a place to be everywhere at once, it must be in one place at all times. North Dakota existed long before the state had a name, and even in its most amorphous form, had the potential to become what it is now. An archive is the same way. In order for me to theorize a limitless archive, expanding into multiple textual and meta-textual dimensions, there must be a precisely locatable archive, representing a distinct potentiality of research. That formal archive is held by three different institutions: University of North Dakota (Grand Rapids), North Dakota State University (Fargo), and Minnesota State University Moorhead (Moorhead).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> University of North Dakota, Chester Fritz Library: Thomas McGrath Papers, 1940-1999; North Dakota State University, Institute for Regional Studies: Thomas McGrath Papers, 1970-1971; Minnesota State University Moorhead, Livingston Lord Library: Thomas McGrath Papers (S2728).

McGrath's principle, however, challenges the boundaries of the formal archive and creates the conditions for the poetic archive to emerge.<sup>51</sup> Bill Dee's story becomes the vision of narrative bibliography, driving down old ranch roads in search of something more satisfying than folders full of yellowed paper. This particular section becomes a way to read *Letter* through the round-song, enacting one of the most powerful lessons of literature, often maligned due to misunderstanding: mimesis. I can emulate Bill Dee's life no more than the poet who is his passenger; but we can both find the same spirit alongside the back-roads of the poetic archive. I may not know what I am looking for when I set out on a research trip, but I know the method of travel.

Like Whitman, whose poetic process required direct engagement with the world (both in nature and in society), McGrath is no armchair poet. *Letter* traverses cities, states, and continents, always returning in some way or another to the landscape and agrarian ethos of North Dakota. The fact that 25 years separated the publications of Parts One & Two (Swallow, 1962) from Parts Three & Four (Copper Canyon, 1985) is a significant detail in the bibliographic narrative of the poem. Part Two ends with a string of place names, indicating the distances across which the poem was composed: “—*North Dakota—Skyros—Ibiza—Agaete—Guadalajara*” (271). After a duration of over two decades, McGrath needed to remind his readers where he left off. He continues the last lines from Part Two, “I'll take you... / my darlings, my dear ones... / over the river,” with the first lines in Part Three: “I'll take you over the river, over the winter ice...” (275).

With a poem as long and spread out (over time and space) as *Letter*, it can be difficult to keep track of where you are as a reader. One feature that helps mediate this difficulty is the use

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<sup>51</sup> What I am calling McGrath's *principle*—“North Dakota is everywhere”—is not to be confused with “McGrath's Law”: IN A LAND WHERE EVERYMAN'S A KING, SOME WILL BE CUTTING TURF” (366), or the Hand's rule of thumb: “Classical Ass / Is Hard to Pass” (287).

of characters, many of whom make repeat appearances, in the poem. Some of these characters are real friends, and they exist in both the poem and the archive (Don Gordon, Bob Bly, Dale Jacobson to name a few). As readers, we see more than the poet's identification with Dee's fast dreaming; we understand the implicit argument running through the entire section that poetic voice belongs to the activity of the round-song, not a singular author, but the exemplary evidence of poetic outliers, like Dee and the other friends and rebels who will not be lost emblems on the "cold trail" or in New York's "icy museums."

Bill Dee reemerges, resilient as ever, in Part Three: "Hi, Bill! I see / You're still viewing the world through that obfuscatory glass eye—" (296). Half-blind but also half-seer, Dee stands in for the kind of prophet McGrath wants to rattle the too-content coterie kowtowing to a defunct version of the American Dream.

A confusion of waters, surely, and pollution at the head of the river!

Our history begins with the first wound: with Indian blood

Coloring the water of the original springs—earlier, even:

Europe: the indentured...

And the local colorist *still* going back:

To the Past: to HEADwaters and HEARTlands (he thinks):

to camp out in the American Dream (beside still waters!):

To atomic cookouts: "Bring your own nigger or *be* one!" (remember?)

To the false Past...

Which we must restructure if we're to create

The commune

and the round dance... (315)

The false past with its icy museums and histories of violence and oppression must be restructured. The past is not forgotten; it is false because of injustice and alienation, and McGrath is constantly witnessing and working to transform atomic cookouts into cantrip circles. In the gap between publication of Parts One & Two and Parts Three & Four, McGrath's friends insisted that he keep going, pushing the poem forward. In a review of Parts Three & Four, Fred Whitehead talks about the "urgency" of McGrath's mission to "demonstrate the hidden continuity in all peoples' struggles for a decent life" (Whitehead 155). But this urgency was not the poet's alone; it was shared by his readers and friends, and the fear that "if he did not tell the connections, they would be missed, they would remain buried and submerged" (155) was a collective anxiety.

The scope of the metaphor to restructure the false past extends from McGrath's characters to those who take up his work, and its durable enactments: "A beginning then / To know one's own place." This is an echo from earlier in Part Two, in the first lines of Book V, when the poet announces his return to North Dakota and the farmhouse:

the old

Dominion of work and want (but all in a new style now)  
 My turnaround point and old-time stomping ground  
 To find the place we went wrong and blaze the trail through the dark,  
 To make the Kachina...

night journey inbound dream

Voyage... (238)

The mimetic impulse of the poetic archive is to fashion the method from the work, and in this case, according to the terms of McGrath's own enterprise: "night journey inbound dream /

Voyage.” The economy of the long-poem is not on a cost-plus basis; it deals in the shady market of the cantrip circle, an exchange of work and love and hunger where the collective desire to make the kachina, as metaphors of a mode of participation in the making of a new world, shows us that place—a thousand places!—where we went wrong. And once we have seen it, or heard it, “like a mad bird screaming / Or keening ghost,” as I found it spending nights alone in the plains of North Dakota, grief-stricken by the bleached-white skull of a buffalo on the banks of the Little Missouri—my presence made possible first by extermination of Native Americans and then by the establishment of a National Park to protect what is left of the wild buffalo herds—the nightmare and despair giving way in the early light to a pair of beavers slapping their tails against the river to scare off predatory coyotes—I emerged from my tent and felt that same living will to endure and resist.

The desolation of my travels through the North Dakota landscape, matched with the fellowship of nights spent in taverns like the Sand Dune Saloon, or mornings spent in conversation with McGrath’s old friends—all of these experiences speak to an *everywhere* which can be reclaimed no matter how far from the physical archive. And North Dakota itself, so long a forgotten state, has become a central figure in popular media. A recent *New York Times Magazine* cover article, “The Luckiest Place on Earth,” tells the current story of an oil and gas rich state that has become the largest oil producer in the country after Texas, with a monthly output of 20.97 million barrels (Brown 29). The article’s author, Chip Brown, is not without his own poetic revelations as he uncovers the boom-town tales surrounding the Bakken formations and the hub of Williston, ND.

For many years North Dakota has been a frontier—not the classic 19<sup>th</sup> century kind based on American avarice and the lure of opportunity in unsettled lands, but

the kind that comes afterward, when a place has been stripped bare or just forgotten because it was a hard garden that no one wanted too much to begin with, and now it has reverted to the wilderness that widens around dying towns. In a way, of course, this kind of frontier is as much a state of mind as an actual place, a melancholy mood you can't shake as you drive all day in a raw spring rain with nothing but fence posts and featureless cattle range for company thinking, *Is this all there is?* until finally you get out at some windswept intersection and gratefully fall on the fellowship of a dog-faced bar with a jukebox of songs about people on their way to somewhere else. (Brown 24)

Wrapped up in the poetry and the politics and the tremendous amounts of money flowing into North Dakota is the archive. Ironically, my work on McGrath has generated interest at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks (UND), where the university's budget is one of the healthiest of any state school in the country due to the boom and surplus. There are research opportunities at UND through funds directly sourced from an industry about which McGrath would have grave reservations. The work of building the kachina is never a totally clean enterprise....

