Whitman on TweetDeck:

Community and Self Through Walt Whitman's

Leaves of Grass and Blogging

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Though not necessary, I would also like to cautiously thank the reader of this thesis, who through the act of reading will give meaning to over 170 000 symbols.

Too many times Whitman's lines have been hacked off and amputated into the forewords of writers lesser than him. His lines are best enjoyed in his book, so I leave them just there.

And thanks, Vic. For believing.

Samandrag:

Denne avhandlinga tek for seg dikt-eposet *Leaves of Grass* (Gresstrå på norsk) av Walt Whitman og tradisjonen han etablerte gjennom verket, i relasjon til blogging. *Leaves* kom først ut i 1855 og er eit verk som ikkje har late seg fange inn i enkle kategoriar, eller utgåver (Whitman gav ut nye utgåver heilt til han gjekk bort i 1892). Gjennom *Leaves* skildra Whitman seg sjølv, naturen, samfunnet og universet med slik kraft at han har vorte ståande som ein sentral figur i amerikansk poesi den dag i dag. Sentralt for denne avhandlinga er korleis Whitman skildra seg sjølv til sine lesarar og gjennom den skildringa skapte eit fellesskap som framleis lever. Whitman vart rekna som arrogant, skammeleg og pervers i sin samtid, men i vår notid står han fram som svært nær med blogging, som også byggjer på å presentere seg sjølv for å skape samhald gjennom den presentasjonen av identitet. Dette har med åra ført til ein ubevisst kjensle av at Whitman på fleire vis er ein forløpar til bloggkulturen, som denne avhandlinga tek opp og utforskar.

Avhandlinga gjer reie for bloggen og hans kopling til Whitman, slik det står fram i media frå 2010-talet. Denne koplinga vart så undersøkt gjennom ein større tradisjon av sjølv-presentasjon, nemleg «sjølvet sine teknologiar» av den franske filosofen Michel Foucault. Foucault såg ein lang linje i korleis mennesket formar seg sjølv gjennom korleis det skriv seg sjølv, dette blir teken i betraktning for analysen av Whitman og blogginga. Avhandlinga tek også opp bloggen i perspektiv av historia den ber i media.

Utvalde dikt frå *Leaves of Grass* vert analysert opp mot «sjølvet sine teknologiar» og bloggen, med fokus på korleis Whitman diktar både seg sjølv og lesarane sine inn i ein felles stad, som her vert kalla «det imaginære rom». Gjennom det tek oppgåva opp korleis dette vært overført til blogg-tradisjonen, gjennom analyse av tre ulike eksempel. Den ser på to forsøk på å bære Whitman sin persona inn i sosiale media gjennom Facebook og Twitter og analyserer korleis Whitman sin persona kjem til uttrykk der. Til sist kjem arbeidet til Steve Roggenbuck, ein blogg-poet som i åtte år publiserte dikt gjennom sosiale media, som forsøk på å følgje Whitman sin tradisjon inn til blogging. Avhandlinga analyserer arbeidet hans på YouTube og diskuterer korleis tradisjonen han følgjer kjem ut gjennom blogging. Funna kan bane veg for seinare diskusjonar om både korleis Whitman er relevant for bloggen og korleis litterære fellesskap vært danna gjennom det digitale.

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Introduction: WWW (World Wide Whitman)- Looking for Walt Whitman on the blogosphere

Today blogging, the practice of writing about oneself and presenting that self to the public, has gone from being a private club of eccentrics to a widespread cultural practice that affects an uncountable number of lives. Facebook alone has nearly 3 billion monthly users (Dean, 2022). From Asia, to Europe, to America and beyond, people share themselves to the blogosphere (the shared sphere comprised of all blogs), an unprecedented development in human history. Understandably, this has been met with much enthusiasm but also much apprehension and skepticism. Especially in our time, blogging has come to be reviled as detrimental to mental health and a potential tool in the process of turning our world into a dystopia.

In the early days of blogging, it looked much the opposite. The ability to connect was taken as a way into a potential utopia. Criticism was lighter then too, early sentiments were that writing about yourself online was vapid and shallow, more recently many have come to an understanding of blogging as directly harmful. Acclaimed essayist and staff writer for The New Yorker Jia Tolentino has testified to this transition. In her essay *The I in the Internet*,[1] she describes expertly many people's experience of coming into adolescence along with the web: "The dream of a better, truer self on the internet was slipping away. Where we had once been free to be ourselves online, we were now chained to ourselves online, and this made us self-conscious." (Tolentino, 2020). Tolentino is part of a much larger wave that condemns the web for its failings. One of 2020's most discussed movies was the documentary *The Social Dilemma*, a movie that goes even further and argues that social media has become an

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[1] The essay is also part of her acclaimed essay collection *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* from 2019

existential threat to us. At the very least, thus far the blog has never been irrelevant, it has either been the coming of a nearly religious unity or the digital devil that preys on our weaknesses. It has not been simply a tool for writing and expressing ourselves, one among several modes of communication.

Blogging is currently heavily criticized, but despite these revelations, social media apps have not experienced a significant dip in its user base. It might be that we are simply too addicted to give it up, like alcoholics who think we can quit anytime and keep drinking, blissfully unaware of our own entrapment. It is also possible that we stay on there because we still believe in that early potential of the web and desire to build community that heals instead of harms and that we are trying but currently struggling to reach that potential.

Scholars too have difficulties with how this phenomenon should be perceived. For one, comprehension of what is actually occurring on the web space is difficult to obtain due to the sheer quantity of user profiles that exist, plus the immense freedom users have to define the content of those profiles. And is the blog best understood as a medium or a genre? If it is a genre, then is it like a diary or a journal? Is every profile an autobiography? These are questions even highly trained academics struggle with.

Whether the blog has come to mean a new, important stage of writing or the dumbing down of the masses is a matter of debate. Few have been able to be neutral on the topic. Autobiography scholar Phillipe Lejeune has described the blog as "attacking life itself" (2014, p. 249) by so rapidly changing how we conceive ourselves and interact that it is impossible to maintain a "narrative identity" (our ability to harmonize the past with the present). To Lejeune, the technology we can use to create our identities has come to a point where it changes so rapidly, that permanence is a thing of the past. An example of this loss of permanence would be all the different social media apps. A little over fifteen years ago, Myspace and Blogger.com were the places where one would go to socialize, but now

Facebook is much more prevalent. There is no reason to assume that this will not change again in the near future and who is to say how many changes will come from this point on. Already, apps like Tik Tok have sprung up recently and become massively popular. This is not even accounting for all the internal changes platforms experience, ask anyone who used YouTube in 2007 and they will tell you how different it is from the YouTube of 2022.

Other academics, like literature professor Bronwen Thomas, has taken a slightly less alarmist view on the blog space and what it means for literature. Her study: *Social Media and Literature* from 2020 is a book that argues that these two concepts are not antithetical to each other. In fact, Thomas argues that social media platforms are providing new forms of engagement with literary culture and production. Views like this are especially important now, when blogging is so heavily criticized but offered no solutions, other than complete abandonment. For literature is, if not a solution, an important quality for human experience to flourish.

Literature is one of the things that give a certain permanence and stability to our fragmented, brief lives and can bring people together. Especially poetry has played an important role for this, then and now. From Homer in Ancient Greece to William Butler Yeats in Ireland, the poet has been a figure that creates community across time and cultures. There are certainly poets operating on the web (Instapoets for example) and specific types of Internet poetry (flarf poetry for instance), but *the* poet that speaks to the web, I argue that poet has yet to be known. Though it is possible that poet already exists. In the United States, where most social media sites were created, there is one poet who has an uncanny closeness to the blog space. That poet is Walt Whitman. He did not have a profile but he had a book, wherein he presented himself and spoke to an entire world of readers, through that presentation.

Through bringing Whitman into the blog space, this thesis attempts to do just what Lejeune lamented blogging to be the loss of, to harmonize our present with our past through Walt

Whitman, a writer that currently has not been examined much in this vein. Through his life's work, *Leaves of Grass*, he has been declared an early feminist, a champion of racial equality, a socialist spokesman for workers all over the world; to mention only a few of his post-mortem honors. He remains a vital part of American literature that still speaks to the culture he came from. By now he practically represents a tradition unto itself, that has been carried from the past into the present by voices like Allen Ginsberg in the 50's and 60's. Now we have a new frontier for this tradition, the blog space, where the people are speaking but are not spoken to. Could the Whitmanian tradition be carried through into blogging? This question has currently not been sufficiently explored within academia, thus this thesis aims to do so. My approach is to examine this connection through a critical reading of blog theory, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and attempts at carrying this tradition into the blogosphere.

By nature this thesis is speculative. It looks at a select few individual accounts and attempts to say something about literature and its relationship to blog culture. The analysis of the interaction between Whitman and the web is likely to also be colored by the assumptions and views I bring to this thesis. As someone who is not only familiar with YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, but has in fact grown up with these platforms, I am likely to have a different understanding of them than someone who does not use them or who has seen them from the beginning with a distance. This does not mean I am unable to be critical of these platforms or practices, it is merely an acknowledgement of what I bring with me into this project. Few have been able to be neutral about the blog and I am not likely to be either.

Chapter 1 catalogues the idea of Whitman as a poet that has an affinity with blog culture, as expressed in various places of the early to mid 2010's. It has come across in news articles, one dissertation, through the conversion of Whitman's poetry into an actual blog (a Twitter profile) and through the work of Steve Roggenbuck. Roggenbuck is a poet that has attempted to follow the Whitman tradition of American bards, though this poet has used the web for

publishing. I argue that the connection through these instances is blog culture and Whitman's focus on creating a "self" that works to something larger, namely a community. Next the chapter looks at Whitman in context, as someone who utilized print media to create his persona. It bases itself partially on writings from Whitman's "Master" Ralph Waldo Emerson, to better identify what the specific Whitmanian figure is and what it means to the blog. The chapter also looks at Whitman's history of reception within collaborative media like television, to give a better perspective of how Whitman has come to be utilized in media before and to evaluate what this affinity with a different medium means for blogging.