The immediate fellowship I felt from reading Brown's article is, however, testament to the everywhere of North Dakota. The tens of thousands of workers flooding into the state to support the boom are certainly not Bill Dee's "old days" returning, but they are reminders of the fundamental reliance upon labor and the necessity of resources that define how we interact with our environment. And with the future placed precariously in front of us, with opportunity reflected in the dangers and warning-signs of climate change, there is also much reason for despair. It becomes increasingly clear that politics is incapable of addressing the challenges we

face, and all the rhetoric of global warming cannot convince the majority of Americans to live any differently or consume any less than we have been since the 1980's. It takes a voice like McGrath, which only has meaning within the comradeship of his readers and the shared, collective experience of the round-song, to pierce through the pros and cons, and truly weigh the value of what we leave behind as a legacy.

Creation begets creation. This is, perhaps, the most meaningful lesson I have learned from the archive. McGrath starts a long poem, sends some sections to friends, publishes the first two books, receives scores of letters in affirmation of the road ahead. He continues to write, to teach, to help younger poets find their way through the dark. Many scattered poems, mostly attached to the ends of letters, were sent as offerings, amulets to help keep the hunger alive.

And you, Tom McGrath,  
 and you, my stately elder brother?  
 May you live a thousand years and longer,  
 a bright star shining on alone  
 in some wholly attainable heaven,  
 a singular glimmer at the end  
 of some old high road  
 of inexhaustible night.

And...

Yea, we have known the anxieties of language,  
 the noise of traffic we overwhelm,  
 the small combustions when comrades die.

Aye, we have shared some mysteries,  
we have saved the grandfather coats.

And then, when we least expect,  
some of our seed is reborn.

I find it fitting that now the image of the “grandfather coats” calls to mind the extremely popular song by a local recording artist, Macklemore, titled “Thrift Shop,” wherein he asks genuinely, “No for real, ask your grandpa, can I have his hand-me-downs?” (Macklemore). If thrift-shop culture can be fashionable, why do we have so much trouble envisioning a return to an agrarian ethos that privileges the values of place, labor, and collective dreaming? The “anxieties of language” and the “noise of traffic” surround us, and with Creeley in one ear—“why not, buy a goddamn big car”—there is McGrath in the other: “Explicit carmen” (407).

That last line of *Letter* might seem elusive out of context, but the use is intended to suggest those who are driving the work forward: “*Bless! Grant him gift and gear, / Against the night and riding of his need, / To seed the turning furrow of his light*” (407). Echoing his friend, or his friend echoing McGrath, the pleasant surprise of a reborn seed—and this image so true to the archive and to the evolving method that has been the focus of this experiment. There is not a succinct way to put this, or an academic argument that ultimately matters more to me than the turning furrow, but the way of reading a book like *Letter* through the archive only made more and more sense as it grew into a narrative. And despite the incompleteness I feel in these closing remarks, I am reminded of a final anecdote which comes again from Ted Kooser. I wrote the following after hearing Kooser read at a Copper Canyon Press event in Seattle (2010):

Even last night, telling of my travels around Sheldon to former poet laureate Ted Kooser, who knew McGrath personally, I was reminded of what McGrath's friends and contemporaries all seemed to know: *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* is an important work of American literature that needs to find new readers. Kooser impressed this upon me directly, and then told one final story about McGrath.

During a literature conference in Minnesota (1989), a group of Midwestern writers went out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant. McGrath was not well, his health deteriorating, and as he sat across from Kooser he told him this was likely the last time they would see each other. Kooser and the other writers teased McGrath about his fatalism, insisting he had many more years to come. After the meal was finished and the fortune cookies passed around, everybody read their fortune to the group. When McGrath's turn came, he split open his cookie with aged and shaky hands, only to find it empty.

### Chapter Three: The Great Chain of Bibliography

The universe, in short, was made in order that all possible forms of being might manifest themselves after their kinds.

– A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*

In Arthur Lovejoy's 1936 study, *The Great Chain of Being*, he describes the continuity of intellectual history that led to a celebration of *plenitude*, stretching from Plato's *Timaeus* to the Romantic ideal. Lovejoy defines the Romanticist program through a dedication to the universal, and then goes on to qualify the progressiveness of the ideal:

It must be universal, not in the restrictive sense of seeking uniformity of norms and universality of appeal, but in the expansive sense of aiming at the apprehension and expression of every mode of human experience. Nothing should be too strange or too remote, nothing too lofty or too low, to be included in its scope; no *nuance* of character or emotion can be so delicate and elusive, or so peculiar, that the poet or novelist ought not to attempt to seize it and convey its unique *quale* to his readers. (Lovejoy 306)

If poetry is a Form, or an Idea, its manifestations should be both progressive and universal. The description above strikes quite a chord with Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, seeking an expansive and nuanced apprehension. And there is also the tension between the potential aggregate of experience and the particularities of character. For Whitman, this is the most important question facing the future of democracy: balancing the average with the personal.

The grey-bearded author of the 1871 “memoranda,” originally published in a soft binding of “light yellow-green coated stiff wrappers” (*Bib.* 157), would have found much sympathy with Lovejoy’s study. Lovejoy makes no mention of Whitman in *The Great Chain of Being*, but it would be hard to identify a more fitting poet-of-plenitude than Walt Whitman. This chapter will take *Democratic Vistas* as its primary subject, and also use the *Walt Whitman Archive* (<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/>) as an example of the emerging trend of digital archives. The point is to round out this dissertation with a nod to the future, but also to ask some fundamental questions about digital archives as a necessary condition of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Before turning to the text and the archive, a few words about the publication of *Democratic Vistas*: “Whitman wrote on 13 August 1868, ‘I am working at my leisure on my little book’ ....On 21 July 1870 he wrote that the book would be ‘printed this fall’ and on 10 October he said he was ‘just delivered’ of it” (157). At least 500 copies were printed by J. S. Redfield in New York. The first publication of *Democratic Vistas* was not, however, the first appearance of its material in print. The 1871 Redfield edition included sections from previous publications, “Democracy” (December 1867, *Galaxy Magazine*) and “Personalism” (May 1868, *Galaxy Magazine*). Between 1871 and 1949, six editions were issued (A4.1-A4.6 in the Whitman *Bibliography*). But this number is misleading. Following the 1871 publication, Whitman combined the text of *Democratic Vistas* with *Specimen Days* and some other works, creating what became a familiar publication of his prose work: *Specimen Days and Collect* (first edition in 1882, A11.1). In particular, the edition used for this chapter, is bibliographic entry A11.4: *Specimen Days, Democratic Vistas, and Other Prose* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1935). It is a first edition and bears this sticky note on the verso leaf (blank) across from the “Contents:”

HELLO!

The Library has had  
this book since 1951.  
It is a first edition  
from 1935. Please  
refrain yourself from  
WRITING all over it.

- a patron

1994

The value of the book for this anonymous patron is apparently in its status as a first edition. What this reader (or can we even assume the patron *is* a reader?) did not seem to know is that this particular book only had one printing, thereby diminishing the value of a “first.” With an original price of \$1.00 in 1935, the price of this edition has, in fact, remained more or less the same. Amazon.com has multiple copies listed around the \$20 range; and according to the westegg.com inflation calculator, the value of that 1935 dollar is \$16.51 in 2012 (<http://www.westegg.com/inflation/>).

All of this is to show that while there is often an implicit assumption about the value of historical materials, a book, or an archive, cannot justify its value according to conservation and preservation alone. While it might be rude and against proper decorum to write all over a library book, the value of this particular copy of *Specimen Days, Democratic Vistas, and Other Prose* is not tied to its worth as a historical object at all. Perhaps most amusing about the sticky note is that it seems to completely disregard the message of one of the book’s primary texts. Without

athletic readers, Whitman argues in *Democratic Vistas*, the great literatures of the future will have no reason to write.

## II.

### A cool of books

will sometimes lead the mind to libraries  
of a hot afternoon, if books can be found  
cool to the sense to lead the mind away.

for there is a wind or ghost of a wind  
in all books echoing the life  
there, a high wind that fills the tubes  
of the ear until we think we hear a wind,  
actual .

to lead the mind away.

– W. C. Williams, *Paterson*

Book Three of William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* begins with an image and episode of the library. The text is sprinkled with bibliographic excerpts, most of which are identified in "Appendix C" of the edition. Williams is here reflecting on the very point to which this study is addressed: as the mind is led to the library, "cool to the sense" its ultimate value is *not* to "lead the mind away," but instead, to let us know that "there is a wind or ghost of a wind/ in all book echoing the life / there." As Williams continues in this book of *Paterson*, what he documents is

a terrible but transforming fire that destroys the library. For Williams, the transformation of the fire is a return to the wind, to the language, that in the library is but an echo.

It is a ghost story of sorts. It is the experience, not far from Lovejoy's Romantic ideal, of plenitude and nuance. The archive can truly be sublime, terrifying in its abundance and endless possibility, and rapturous in the pure sensation of discovery and possession. When we hear the wind actual, the life of poetry carries us away.

A first reading of *Democratic Vistas* will instill the clear argument of Whitman's future democracy: it must have its "great original literature" and "especially its archetypal poems" (*DV* 265). What is harder to wrestle with, upon subsequent readings, are the moral and religious grounds for his argument. "The priest departs," he announces, "the divine literatus comes" (265). We can be tempted to think that literature, therefore, supplants the need for religion. But this is not the case at all. It is, rather, a profoundly religious literature he imagines, not tethered to any dogma or religious institution, but powerful enough to bear the moral burden of a largely infidel society. Whitman oscillates time and again between despairing over a "crude" and "defective" people, and then resurrecting a grand faith in its stock personalities. "There is plenty of glamour about the most damnable crimes and hoggish meanness, special and general, of the feudal and dynastic world over there....But the [American] People are ungrammatical, untidy, and their sins gaunt and ill-bred" (276-7). One of the qualities that make *Democratic Vistas* challenging to read is its bi-polar treatment of "the People."

This treatment is not due to Whitman's inability to make up his mind. The conflict is, in fact, artificial; the People are laws unto themselves, and this is what we should be striving toward.

The purpose of democracy—supplanting old belief in the necessary absoluteness of establish'd dynastic rulership, temporal, ecclesiastical, and scholastic, as furnishing the only security against chaos, crime, and ignorance—is, through many transmigrations, and amid endless ridicules, arguments, and ostensible failures, to illustrate, at all hazards, this doctrine or theory that man, properly train'd in sanest, highest freedom, may and must become a law, a series of laws, unto himself, surrounding and providing for, not only his own personal control, but all his relations to other individuals, and to the State; and that, while other theories, as in the past histories of nations, have proved wise enough, and indispensable perhaps for their conditions, *this*, as matters now stand in our civilized world, is the only scheme worth working from, as warranting results like those of Nature's laws, reliable, when once establish'd, to carry on themselves.

(275)

It is imperative to the nation that each citizen becomes a law unto himself or herself. But this law cannot serve self-interest alone; in order for it to rule justly, it must extend into relationships with others. And in order for that to happen, it must have some kind of moral and religious backbone, spinal (an image Whitman repeats), allowing the average American to achieve highest freedom. “Is there a great moral and religious civilization—the only justification of a great material one?” (272).

Whitman is even more explicit about this requirement: “For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element” (282). What the reader has to keep in mind is that all of this talk about morality and religion is not intended to serve religious institutions, as, after all, the mainstay of the feudal system Whitman sees as anathema. The “divine literatus”

supplants the priest. Instead of church on Sundays, we should find our “common skeleton” in the libraries.<sup>52</sup>

It is a double spook—Whitman haunted by what is lacking and the *Paterson* poet haunted by the ghosts of plenitude, when they remain only ghosts or echoes. In the library, the poet struggles against the anxiety of the archive: “The Library is sanctuary to our fears” (WCW 98). He is left alone to catalogue history in newsprint.

Sit breathless

or still breathless. So be it. Then, eased

turn to the task. So be it :

Old newspaper files,

to find—a child burned in a field,

no language. Tried, aflame, to crawl under

a fence to go home. So be it. Two others,

boy and girl, clasped in each other’s arms

(clasped also by the water) So be it. Drowned

wordless in the canal. So be it. The Paterson

Cricket Club, 1896. A woman lobbyist. So

be it. Two local millionaires—moved away.

So be it. Another Indian rock shelter

found—a bone awl. So be it. The

old Rogers Locomotive Works. So be it.

Shield us from loneliness. So be it. The mind

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<sup>52</sup> Whitman writes that “the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me” (268).

Reels, starts back amazed from the reading .

So be it. (W. C. W. 98)

The “So be it” refrain echoes the last lines of *John Brown’s Body*: “If you at last must have a word to say, / Say neither, in their way, / ‘It is a deadly magic and accursed,’ / Nor ‘It is blest,’ but only ‘It is here’” (*JB* 377). In both of these modern texts the poet’s job is not to judge. The imagery in the newspaper files starts off heartbreaking, but then becomes pedestrian, suggesting a sequence of events from which no divine order or presence can be detected. The poet is not searching for meaning outside of the library; he uses the archive to create his own law, articulated through the experience of turning “to the task,” which eventually leaves him reeling and “amazed from the reading.”<sup>53</sup>

It might be tempting to read a kind of spiritual emptiness in the Modernist surrender (“in other words, to hell with it”). Is this Whitman’s fear of a spineless moral society haunting the poet of the modern? It is important to keep in mind that Whitman’s sincere faith in the stock American personality is grounded in his experiences during the Civil War. He explains in *Democratic Vistas* that his time spent in the “great army hospitals” provided the definitive proof of an “accomplish’d and convincing growth” in the American races (*DV* 279). His war memoranda in *Specimen Days* confirm this belief. But it is also worth speculating how Whitman would have reacted to a war in which holocaust was the result, not emancipation. We have already heard from one poet, Muriel Rukeyser, as she attempted to respond in the void left by World War II. The *Paterson* poet is also a post-war subject, well aware that his library is not a

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<sup>53</sup> To be fair, the refrain is also part of another archive: “WCW told Pound ‘the “so be it” I copied verbatim from a translation of a Plains Indian Prayer....It meant what it says: if it so is then so let it be. In other words, to hell with it’” (editor’s note, 280).

dainty antiquarium, but a hall of horrors through which the haunted winds blow.<sup>54</sup> *So be it* not out of disregard, but as a WITNESS.

This is a good law for poetry, and also for the archive. Whitman reminds us that such a law is “the only security against chaos, crime, and ignorance,” and will require “many transmigrations...endless ridicules, arguments, and ostensible failures” before it can be properly illustrated. If we are not there to witness it, if instead of writing all over the archive we treat it merely as an artifact to be preserved for historical worth (as an institutional “asset”), then we have done worse than failure; we have succumbed to a total corruption of consciousness and neglected the immense possibilities of a “fervid and tremendous IDEA” (268).