Chapter 2 gives a definition of the blog as a genre and sees it in a larger history of self-writing. My theory of the blog genre comes from the 2014 book *Blogging*, by professor in digital media Jill Walker Rettberg. It provides a solid definition of blogs that I utilize. I use this book, because it is both contemporary enough to be relevant and to see the blog as it has progressed, to work against the notion that blogging is "dead" and replaced by social media. On the contrary, social media is a continuation of the blog. To see *Leaves* and the blog in a larger history, I utilize Michel Foucault's book *Technologies of the Self*. Technologies of the self is a theory that sees a recurrence in practices like journaling and even confession as "technologies", a way for the individual to create their identity that conforms to their ideals and desires. Foucault died in the 80's, but the theory has been extended into blogging practice as well. Here, it is the individual that creates itself through writing. Foucault hinted at an important shift occurring in the 18th century onward in this tradition, the creation of a "new self" (Foucault, 1988, p. 49). To further elaborate on this, I utilize a chapter in the book by scholar Huck Gutman, which examines the 18th century work *Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and later works. This reading informs my view of this "new self" created in both Whitman's time and blog culture's time.

Chapter 3 is a close reading of *Leaves of Grass*, within the tradition of *technologies* and aims to look both for similarities and differences with the blog. It looks at select poems from *Leaves of Grass*, namely *Song of Myself*, *As I Ebb'd With The Ocean of Life* and selected poems from the cluster *Calamus*. It looks at the work in stages, seeing a discussion of how he creates an idea of himself to the reader. *Song's* analysis concerns itself with how Whitman presents a self to the reader and builds a closeness between the reader and their idea of Whitman which by function of the medium cannot be fulfilled (i.e., the book is always silent, therefore the reader and Whitman are always at a distance). The poem *As I Ebb'd* suggests that it also puts Whitman at distance, as he stands alone by the shore with his "real Me" unreached. The *Calamus* poems are analyzed as Whitman further discussing this distance and demonstrating the importance of it for his community.

Chapter 4 analyzes "blog Whitman's" that have sprung up, to discuss if the Whitmanian tradition has meaningfully been carried through the web. I look at three instances. First, a Facebook profile created by a publishing company as a representation of Whitman. Second, I examine the Twitter profile @TweetsofGrass, which reproduces the 1855 edition through a few tweets a day. Finally, I examine Steve Roggenbuck's YouTube poetry that tries to bring the Whitmanian persona into the blog and I discuss how he works towards this effect, ultimately evaluating if blog culture has managed to follow up what Whitman started.

Chapter 1: Walt Whitman, an American blogger?

I am the bard! I am the poet! And to be a poet while the Internet exists... Man, we got an opportunity! You know that Walt Whitman would die for this, that Walt Whitman would be on Tweetdeck, kicking his legs up and going hard!

(Roggenbuck, 2013, July 15)

The quote above is from a former YouTube poet. If you look for him, you will find his channel, the home of a self-proclaimed bard, a young man from the Midwest with a shrill voice and boundless enthusiasm. He wanders into the forests and over the fields, with his voice as his pen and his handheld camera as his paper. He observes and comments on the sky, the trees and the moon, all the while making faces and voices that resemble the sarcasm and mockery so ever present in online culture. Though this poet does not make faces to mock and deride his subject, he sincerely celebrates it the only way he can contrive, by looking into the camera and sharing these thoughts with his audience beyond the lens. As he speaks, text and images are flashing in and out of view and cuts jump to footage from movies and news broadcasts. None of it is intended as a joke, this use of Internet language is part of his presentation, that tries to reach other people. His name is Steve Roggenbuck, his platform is the blog and his work is made to walk in the footsteps of Walt Whitman.

Steve Roggenbuck is an Internet poet and YouTuber who is not entirely sure if a video can be a poem but he has tried nonetheless to follow in Whitman's footsteps. He is not alone in this, men like William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Allen Ginsberg and currently poet Ben Lerner[2] have all had to grapple with his shadow in some way. The most significant way in which Roggenbuck distinguishes himself from these men is through his choice to publish using the blog space, or rather the *blogosphere* (a shared collective that blogs comprise together.

The term blogosphere is commonly used but is also debatable, as it suggests a shared social space for practically all users, that may not necessarily be there. Media scholar Jodi Dean is especially critical of this notion and argues instead that the blog space is best described as a *blogipelago* (derived from archipelago):

> The term 'sphere', suggests a space accessible to any and all. It implies a kind of conversational unity, as if bloggers addressed the same topics and participated in one giant discussion. (…) Blogipelago, like archipelago, reminds us of the separateness, disconnection and immense effort it can take to move from one island or network to another. (2010, p. 38).

Dean's criticism is warranted, although many if not all have the access to participate in a domain, what happens in one corner of the web does not necessarily ripple out into other places. Something that is discussed in one domain might in theory only be heard in that place, if no one shares the event elsewhere and not all places are equally accessible. In addition, users of for example Twitter do not necessarily understand themselves as one group, the fact that vitriol and hate speech is so common there suggests this. On the other hand, I would argue that users do participate with shared a understanding of what the blog is for, to exchange ideas and engage in a participatory exchange of ideas and concepts. Without even

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[2] Lerner is discussed later down in this chapter

defining the word blog, many of us have an intuitive understanding of what a blog is and isn't. Ultimately, it is a matter of perspective more than material reality, if we understand the online blog space and all its different domains as a shared and unified collective or a divided neighborhood with tall fences. For this thesis I take the perspective that the blogosphere is a possibility rather than a proven reality. For this reason the term blogosphere is used when describing the space that Whitman's presence finds itself fitting into.