A *crude* and *sane* idea, as well. Much can be glossed from Whitman’s favorite adjectives. This project largely began with a hunch that the archive was a profoundly democratic space, a space where the average and the personal came together in a round-song of shared work, love, and hunger. “Communitas at forty below,” as Tom McGrath would say. The North Dakota of the archive is both crude and sane in the Whitmanian spirit, resisting the “magician’s serpent,” which seeks to devour all in its path: “In business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. The magician’s serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician’s serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field” (270). What has changed? Only the sustainability of the very biosphere that assures us any possibility of a future, let alone a brave new world that has such people in’t...<sup>55</sup>

Dark days are ahead, *nightmare, nightmare, struggle, despair and dream*—but again Longshot O’Leary’s insistence: “But as long as someone is fighting back / It never goes quite away.” The time for direct action is certainly upon us, and since we have yet to heed the call

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<sup>54</sup> *The Life of Poetry* and Book Three of *Paterson* were both published in 1949.

<sup>55</sup> The “crude and sane” irony here is the insane over-development and dangerous extraction of oil from the North Dakota Bakken formation, massively contributing to global warming.

from poet's such as Rukeyser, Benét, McGrath, and Whitman—who all know first-hand the value of poetry as a resource for democracy and peace—there is room still for conviction and labor in that tremendous idea.

### III.

You can cultivate corn and roses and orchards—but who shall cultivate  
the mountain peaks, the ocean, and the tumbling gorgeousness of the  
clouds?

– Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

The digital *Walt Whitman Archive* began as a collaboration in the mid-1990s between Professors Ed Folsom (University of Iowa) and Kenneth Price (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), who set out “to produce a scholarly edition of Whitman on the web.”<sup>56</sup> Their justification for the project stems from the “textual difficulties” of Whitman’s corpus:

He left behind an enormous amount of written material, and his major life work, *Leaves of Grass*, went through six very different editions, each of which was issued in a number of formats, creating a book that is probably best studied as numerous distinct creations rather than as a single revised work. His many notebooks, manuscript fragments, prose essays, letters, and voluminous journalistic articles all offer key cultural and biographical contexts for his poetry.

The Archive sets out to incorporate as much of this material as possible, drawing

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<sup>56</sup> From an interview with Ken Price: <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/history.html>.

on the resources of libraries and collections from around the United States and around the world.<sup>57</sup>

These difficulties are familiar to any Whitman scholar. The Whitman *Bibliography* (University of Pittsburgh Press) lists 46 titles in “Separate Publications,” yet they cover over 400 pages.<sup>58</sup> And that is only the tip of the iceberg; the entire contents dealing with Whitman publications of all types cover 982 pages. Taking into account the sheer number of publications—in various shapes, sizes, and formats—and all material corresponding to these publications that can be considered part of the Whitman archive (notebooks, fragments, letters, etc.), it is hard to conceive of a single archive held in the traditional manner by an individual institution.

Despite the ease of access and use which the digital format makes possible, there are substantial limitations of the *Archive*. The most glaring limitation is in the privileging of Whitman’s poetry over his prose. This is, of course, understandable given the history of Whitman scholarship and the trafficking needs of the *Archive* (taking into account its audience, not to mention allocation of available resources), but the message is clear: we value Whitman primarily as a poet. Even the official rhetoric of the *Archive* reinforces this message: “Whitman, America's most influential poet and one of the four or five most innovative and significant writers in United States history...”<sup>59</sup> We are sure he is the *most* influential poet, but less certain of his status as writer.

In the section, “In Whitman’s Hand,” there are currently no manuscripts of his prose works. There is an electronic version of *Democratic Vistas*, but it is a facsimile scan of the text from *Complete Prose Works* (1892). A search for “Democratic Vistas” is the most useful method

<sup>57</sup> “About the *Archive*:" <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/index.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Each number corresponds to a primary title, but every separate publication (edition, printing, volume, etc.) receives its own entry, i.e. A11.4 is catalogued under *Specimen Days and Collect* as the primary title (A11), but corresponds to the fourth volume, published as *Specimen Days, Democratic Vistas, and Other Prose*.

<sup>59</sup> “About the *Archive*:" <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/index.html>.

for finding relevant material (442 results using a Google Custom Search platform, compared to 34,000 results in a regular Google search). The most productive results of this search are in criticism and correspondence. Because the letters are available in digital format, the *Archive* can find relevant references to title-specific searches, which facilitates bibliographic research on a particular work. Furthermore, the *Archive*'s collection of criticism enables the researcher to survey contemporary responses to a publication.

Before moving on to some of this criticism, it is worth noting that while there are notebooks with facsimile scans in the *Archive*, the letters are transcribed without images. This significantly alters the experience of working with personal correspondence. No matter how expansive the wealth of a digital archive, there is no substitute for the experience of materiality and texture when holding physical documents. It is an obvious limitation of any digital archive, but still important when discussing the merits and value of archival research. The limitation is more keenly felt in the process of narrative bibliography.

The advantages of ease of access and quick returns on investment (the time of research) are palpable. In looking at the contemporary criticism pertaining to *Democratic Vistas*, a few immediate insights jump out to the reader. First, it is clear that Whitman's initial 1871 publication of the text did not garner much attention. With one exception, all of the criticism for *Democratic Vistas* is contained in broader reviews of *Specimen Days and Collect* or combined with "Other Papers." This shows that the largest audience for *Democratic Vistas* came attached to other prose works. What is also clear is that readers of Whitman were quick to differentiate between Whitman-the-poet and Whitman-the-thinker, often writing as if there were two distinct authors, each with potential strengths and weaknesses. Finally, most of the reviews treat *Democratic Vistas* as an afterthought to *Specimen Days*, sympathetic more with Whitman's war

memoranda than his democratic prophesies. It is also highly significant that the first publication of the very popular *Norton Critical Edition* of Whitman left out *Democratic Vistas* altogether, despite Whitman's own note that it was perhaps his most important piece of writing.

None of these insights are particularly revelatory, especially the bifurcation of Whitman's prose and poetry; it must have seemed natural at the time to evaluate the writer according to each genre. In one case, however, an anonymous reviewer (*The Literary World*, 1882) actually rearranges lines from *Democratic Vistas* into verse, stating, "As to Mr. Whitman's prose it is obviously quite interchangeable with his poetry."<sup>60</sup> The same reviewer argues the advantages of Whitman's prose:

WE have here Mr. Whitman's collected prose. His prose is better than his poetry. It is clean. It is sane. It is intelligible. It is often readable. Much of it is really interesting, because either of its autobiographical effect, its reminiscential quality, or its frank fresh mirroring of out-of-door life and sensation. The book is virile. In many places it has the smell of damp loam or of new-mown grass. It is honest and justifiable.<sup>61</sup>

If the prose can be simply rearranged into poetry, and the prose is more "readable," why bother with what Emerson called the "nondescript monster which yet has terrible eyes and buffalo strength"?<sup>62</sup> Yet, while the reviewer from *The Literary World* praised the virility of *Specimen Days and Collect*, another reviewer felt the book suffered from Whitman's "democratic enthusiasm."

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<sup>60</sup> *Whitman Archive*, "Criticism:" <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/days/anc.00102.html>.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> In reference to *Leaves of Grass*. From a letter to Carlyle, May 6, 1856. Reproduced in a review by William Metcalfe. *Whitman Archive*, "Criticism:" <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/days/anc.00219.html>.

We conclude that Specimen Days are also a specimen of this new and especially democratic style. If so, we are not ripe for it, for it is, to us, the one great drawback to the book. Many of Whitman's criticisms on contemporary literature, society, and morals, in America, are very striking and original, showing great insight and considerable power of generalization; but their philosophical value is greatly lessened by his allowing his democratic enthusiasm to overspread the whole field of thought.<sup>63</sup>

The reviewer, speaking in the first-person plural presumably for his publication (*The Westminster Review*, 1883), is perhaps also speaking for the British audience at large. Whatever insight Whitman might provide to his readers is diminished by enthusiasm and “democratic style.” There is more appreciation for the smell of fresh-cut grass in the American fields than in the tightly manicured gardens of England.

Another reader across the Atlantic, writing for *The Scottish Review* (1883), finds faults with Whitman's prose and criticizes his style, which is “marred...by mannerisms.” Still, he acknowledges what other reviewers neglect:

For a right understanding of Whitman's poetry, however, a careful study of his prose writings, and more especially of the section having the somewhat strange, though not all together inappropriate, designation of 'Collect,' is indispensable. It is here that he explains himself, and unfolds the aims and principles by which he is guided and inspired.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Whitman Archive*, “Criticism:” <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/days/anc.00109.html>.

<sup>64</sup> *Whitman Archive*, “Criticism:” <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/days/anc.00219.html>.

An attempt is made to integrate the poet with the prose writer, with explicit reference to the *Collect* contents: namely, *Democratic Vistas* and the prefaces to *Leaves of Grass*. Since Whitman was a new kind of poet to many readers—the same reviewer from *The Scottish* calls him the preeminent poet of the modern world—the integration of genre as a practice of poetic process was not fully understood. Earlier Romantic writers such as Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge were certainly proficient in both prose and poetry, but the implicit interconnectedness of method that we see in Whitman, the essential role of his jottings and memoranda for the poetic process, takes on new significance in a democratic context. Whitman’s verse, many would argue, was not “high art;” and if a critic tried to isolate it from his broader endeavors, the resulting criticism more often than not feels removed from the life of his poetry. We remember Rukeyser’s critique of these “Still Life” critics, who needed to shatter a poem from its *animus* in order to affix meaning to a static object. Even those who found value in Whitman’s inherent spirit and exuberance could not consider him a truly great poet: “A really great poet, one, that is, who is thoroughly perfect in all the branches of his art, is a master of expression. Whitman confessedly is not.”<sup>65</sup>

One hundred and thirty-one years after the first publication of *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882), it remains difficult to confidently attribute a form to the book. One apt suggestion in 1883 was *ensemble*. “Every sort of thing is crammed into it,” observes a reviewer for *The Critic* (1883), “and the manager is the big, good-natured, shrewd and large-souled poet, whose photograph shows him lounging in smoking-jacket and broad felt hat, gazing at his hand, on which a delicate butterfly, with expanded wings, forms a contrast to the thick fingers and heavy

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

ploughman's wrist."<sup>66</sup> The photograph referenced was taken by W. Curtis Taylor in Philadelphia, sometime around 1877.<sup>67</sup>



The rapt attention of the poet, intent on the delicate butterfly with wings extended, shows a dedication to the poetic possibilities of nature and democracy, both expansive and stretching into the future. The relation of the democratic ideal to a natural law is crucial for Whitman's argument in *Democratic Vistas*. The promise of a self-actuating society, wherein citizens are empowered not only by the right to vote (a clearly controversial issue for Whitman, and his

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<sup>66</sup> *Whitman Archive*, "Criticism:" <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/days/anc.00108.html>.

<sup>67</sup> *Whitman Archive*, "Pictures and Sound:"

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/image086.html?sort=year&order=ascending&page=6>.

response to Carlyle's rabid critique in "Shooting Niagara" is not to promote universal suffrage) but by their ability to merge independently with the "divine, vast, general law" (*DV* 282). There is a necessary courage in all of this—"Thus we presume to write, as it were, upon things that exist not, and travel by maps yet unmade and a blank" (291)—and a determination to see beyond the "supercilious infidels, who believe in nothing" (296). A 19<sup>th</sup> century critic may accuse Whitman of many things, but nihilism is not one of them. Looking at his photograph also calls to mind Benét's *ex libris* in Chapter One: "Wisdom is a butterfly and not a gloomy bird of prey."

In addition to his "mannerisms," Whitman was criticized for an affected style. This included his use of American slang and neologisms (which particularly annoyed British readers); "the frequent occurrence of long and often clumsy parentheses;" and intentional distortion. A review in *The New York Times* (1882) even used one Whitman's own complaints from *Democratic Vistas* against him:

As to Whitman's prose manner—the manner which may be described as his style—that is found to be, throughout this book, a kind of cultivated affectation, not at all forcible because it is unconventional. It is an obscure, involved, harsh manner, frequently ungrammatical and cumbersome: seldom graceful, direct, or simple. It is best when it is most free from the writer's word-torturings.

Occasionally Whitman throws off his affectations and composes with straightforward lucidity; the fact that he can do this and does it proves conclusively that he depends for one sort of effect upon literary eccentricity and trickery. It is probable, however, that he has faith to some degree in his own tricks.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Whitman Archive*, "Criticism:" <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/days/anc.00178.html>.

In talking about the content of the *Archive*'s criticism, Professor Ken Price advertises that "Nineteenth-century reviewers held no punches, so these reviews make fascinating reading."<sup>69</sup> When Whitman accuses the People of being "ungrammatical," he is framing the contrast between the American masses and the feudal "*personnel* of lords and queens and courts, so well-dress'd and so handsome" (277). The derogatory remark seems to apply to general literacy more than technical insufficiency. On the other hand, the *Times* critic is talking technique, taking issue with Whitman's free play of prose. Much of the contemporary criticism murmurs around this same critique; Whitman may be a unique American voice and veritable poet of the modern, but we sure wish he would write cleaner and without cumbersome affectation. Why does he have to make it so excruciatingly unconventional!

The critical consternation lies in the use of a favorite Whitmanian adjective, touched on earlier: *crude*. A few examples should prove the point:

The best class we show, is but a mob of fashionably dress'd speculators and vulgarians. True, indeed, behind this fantastic farce, enacted on the visible stage of society, solid things and stupendous labors are to be discover'd, existing crudely and going on in the background, to advance and tell themselves in time.  
(270)

The worry is that after all the sacrifices from revolution, independence, and secession, the People will resort to worshipping the false idols of a materialistic development. It is not enough to uplift "the masses out of their sloughs;" men and women—north and south, black and white, east and west—must cast off the remaining provincialisms of a young nation and learn to become laws unto themselves. But Whitman remains a realist: "I myself see clearly enough the crude, defective streaks in all the strata of the common people; the specimens and vast collections of the

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<sup>69</sup> *Whitman Archive*, "About the *Archive*:" <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/history.html>.

ignorant, the credulous, the unfit and uncouth, the incapable, and the very low and poor” (279-80). These are stark realities, and remain so today. In some ways, his worst fears have come true. Growing inequality and the widening gap between rich and the poor has cast the future of America into greater doubt than ever before. But what is crude, even if it is currently defective, can still be molded and transformed. He never loses sight of “the joy of being toss’d in the brave turmoil of these times” (291), reminding his dear readers: “Far, far, indeed, stretch, in distance, our Vistas!” (290). If there is an ungrammatical grammar to his logic, it is a future imperative mood. “Doubtless, also, it resides, crude and latent, well down in the hearts of the fair average of the American-born people, mainly in the agricultural regions. But it is not yet, there or anywhere, the fully-receiv’d, the fervid, the absolute faith” (290).

What is seen as a defect by his critics is precisely the value Whitman affirms in *Democratic Vistas*. The crudeness of the American people, embodying both latent power and cataclysmic infidelity, will become a law governing all social, political, economic, and environmental futures.

#### IV.

Typically, scholarship in the humanities takes the form of a solitary individual writing articles or a book. I have always enjoyed collaborations. Some of my deepest and best friendships have been gained through work on this project.