Roggenbuck's appearance came in the early 2010s, a time when American life seems to have needed a figure as Whitman, a unifying voice amid the loud multitude of people. Blogging platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Reddit had become a normal part of life for many, especially teens and young adults. Memes and opinions circulated rapidly, but not a literary voice that could bring people together, the way bards of yore brought masses together to listen. No one came out and explicitly said that Walt Whitman should rise up from his mausoleum and speak to America again, but the desire did make itself present in articles and with one of 2014's most important American novels by Ben Lerner.

In the critically acclaimed novel *10:04*, New York poet Ben Lerner expressed this desire for a Whitmanian bard in the 21st century. At the beginning of the novel, Lerner's unnamed author and narrator is asked by his publishing agent about his plans for making the book he's about to write (the book he eventually published as *10:04*). The agent is not asking to ascertain the author's artistic ambition but checking in because a finished novel could get them six figures. The narrator likely says something reassuring, but wishes that he had said this: "I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously," I should have said, "a minor tremor in my hand; I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid." (Lerner, 2014, p. 4). Lerner refers to Whitman again and again, ultimately making it a dialogue between himself and the sincerity Whitman represents and whether he should try to earnestly reach out in this book, in a time where detachment is so present and the

future so devastatingly uncertain. Ultimately Whitman wins the battle, the author-narrator decides to sincerely attempt reaching out, through his printed book. He makes "if not a pact, then a kind of peace"[3] with Whitman's ghost, opting to make his novel into "an actual present alive with multiple futures" instead of a fraudulent exercise (2014, p. 194).

Let's return to this "Whitman of the vulnerable grid" that Lerner describes. His narrator was evidently not alone in this wish, because around this time of the early 2010s, articles came up from multiple places that suggested Whitman's poetry did in fact belong on the web, not just as information but as a voice from the past eerily present today. In the LA Times, author and columnist Jeffrey Fleishman declares: "Although he predated the World Wide Web by about a century, Walt Whitman, had he a Facebook page, might have posted his poem "Among the Multitude"" (2015). The poem goes:

> Among the men and women the multitude,
> I perceive one picking me out by secret and divine signs,
> Acknowledging none else, not parent, wife, husband, brother,
>   child, any nearer than I am,
> Some are baffled, but that one is not — that one knows me.
>
> Ah lover and perfect equal,
> I meant that you should discover me so by faint indirections,
> And I when I meet you mean to discover you by the like in you.
> (Whitman, 1891-92, p. 111)

Fleishman uses this poem (without edit) to describe what the daily life of the blogosphere is. Suddenly your profile can get a friend request or a post can be upvoted, someone has "picked

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[3] The specific avoidance of making a «pact» is interesting, as it brings to mind the poet Ezra Pound, who entered into a dialogue with Whitman in his poem *A Pact*, where Pound makes a truce with him. Pound portrays Whitman as a father figure and himself as a child, suggesting a modernist notion of a necessary lineage and continuity. Lerner's avoidance of such a "pact" but instead opting for peace, communicates his ambition to not force a chronology unto his present time but to acknowledge the past and move onwards with it.

you out" from among this multitude of individuals and you feel as if you have been discovered by these "faint indirections". In this encounter, there is a fulfillment, being made special and unique through the eyes of someone else. There is a theme of narcissistic gratification at the heart of the poem, a wish-fulfillment over being seen and loved passively. We see no shame or embarrassment over this desire to be special and no concealment is present in Whitman's language, it is spoken casually and plainly without a hint of shame. He does not pretend there was an accident in their meeting, he admits he "meant" to be approached. There is also a naked individualism to these lines, the speaker is himself fully, he does not feel compelled to answer or explain himself to any other. Furthermore, in spite of this excessive individuality that presents itself, the meeting of a "lover and perfect equal" does happen, not in spite of this arrogance but because of it, met through "faint indirections". A meeting between individuals occur, where neither conform to the other but fully find themselves. It is a dream of community that does not sacrifice individuality, a dream that is very much alive in the blogosphere, where we present ourselves as individuals, seeking a connection.

Fleishman's choice of poem is not an outlier, it is emblematic of Whitman's poetic subject, himself and the people. All his career, Whitman presented himself through his written words and maneuvered between celebrating his own individuality and creating a community between himself and his readers. He was a passionate American nationalist who strived to build on the foundations laid by his forefathers and mold his country into a true democratic nation. Most users on Facebook likely have lesser ambitions but that central issue of conceiving a self through writing, a self that is meant to socially interact with the wider world, few American writers have trotted that ground as thoroughly as Whitman has. When he started his career, he was forced to self-publish *Leaves of Grass*, due to how odd it appeared to contemporary eyes and gave him much trouble. It would seem that Whitman, the man who

preceded blogging but managed to build such a lasting community could teach us something about how we make sense of ourselves to others.

A less discussed connection between Whitman and contemporary blogging is the ability to see a writer's evolving train of thought through time. Everything that a blogger publishes is catalogued and archived (unless of course it is deleted) and Whitman did something similar. After publishing his first edition of *Leaves*, he published it again with the same title and continued doing so for the remainder of his life. The editions are significantly different, the first edition was small while the last "deathbed" edition was large, containing both the poems of the first book and many, many additional poems he wrote as he went. When one compares these editions the progression of his poetic mind and how his thinking evolved becomes apparent. Whitman never differentiated these editions by name and upon his deathbed he told his benefactors that subsequent editions would be reprintings of that "deathbed edition". This strongly suggests that Whitman never intended the editions to disclose how his thinking adapted, but for future readers to see the final version as the "complete" one. Similarly with blog culture, which enables multiple accounts, there are multiple Whitman's present throughout *Leaves*.

One of those Whitman's, the earliest one for 1855, has already been put into blog format. It is a Whitman Twitter account named @TweetsOfGrass. The account puts out a single portion from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, every day in chronological order. Remarkably, most of his lines fit well into Twitter's then very strict 140 characters scheme. Covering the account for the Atlantic, journalist Rebecca J. Rosen interviewed MIT literature professor Noel Jackson, who observed that Whitman fit into Twitter more than just spatially:

> To Jackson, there is something about who Whitman was and what he was trying to
> capture that matches Twitter's spirit. Whitman, Jackson wrote to me [Rebecca], was

"the poet who celebrated and sought to capture 'the blab of the pave'." Could one imagine a more appropriate setting than Twitter? (Rosen, 2013).

The amount of followers the account has (over 47K as of November 2, 2021), indicates a shared understanding of this.

Other attempts at converting Whitman unto Twitter have been made, one very notable example through a college course in Whitman studies. This came in 2016, through the course *Walt Whitman in American and Beyond* at Charleston College in the US, headed by literary professor Anton Vander Zee. A student (simply named Madison) had noticed that quotes from Whitman would often circulate on Twitter, as a way of celebrating his lasting legacy in the culture. Given this, they decided to examine if not just Whitman's words but his persona could be carried through unto Twitter. Their criteria for whether or not this would be done successfully was that Whitman would be construed as something more than a soundbite but as an "accurate" representation of his persona (Madison, 2016). For about two weeks, Madison posted specific quotes from Whitman's as comments on contemporary news topics.

Overall, Madison reported that they experienced little discourse or engagement with the lines (very likely affected by the fact that they only posted for about two weeks). In addition Madison quickly found it difficult to stay "accurate" to Whitman's persona, because after all who is Whitman for? When attempting to define this through a contemporary topic, quickly they found it unconvincing. Madison's integration of Whitman suggests that a Twitter profile is expected to have a kind of consistency, to conform to certain ideas about its own character and not simply say things for their own sake. Madison was rather critical of users that quoted lines for their aesthetic qualities, but conversely, nailing Whitman down to something concrete and specific did in this case come with its own set of problems. One of Whitman's defining characteristics is that he 'contains multitudes', he does not need to strictly be one

rigid ideal. If Twitter does not permit oneself to be playful and allude with one's identity, it is likely to be a poor place for Whitman.

Madison experienced few meaningful exchanges on Twitter but concluded on a highly positive note with regards to Whitman:

> [His] work is not irrelevant or dated. On the contrary, I believe his work is just coming into an age where it can be truly used and appreciated and that in the number of social movements around the globe there is an opportunity to connect to and reexamine his literature. The radical nature of this poet as well as his deep desire for human connection fits as cultures across the globe seek camaraderie and as mediums such as Twitter seek to connect us. (2016).

Higher up in academic circles, there have been made connections between blogging and Whitman, but only in passing. In her 2010 dissertation, *Confessional Poetry and Blog Culture in the Age of Autobiography*, Deidre Dowling Pierce drew a comparison between blogging and Whitman and appears to be the earliest to do so. The dissertation mainly looks at confessional poets (for example Sylvia Plath) and argues that there is a cultural lineage between them and "confessional blogs" (what she calls blogs dedicated to disclosing private affairs that are painful to air in person) (Pierce, 2010). Pierce names Whitman as the start of this cultural practice into American lives, but she does not explore to a satisfactory degree *what* about Whitman it is that makes him this. What she does do is emphasize the *persona*, the literary mask common in poetic tradition, as an important throughline from Whitman to the confessional blog.

On the web, in and in a few places within academia, a sense has slowly sunk in that Whitman does in fact belong as part of the Internet in some way. More accurately, the *persona* of Whitman is important, in how it works together with the conventions of the blog and the user

profile it conveys. Blogging has been heavily discussed for its implications to politics and

culture but not so much as a space for literature. The blog is currently not considered a literary

genre the way the novel is. To motivate a reading of Whitman's closeness with the blog, I lay

out how Whitman emerged in his own medium, the book.

The persona of Walt Whitman

Like the meeting between the "I" and "you" in *Among the Multitude*, the meeting between

Whitman's persona and the reader has been no accident. The persona is an assumed identity,

the speaker of a lyrical poem, that separates the writer for their work (Baldick, 2015a). The

persona is important both from a critic's perspective and a reader's perspective, because it

allows us to avoid mixing the author in real life and the speaker in a text. It helps prevent us

from narrowly reading the work as needing to have a basis in the author's lived life. The line

can often however become blurry to readers, like with Whitman. From the beginning of his

career, he made choices that motivated readers to have trouble separating him from his book.