– Professor Ken Price, *Walt Whitman Archive*

One of the advantages of the *Whitman Archive* is the obvious community it initiated and continues to form. There are currently 27 “project staff” members listed on the website, along with a very extensive list of important contributors, ranging from literary scholars to computer scientists and programmers.<sup>70</sup> The sentiment expressed by Professor Ken Price above seems genuine and verified by the communal scope of the *Archive*. This sociology of texts, gathered around the archive and not just the production of a text (as expounded by D. F. McKenzie in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*), demonstrates a fundamental principle of the archive: comradeship. Whitman himself understood the importance of this principle for American literature moving forward:

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 saviours of every land and age, and which seems to promise, when thoroughly develop'd, cultivated and recognized in manners and literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States, will then be fully express'd. (317)

In political terms, community can often feel like a shallow utterance, invoked as a catch-all to defer real and practical problems, such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression. But in terms of literature, and specifically here in terms of the archive, there is a palpable recognition that without shared labor and sacrifice, the *Whitman Archive* would not exist.

Whitman continues his meditation on comradeship in a footnote, explaining that “the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship” is the one thing which can be “the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof” (f.1 317). Often overlooked is this value of the

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<sup>70</sup> *Whitman Archive*, “About the *Archive*.” <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/staff.html>.

archive; it initiates a community of readers mediated not just through a text or an author, but the expansive huddle of all the various and variegated materials, experiences, and events of a living archive. Instead of a safe-guarded trove of records buried deep in the vaults of Special Collections, the *Whitman Archive* exhibits a truly vital platform of responses to Whitman's work, such as criticism, interviews, and resources for teachers and scholars. Working in the digital *Archive* is not a lonely, solitary activity. There is an abundance of personalism made possible by technological exposure to those who have also participated in the Whitmanian plenitude.

While it does not seem to have this feature currently, one can easily imagine a "chat" or "blog" feature in the *Archive*, where that community of readers is brought into even closer and more immediate contact. This experience of shared discovery is also wanting in the traditional archive. There is nothing more erotic in archival research than wondering what others are looking at and discovering nearby in the Reading Room. And certain libraries, such as the Beinecke, have made efforts to formalize this passionate mystery. Those awarded research scholarships to work in the Beinecke are invited to share their research with each other over tea.

This communal impulse of the living archive should be encouraged, promoted, and celebrated. In the field of poetry, we are directly familiar with the phenomena of poetry readings. Certain readings, like the infamous Gallery Six reading of *Howl*, are part of a poem's legend; and therefore, there is no reason why poetry readings and the community they engender should not also be part of the archive. Aural archives such as PennSound (<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/>) and UbuWeb (<http://www.ubuweb.com/>) are two of the most exciting examples of what is possible with digital archives (integrating readings, interviews, events) and both have enthusiastic followings. There is incredible potential for multi-media archives on the Web, especially in the genre of poetry. Even poetry journals—once the

darling of print media with “little magazines” setting the stage for the poetic renaissance of modernist and then post-modern writers—have moved increasingly online, with the ability to incorporate multi-media presentations of poems.

But despite the success of online journals and multi-media archives, there persists a confusion of purpose and audience. A site like UbuWeb is useful for both poetry enthusiasts and scholars alike, but it does not have a specific scholarly mission. In contrast, the *Whitman Archive* is clear about who it is designed for: “The *Walt Whitman Archive* is an electronic research and teaching tool that sets out to make Whitman's vast work, for the first time, easily and conveniently accessible to scholars, students, and general readers.”<sup>71</sup> The order of the audience in this statement is not accidental, prioritized in descending order. The *Archive* is primarily for scholars, and this is evident immediately from the homepage.

Working in the reading room of the Beiecke, it is also evident that the institution serves primarily the interest of scholars. The libraries of North Dakota public universities, however, serve a broader audience. It cannot be assumed, while digging through boxes on Tom McGrath, that the rest of the reading room is conducting scholarly research. Many local residents use public libraries to search for archives of genealogical interest, or for materials relevant to the casual historian. For all the elegance and erudition of the Beinecke, there is something refreshingly crude about the open access of public university libraries.

These musings are significant to Whitman and *Democratic Vistas* in a number of ways. First, the democratic argument in *Vistas* necessitates public access to art and literature. Second, we cannot assume that just because an archive is digital, it is therefore more accessible to the public. Third, Whitman is very clear about where he wants his literature to come from, and it is

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<sup>71</sup> *Whitman Archive*, “About the Archive:” <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/about/over.html>.

not from the halls of high culture, wherein “the grand style” reigns—or where, to recur to Williams, we may hear only the “ghost of a wind” which can, indeed, lead the mind away.

To address each of these points separately, we can find correspondences in the text. More than material wealth or political power, America needs art to furnish its democratic personalities of the future: “The literature, songs, esthetics, &c., of a country are of importance principally because they furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways” (292-3). These materials and suggestions are only authentic if they arise from a truly public literature, which means not restricted by access or dictated by technology. It is easy to mistake the technology of the book as a singular medium. In reality, during a busy 19<sup>th</sup> century of print technology, the forms of the book were extremely diverse; and there is no better example of this than Whitman, who published his work in many different formats. And this is not to say that all websites are the same, but the obvious limitation of a digital platform is that it can only be delivered digitally. One of the glaring social justice questions left largely unaddressed in the United States, as we press ever onward into the digital chaos of the cloud, is the issue of data access and privilege. Whereas the myth of the middle-class used to be the great American equalizer, now the myth of the data-class has superseded it. As long as we all have access to the web via smartphones and tablets, anything is possible, and mobility is always upward!<sup>72</sup>

Long before the advent of the internet, Whitman saw through the supercilious nature of technology worshipping. His critique of Culture in *Democratic Vistas* cuts right to the heart of our contemporary danger: “As of now taught, accepted and carried out, are not the processes of

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<sup>72</sup> This myth is perpetuated by some of the rotten scoundrels of the new Silicon Valley elite, who claim to be working for social justice through increased access to information, but are ultimately creating products and services that deliver consumer information to a bevy of for-profit companies. Our entire existence on the web is being used for the neo-liberal ends of consumer capitalism. See George Packer’s provocative story in *The New Yorker*, “Change the World,” May 27, 2013.

culture rapidly creating a class of supercilious infidels, who believe in nothing?" (296). This passage was alluded to earlier in the preceding Section, but we can see here the larger extent of his argument:

I do not so much object to the name [culture], or word, but I should certainly insist, for the purposes of these States, on a radical change of category, in the distribution of precedence. I should demand a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, working-men, the facts of farms and jack-planes and engineers, and of the broad range of the women also of the middle and working strata, and with reference to the perfect equality of women, and of a grand and powerful motherhood. I should demand of this programme 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, eligible to the uses of the high average of men—and *not* restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses. (296-7)

There is a good deal in this excerpt, from Whitman's imperative mood to the *spinal* refrain of his *Vistas*. Also, the controversial feminism of the text—clearly arguing for “perfect” gender equality, but still framing the power of women in the role of motherhood (although this is not entirely accurate; he elsewhere states the more revolutionary proposition: “The day is coming when the deep questions of woman's entrance amid the arenas of practical life, politics, the suffrage, &c., will not only be argued all around us, but may be put to decision and real experiment” (302)).

We are fooling ourselves to believe that by increased access to data and web-based applications, we are becoming wealthier and more secure as a nation. A small minority is certainly increasing its vast fortunes, but the majority of Americans are falling farther and farther behind. And even *if* new technology were making us collectively richer, Whitman is arguing for “a radical change of category” when it comes to culture, something the internet has certainly not delivered. Sure, the media may look radically different, and we may be receiving it in radically different ways, but can we honestly tell ourselves, as responsible critics, that the same “congeries of conventional, over-corpulent societies” do not remain “stifled and rotten with flatulent, infidelistic literature, and polite conformity and art” (295)?

Once again we need return to a universal and nuanced theme in Whitman’s memoranda: crudeness. In addressing the uncharted territory of his *Vistas* (“maps yet unmade, and a blank”), he beckons a literature that “without polish’d coherence, and a failure by the standard called criticism, comes forth, real at least as the lightnings” (291). Reaffirming his “original premises....To take expression, to incarnate, to endow a literature with grand and archetypal models,” he later defines “the needs and possibilities of American imaginative literature, through the medium-light...along these Vistas crudely outlined” (305). And in another section:

It must still be reiterated, as, for the purpose of these memoranda, the deep lesson of history and time, that all else in the contributions of a nation or age, through its politics, materials, heroic personalities, military *éclat*, &c., remains crude, and defers, in any close and thorough-going estimate, until vitalized by national, original archetypes in literature. (307)

Whitman then gives us a helpful metaphor, not just in terms of his argument, but also for the current project of establishing a new poetics of the archive. Referring to the value of archetypal poems, he writes:

The little ships, the miracles that have buoy'd them, and by incredible chances safely convey'd them, (or the best of them, their meaning and essence,) over long wastes, darkness, lethargy, ignorance, &c., have been a few inscriptions—a few immortal compositions, small in size, yet compassing what measureless values of reminiscence, contemporary portraitures, manners, idioms and beliefs, with deepest inference, hint and thought, to tie and touch forever the old, new body, and the old, new soul! (307)

A small vessel, such as *Beowulf*, reminding us not only about the cultural heritage of Anglo-Saxon literature, but as Seamus Heaney discovered in his translation of the poem, “The erotics of composition are essential to the process, some pre-reflective excitation and orientation, some sense that your own little verse-craft can dock safe and sound at the big quay of the language” (Heaney *xxvi*). This “erotics” is essential for poets, translators, readers, and witnesses—“the old, new body, and the old, new soul!” Like works of great literature, archives are not static, but travel back and forward through time, seeking passionate stewards to steer them into meaningful harbor.

For his part, Whitman is adamant to prophesize both the construction of a brand new fleet and its worthy captains: “I demand races of orbic bards, with unconditional uncompromising sway. Come forth, sweet democratic despots of the west!” (*DV* 309). The use of “despot” is curious at a glance, but his expectations are no less than a national literature that triumphs according to the revolutionary zeal of its being; “Daughter of a physical revolution—mother of

the true revolutions, which are of the interior life, and of the arts” (313). The implications of which are celestial: “America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical, as she is herself” (315). The task is immense, as are the stakes of his *Vistas*, dealing with nothing less than the philosophical subject of the soul, of which nation building is but a logical extension. In case there is any lingering confusion, he adds this in parentheses: “(This Soul—its other name, in these *Vistas*, is LITERATURE)” (316).

Whitman undoubtedly sees literature as a vital life-force for democracy, and as *Democratic Vistas* works toward its conclusion, he attempts to define more precisely the kind of literature he is demanding.

Not but that in one sense, and a very grand one, good theology, good art, or good literature, has certain features shared in common. The combination fraternizes, ties the races—is, in many particulars, under laws applicable indifferently to all, irrespective of climate or date, and, from whatever source, appeals to emotions, pride, love, spirituality, common to humankind. Nevertheless, they touch a man closest, (perhaps only actually touch him,) even in these, in their expression through autochthonic lights and shades, flavors, fondnesses, aversions, specific incidents, illustrations, out of his own nationality, geography, surroundings, antecedents, &c. The spirit and the form are one, and depend far more on association, identity and place, than is supposed. (313-4)

We hear immediately in this passage the same notes sung at the beginning of this chapter by Lovejoy: the universal and the nuanced working in concert toward the tremendous idea of plenitude. Here is the average and commonplace, available to all and appealing to the masses; there is the detail and the exception, arousing the individual passions and transforming the

independent character. And whatever kind of expression these shared features take, “the spirit and the form are one.” There is an underlying mimetic principle that like a ten-cylinder printing press—“which I can stand and watch any time by the half-hour”—crashes forth productive and proud (309).

The association to 19<sup>th</sup> century technology of the printing press is not without purport. As we are increasingly forced to confront the value of archives in the digital age, and furthermore, to evaluate the funding allocation of grants in the Digital Humanities, it will be imperative to develop useful criteria in the assessment of resources. Instead of settling for a uniform and conventional platform of digitization, libraries should encourage the collaboration between library scientists, artists, and scholars to create meaningful archival experiences. Whitman loved the raw power of the printing press, but also understood its limitations as a tool. The technology of the present, whether in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> century, cannot ensure substantive content. In working not merely toward vague outlines of access and ease of use, archivists (hopefully this term can enjoy a renewed scholastic and cultural relevance) should strive for more creative uses of their materials. Beyond a simple arithmetic of addition (which budgets might not allow), there can be a whole calculus of spirit and form—transforming the archive into a more performative space for researchers of all kinds—the transformation itself contributing to community and comradeship.

It is an ambitious vision, like Whitman’s *Vistas*, but one which will pay dividends in creative output. Inasmuch as this is a crude analysis of the current state of archival studies, the reader is to please remember: “Rude and coarse nursing-beds, these; but only from such beginnings and stocks, indigenous here, may haply arrive, be grafted, sprout, in time, flowers of genuine American aroma, and fruits truly and fully our own” (316).



The future of the living archive cannot be relegated to information technology alone; there must be a passionate reminder to see beyond the institutional barriers (whether in a library or on an official website) in pursuit of something greater: “I hail with joy the oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age, our States. But woe to the age or land in which these things, movements, stopping at themselves, do not tend to ideas” (321-2). Even the librarians share responsibility for this greater pursuit. Whitman recalls the librarian of Congress, who implored, “The true question to ask respecting a book, is, *has it help'd any human soul?*” (323).

It is time to expect more from our archives. They are, after all, our collective histories and factual representations of manners, moods, prerogatives, anxieties, and ambitions of any age. They show the real *stuff* of literature: the letters, doodles, marginalia, receipts, orders, exchanges, and an almost incomprehensible amount of quotidian paraphernalia pertaining to the production of texts. A book never dies, but its archive is the living proof.

As if he was addressing the idea of plenitude directly, Whitman identifies the “last, profoundest measure and test of a first-class literature or esthetic achievement” as the single-syllable “All:”

And lo! To the consciousness of the soul, the permanent identity, the thought, the something, before which the magnitude even of democracy, art, literature, &c., dwindles, becomes partial, measurable—something that fully satisfies, (which those do not.) That something is the All, and the idea of All, with the accompanying idea of eternity, and of itself, the soul, buoyant, indestructible, sailing space forever, visiting every region, as a ship the sea. (323-4)

As abstract as it all might sound, for as much as Whitman sincerely heralds a new Metaphysics to coincide with a new Literature and a new Poetry, the religious fervor is always to be mediated by scientific fidelity. The new poet of the modern and democratic literatus is “not only possess’d of the religious fire and abandon of Isaiah, luxuriant in the epic talent of Homer, or for proud characters as in Shakespeare, but consistent with the Hegelian formulas, and consistent with modern science” (324). Rarest air, indeed; the deep schisms between science and religion that permeate contemporary thought and discourse would disturb Whitman mightily.

When the poet asks in Book Three of *Paterson*, “What language could allay our thirsts...but song but deathless song?”, the haunting returns to consciousness, demanding a better way forward. The great songs are deathless precisely because they are songs of death, laying fertile foundations for generations of readers and reimagined works to come. They are not represented by technique or material success, but rather by their confrontation with nature, with winds and floods, buoyed by the little ships, “fructifying the moral elements” (322). In such works, “A strong mastership of the general inferior self by the superior self, is to be aided, secured, indirectly, but surely, by the literatus, in his works, shaping, for individual or aggregate democracy, a great passionate body, in and along with which goes a great masterful spirit” (325). The song can supply the wind, the literatus can build and shape the vessel, but the reader must ultimately become the master.