For example, in the first edition his name did actually not appear on the cover, which was

uncommon even in his time. His name was only revealed well into the reading: "Walt

Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," (Whitman, 1855, p. 29). It is never

easy to distinguish where the man ended and the persona began, or to even be sure if "Walt

Whitman" is a real person. One of Whitman's earliest readers, the philosopher Ralph Waldo

Emerson, noted this in his letter to Whitman (taken here from his reprinting): "I did not know

until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and

available for a post-office." (Whitman, 1856, pp. 345-346). One critic, Malcolm Cowley,

found it necessary to divide Whitman into three whole personas to make sense of his

complexity (Cowley, 2004). Cowley did not just separate between Whitman before and after

he published *Leaves*, but sectioned him off in different timelines, arguing that the "real"

Whitman only appeared in 1855 and disappeared forever in 1874 (disregarding the last 18 years of his lived life).

Where the "real" Walt Whitman ended and where his textual persona began has been a constant source of debate between scholars and every reader has had to make up their own mind over who the Whitman on the page really is. It is easy enough to separate Whitman from his book before 1855, but after this point the book took such a large presence in his life that it became much less easy to separate the two, because after that year the book kept living. It was published through multiple editions and it changed as he changed. Of course, this is not to say that the persona ever ceased to be and that Whitman's soul and body suddenly took the place of the book, but he managed to have the effect of making readers wonder who the odd bard is and seek him through his book.

Figure 1: Walt Whitman by Samuel Hollyer, engraving of a daguerreotype by Gabriel Harrison (original lost), 1854. A digital copy of the engraving of Walt Whitman used in his

1855 edition. Retrieved from: https://whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/zzz.00002.html Image is in the Public Domain.

The start of the Whitmanian poet came not with the poems though, but with a picture. On the first pages, there was an engraving of a daguerreotype (the type of picture that could be produced in Whitman's time, example above) taken of Walt Whitman looking directly at the reader. Today it doesn't distinguish itself as anything unique, but it garnered much reaction. He clothed himself much more loosely than men in his time were expected to public places (Kaplan, 1980, p.147). He looked odd to many people and knew he did, posing in a provocative manner, head cocked to the side and leaning. He created a distinct impression of himself as a loafer, an outsider, who still stood and welcomed the reader to turn the page and discover what this outsider could offer.

Acclaimed Whitman scholar Ed Folsom has noted the importance of this introduction in his essay *Whitman making books/Books Making Whitman*. He notes how in the opening pages, Whitman did not name himself as the book's author or as the man in the picture, first time readers would not be sure that the one on the picture was Walt Whitman himself. Discussing this choice, Folsom writes: "One effect of the arrangement is that the identity of the person speaking the poems emerges from the poems themselves and is not confused with any actual individual." (Folsom, 2006). Folsom assumes that the omission removed the expectation of the author to be represented through the poems, though I would argue that the opposite is just as likely. By removing the name, the reader becomes confused and is forced to look for signs of the author in the text itself, in effect merging the presence of the author directly with the text, which makes separating the two less possible. Whitman mediated his poetic self, fully engaging with the possibilities of the medium of print to create his authorial identity, which makes him so inseparable from his book.

In fact, Whitman was a bookmaker himself, having learned printing at a young age in lieu of a full education. He learned the process of creating a book from beginning to end and used that consciously in the creation of his different editions, experimenting for his entire life with placement, typing, the use of illustrations and even the length and size of the book itself. At the beginning the book was meant to be small, so anyone could have it in their back pocket, final versions had the weight of a Bible, which likely motivated him to change pronouns from "you" to the more biblical "thou" (Folsom, 2006). Changes number in the hundreds when comparing any two examples of his editions. The book was not simply a way for the bard to store his poems, it was the means in and of itself to reach his audience.

The construction of Whitman's persona owes much to Emerson, the father of Transcendentalist thought. It is common to look at their relationship as that of an old master and a young apprentice, but this perception is largely due to Whitman's advertising strategies. After he sent Emerson a copy of *Leaves*, the philosopher wrote his brief but highly approving letter: "I find [Leaves of Grass] the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. (…) I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start." (1856, p. 345). Whitman published this letter in a newspaper and included it in his next 1856 edition. In later editions, he even added "I greet you at the beginning of a great career" in gold letters on the book's spine. Emerson did not approve of this, perhaps both because his wish for privacy was disrespected and because he may have been more cautious in his approval than Whitman understood it to be. In 1871 Emerson is reported to have said: "I expected-him-to make-the songs of the Nation-but he seems-to be contented to-make the inventories." (Miller, 1989, p. 141). Whether he truly said this or not, it is likely Emerson found something missing from Whitman upon closer examination.

Emerson was the head founder of the literary movement called Transcendentalism. According to the Oxford Literary Dictionary Transcendentalism is:

> An idealist philosophical tendency among writers in and around Boston in the mid-19th century. (…) Transcendentalism affirmed Kant's principle of intuitive knowledge not derived from the senses, while rejecting organized religion for an extremely individualistic celebration of the divinity in each human being. The leading Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson issued what was virtually the movement's manifesto in his essay Nature (1836), which presents natural phenomena as symbols of higher spiritual truths. (Baldick, 2015b).

The movement has a romantic relationship with nature and non-conformity, arguing against empiricism in favor of looking at nature and what truths can be taken from it by feeling and intuition. Transcendentalist thought is visible in many ways throughout Whitman's democratic poetics, from his affectionate descriptions of nature and of his individual nature, both evident as divine to him. When it comes to his persona, the clearest influence on Whitman's figure is evident in Emerson's 1844 essay, *The Poet*.