At the end of *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman turns his attention from the literatus to the reader, who “must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem” (329). It is this injunction that has the most decisive repercussions for the archive: “Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does” (329). If reading is not a “half-sleep,” than the “half-light” or “medium-light” of the archive, by which we unbury the life of

poetry, increases intensity the more our resolve fixes upon the “deepest basic elements and loftiest final meanings” (330). Our investment in the archive is a reflection of our commitment to “the average, the bodily, the concrete, the democratic, the popular, on which all the super-structures of the future are to permanently rest” (330). As we enter unprecedented territory of technological capabilities, we must also recognize the danger of “the bloodless vein, the nerveless arm, the false application” (329); a living archive is only as deathless as its song.

Part of that song is an 1871 first edition copy of *Democratic Vistas*, one of only 500 (give or take), held by the University of Washington, Suzzallo Library Special Collections, 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature Collection. The 84 pages are composed of three quires of 12 and one quire of six, numbered [1-3] 4-78 [79] 80-84.<sup>74</sup> The text was electrotyped by Smith & McDougal, 82 Beekman Street, New York, which gave Whitman control of the plates for future publications. He would reuse those plates just once, in a reissue of the original 1871 text, combined with other works in *Two Rivulets* (1876). After this second issue, the text was revised for all subsequent editions, printed under different titles and combined with other works (namely, *Specimen Days and Collect*, as was discussed earlier).

The “[l]ight yellow-green coated stiff wrappers” are exactly as described in the Whitman *Bibliography*, as are the front and back covers, and the title page bearing the mark: “MEMORANDA.” The publisher, J. S. Redfield, 140 Fulton St., is also listed on the back cover in the advertisement for where to purchase the book, along with other locations, and also directly (through the Washington, D. C. Post Office) from Whitman himself. The quires of the UW copy remain uncut, and the copy itself was placed into a decorative collector’s box with calf leather on the spine, grained to look like goat skin. According to Sandra Kroupa, Book Arts and Rare Book

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<sup>74</sup> University of Washington, Special Collections, PS3213.A1 1871.

Curator, the box was made sometime in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was not a particularly expensive case. Talking with Kroupa about the book, there is nothing unique about the UW copy to set it apart from the description in the *Bibliography*. Rare enough to merit an “appointment only” designation, but not as valuable as, say, a first edition copy of *Leaves of Grass*, which Kroupa was offered for the paltry sum of \$120,000. She politely declined the offer, which would have amounted to three years-worth of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Literature Collection’s endowment.

No great aura emanated from the soft, little book, delicate, ready to crumble against a rude touch. But in talking about Whitman and the archive, Kroupa mentioned some curious books that had been gifted to the library long ago, created by the collector, Henry S. Saunders. Nobody had ever asked to see these books, and to her knowledge, nobody but Kroupa had in fact seen them since they were given to the library. *Where is the stranger, the reader, in the half-light of the buried life?*

When they were retrieved, the archive came to life. The Saunders collection consisted of mimeographed and bound copies of essays written about Whitman, which Saunders himself had made. There were also multiple volumes of books containing photographs of Whitman; and one volume, titled, Portrait Gallery of Whitman Writers that was a collection of photographs and handwritten quotations (by Saunders) of writers who had written about Whitman or his works. The book bore an imprint from Toronto, Canada (1927) and had this inscription on the verso leaf to the title page: “Not more than ten copies of this book will be made. This is number three.” Henry Saunders had already made, by hand, two copies of the very same book.

What can an archive tell us about the life of a poem? As we saw from the *Whitman Archive*, we can find criticism contemporary to a book's publication and better understand how it was received by the author's historical audience. We can find letters pertaining to the publication process, perhaps notebooks that contain relevant material to the poetic process. And in the case of the UW Whitman collection, we can find testament to the living influence of a writer, embodied in the production of books by a complete stranger, who is nonetheless a comrade.

In one of the books made by Saunders was an essay by William Gay, originally published in Australia in 1893. Saunders retyped the essay and bound it in book-cloth. The essay, "Walt Whitman: The Poet of Democracy," had this "Prefatory Note," written by Gay:

This little work is a reprint, with considerable alterations and additions, of three articles which appeared in The Australian Herald about a year ago, shortly after Whitman's death. It aims in the first place at a portrayal of the man, and, after that, at a vindication of the poet and his message. Whitman's faults, chiefly of literary execution, are, like his merits, great; but as they are so very obvious and have so often been expiated upon, I have done little more than allude to them.

What is excellent in him completely overshadows what is defective; and what that excellence is, I have, in what follows, imperfectly tried to indicate.

This sounds quite familiar, recalling the previous examples of contemporary criticism gathered from the digital *Whitman Archive*. But this time, instead of just the content of the criticism, there is the form of the little book, retyped and bound by Saunders. This bibliographic continuity and transformation, taking one bibliographic fact and making it into another, is worth more to the living archive than a hundred transcribed reviews. The object itself, the translucence of the

mimeograph paper and the dark, heavy stains of the ink, speak more to the poetic possibilities of the archive than gigabytes of data. The gift of this book, however slight in the totalizing scope of Whitman's archive, is a wonder to behold.

There was another volume in the Saunders collection worthy of mention, with a black cover and red title: Parodies on Walt Whitman. This was a formal publication (American Library Service, 1923) of poems by various authors, compiled by Henry Saunders, and with a preface by Christopher Morley. Two things immediately stand out: first, Morley was a frequent contributor to Whitman publications, thus giving the volume of parodies a definite legitimization; and second, the work of Saunders was not simply a self-satisfying hobby. As evidenced by his colophon in Portrait Gallery of Whitman Writers, Saunders was writing for a community of readers. This same spirit of comradeship, which Whitman heartily championed, also spilled from the compilation of parodies. When readers work together in the living archive, they are no longer strangers.

Even though 19<sup>th</sup> century readers of Whitman were well aware of his technical flaws, they celebrated the energy and enthusiasm of a uniquely democratic voice. From a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, those same flaws are now part of Whitman's appeal as a poet; we are not beholden to criticism according to the feudal standard which Whitman himself was resisting. The shortcoming of the critics was their inability to see beyond the conventional expectations of "high art" in literature, measuring Whitman against an elusive "perfection" which only privileged (viz. "established") writers could enjoy. Still, it is a tribute to his poetic method—a process that included prose and verse working together to create a modern and democratic vision of the expansive ontology of the self, seeking fellowship in nature and in society, adhering to

laws both universal and progressive—that the same critics who bemoaned Whitman’s obvious failures could simultaneously affirm his dramatic excellence.

After pointing out that formerly he was considered the best poet who composed the most perfect work, or the one which was most complete in every respect, [French critic Charles Augustin] Sainte-Beuve has remarked that for us in the present the greatest poet is he who in his works most stimulates the reader's imagination and reflection; not he who has done the best, but he who suggests the most; he, not all of whose meaning is at first obvious, who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your turn.' Judged by this standard Whitman deserves to take a place among the foremost. His works are preeminently suggestive. Any finished picture he seldom presents. His poems are rather suggestions, arousing the reader, and leading him on and on, till he feels the fresher air of a freer thought breathing around him, and sees spreading out before him the limitless and unknown.<sup>75</sup>

Winds of fresher air must have moved a reader like Henry Saunders to “complete” the work Whitman had begun. This becomes part of the poetic lore of the living archive. And the quality of light, whether observed on the peaks of western mountains as the violet shadows slide across the horizon, or revelations of color erupting like wild-flowers out of boxes and folders in Special Collections, or even the illumination made possible by a click of the computer mouse—without these suggestions and arousals, the archive falls into obscurity.

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<sup>75</sup> *Whitman Archive*, “Commentary:” <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/reviews/days/anc.00219.html>.

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