In *The Poet*, Emerson called for a poet of the United States to come forth and emancipate the American consciousness. The poet would be the "Namer", that communicates the truths of nature to the masses (Emerson, 2013, p. 573). He would speak to them as Homer and Dante spoke to their people. They were poets for their nations and as the US was a new kind of nation, a proper poet would have to write his poems in a new way: "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem." (p. 569). Emerson envisioned a poet for the whole country, his vocabulary: "would embrace words and images excluded from polite conversation"(p. 572). This was Emerson's two cents in the larger conversation over what American literature should be, which at this point was divided over if it should retain the tradition of their European ancestors or if they should break from it. Transcendentalist thinker

and critic Margaret Fuller sums up the latter position most clearly: "Books which imitate the thought and life of Europe do not constitute an American literature. Before such can exist, an original idea must animate this nation and fresh currents of life fresh thoughts among its shores." (Kaplan, 1980, p. 100).

Whitman was very aware of this debate and he fell very firmly within Emerson's side of the issue. His poetry was written in free verse and his words were distanced from the expected formalities of poets and took on the vocabulary common people used. Through his poetry he embodied a democratic order, where the common people would be represented and united. The first edition has a preface that explicitly conveys this: "(…) the genius of the United States is not the best or most in its executives (…) but always most in the common people." (1855, p. iii)

Whitman's constructed self was in many ways from Emerson's model in *The Poet*, but it also represents a break from the lineage the essay presented, in his rejection of anonymity. For the poet Emerson prescribed would be representative, but not representative of himself. Dante's greatest accomplishment, according to Emerson, was writing an autobiography that was in "cipher" (2013, p. 579). In Emerson's poet anonymity is essential, the poet has to renounce his identity to become a vessel for the higher truths poetry that must be conveyed to the masses. The figure of the bard is by necessity made as a construction and not a person. The essay itself puts this idea of anonymity into practice, when he reminiscences about a "certain poet" he claims to know that espouses poetry as seen through nature's metamorphosis: "

> [Nature] makes a man; and having brought him to ripe age, she will no longer run the risk of losing this wonder at a blow, but she detaches from him a new self, that the kind may be safe to which the individual is exposed. So when the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away from its poems or songs (…) (p. 574).

To Emerson, the poet's physicality is a threat to the enrichment of the soul, therefore it has to be eliminated in some way, to let the soul leave the body behind. His very quotation of this "poet" is a demonstration of his philosophy, because he does not in truth refer to another person's voice here but his own, the paragraph is his own words.[4] In a meta way, he constructed a poet that exemplified his view that for the poet to come forth, the man needs to be absent so that the poet can be elusive and speak as anyone.

In *Leaves of Grass*, the poet as the Namer is very much present, but just as present is the man Walt Whitman. Whitman is after all not just 'the poet of the soul', but 'the poet of the body'[5] as well, a body he very intimately connected to his book with his photograph of himself. That picture is the very first thing readers of the 1855 book would meet, and through subsequent editions he would continue photographing himself and bring that specific image into the body of the work itself. The photos showed him age from a man of 36 in 1855, to an older one as editions went on. Photography had just come into American life at this time and constituted a shift from how a person could be embodied through an image. Portraits were painted only a few times in life and required the painter's creativity to capture the spirit of the person. By contrast, a photograph captured the person in a very specific moment in time, representing the very minute it is taken in. (Folsom, n.d.). Through this, Whitman forces the reader to see a moment of the poet as he is, to bring the body out and let the masses see the poetry and the man. His choice did not prevent his rise to the become the poet of America, but in fact enabled it. He invited the reader in with both an idea of himself (the poetry) and his actual person (the picture), practically daring the audience to find the difference between the two. This is a key feature of Whitman's contribution in American poetry, to both be present and distant as the person and the persona.

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[4] This fact is not present in the text itself, I was only made aware of this through a footnote in the Norton Anthology I read this essay through, which calls Emerson's removal of himself in the text «a private joke».
[5] As stated in section 21 of Song of Myself

Whitman's life may have ended in 1892, but his final edition has not been the final word on his project as a whole. To this day, scholarly discussion over the work has to take into account that the editions are different from one another and do constitute Whitman's vision, frozen in different points in time (much like a photograph). Some still stick to *Song of Myself* with the very first edition, that isn't broken up into sections and goes untitled.[6] Whitman was at the end of his life clear that he wished his final "deathbed" version to stand as the one that would be read after him. Many later printings of the book conform to this edition as being the final, absolute word on the matter, but this thesis intends to see the separate works in a chronology. In cases like Whitman, a final edition does not have to mean "final intention", i.e.; an overall "superior" version of the work. As scholarly critic Thomas G. Tanselle (2015) has argued, it is best to view the editions as "final intentions":

> If one decides that the revisions of at each stage are the kind which spring from an altered conception of the whole, one can argue that each edition of *Leaves* is a separate work with its own final intention. (…) In that case, Whitman's last text is not- as an intended work- any more "final" than his earlier texts; it merely comes later. (p. 151).

For this thesis I primarily utilize the three earliest editions of *Leaves*, the ones from 1855, 1856 and 1860 (with some additional edition utilized in cases of contrast or clarification). The poems will be referred to by the respective edition it came from, taken from the *Walt Whitman Archive*, to better examine the work as a continual process. The Archive is very well suited for this, as it contains freely available scans of these editions and therefore retains the poems' placement and particular spelling. This is particularly meaningful with the poem *Song of Myself*, which went through many rewrites and changes in terms of placement in the work. All of the poems used went through several changes in terms of name (in many instances not

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[6] One example of this is a Norwegian translation of *Leaves* (titled *Gressstrå* and published in 2006) from Norwegian scholar Kurt Narvesen, who decided to translate *Song* without dividing it into sections. The Twitter account @TweetsofGrass is also an example of this.

having one), but to avoid confusion I refer to them by their name from the 1892 edition, as it is this edition that is likely to be most familiar to the reader. When publishing his work, it is up to the editor to decide which version should be printed and it is up to the reader to decide what to read. For this thesis, I choose to look at more than one edition, because they are different statements and in order to see them in chronology they must be acknowledged as such.

The use of Whitman in mass media

If Whitman would fit into blogging, it would mean he would fit into a medium different from the book. Before this discussion, Whitman has had a resurging presence in multiple mediums before. To give the discussion a larger context, this section looks at how Whitman fitting into the blogosphere fits into Whitman's history of adaptation and use. In order to better capture this moment, it is meaningful to look at how he has come to be used in a wider context of media appearances.

In their essay "Walt Whitman: Twentieth-century Mass Media Appearances" scholars Andrew Jewell and Kenneth M Price have catalogued how Whitman has been used in different mediums. The examples are many, but on average they can be boiled down into two categories. The first is to use Whitman by merely borrowing his iconic figure that is mediated by someone else, to lend some type of credibility to a topic unrelated to him (as an example, in one of the cafés in Lagunen Storsenter in Bergen, a wall there holds a picture of Dracula and a quote from him: "Come freely. Go safely; and leave something of the happiness you bring." Dracula is never associated with cafés in the book, the connection is forced to attract customers.)

The other way is to engage in conversation with Whitman, to comment or even parody his poetry, to avoid reduction and go for engagement. "Until the 1960s, Whitman was invoked with surprising frequency as an icon of high literary stature." (2006, p. 341). His figure was used to sell products like whiskey, cigars and stamps, lending credibility to a brand by borrowing his name and figure. In many cases he is misconstrued as someone from an "elite", a generic figure of historic respectability that in some way represents their product. These representations are usually apocryphal to his actual life, Whitman spent most of his years isolated and unappreciated, living by modest means. "The Whitman represented is the writer who will unsettle the fewest possible people in the marketplace."(Jewell & Price, 2006, p. 343). His less "safe" aspects, like his themes of sexuality and complex meanings are amputated for the sake of a comfortable image.

After the 60s, his figure and work is engaged with on a deeper level, used and commented on in myriad ways. His poems have been used for addressing the subject of death, for example in *Six Feet Under.* In romantically oriented shows like *Friends*, (as well as in music) the open sexuality and desire that he portrays is brought forth. The generic image of a "good gray poet" is traded for someone who had things to say about sexuality and society at large. He is not simply a respected dead man, but someone whose meanings are adaptable and open for conversation. His poetry is also not only respected but can be mocked as well. One of many examples is the Simpsons, where Whitman was referenced in season 7, in the eighth episode titled "Mother Simpson". In it, Homer approaches a gravestone he believes to be his mother's, only to discover that it in fact belongs to Walt Whitman. Homer kicks the stone and yells: "Damn you Walt Whitman! *Leaves of Grass* my ass!" (p. 348). Jewell and Price take this as mostly a frivolous joke, but one that demonstrates "that American culture has developed an easy familiarity with Whitman" (p. 348).

Intentionally or not, the scene speaks to the broader context of how far Whitman has come in American culture. The fact that an oaf like Homer is aware of this 19th century poet, though surprising, is not so out of the realm of plausibility that it breaks the joke. It also assumes that the average viewer will know Whitman and be able to share in Homer's frustrations in not understanding Whitman's poetry. Lastly, Whitman appearing at a seemingly random instance is emblematic of where he is at the current moment in American history. He has become so engraved into the culture that he shows up in places he isn't even supposed to belong to. People do not have to look for him, he will appear on his own.

Jewell and Price wrote their essay in 2006 and since then Whitman has not ceased to appear. In 2020 Bob Dylan put out the song *I Contain Multitudes*, referencing one of Whitman's most famous lines both in the title and as a recurring rhyme. Dylan has been an artist for about 60 years, played with dozens of famous artists and received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In this calm single he uses Whitman's words to reflect on his own contradictory roles throughout this very long life and to seat himself with the American literary canon, preparing for the end of his career. In his arena of music, Dylan could very well be said to have carried the Whitmanian tradition through his time. Another reference of note came in the tv series "Breaking Bad". In it, a copy of the book *Leaves of Grass* is not only referenced but plays a role in several seasons of plot, effectively raising an uncanny comparison to the poet and the protagonist Walter White. Like Whitman, Walter White is an entrepreneur in a field of his own choosing, intensely focused on achieving greatness solely on his own terms. In season 5 of the show the comparison comes to a head with episode 8, titled "Gliding Over All", a reference to Whitman's poem of the same title.

The speaker in the referenced poem is of a satisfied person, who is gliding: "Through Nature, Time and Space / (…) Death, many deaths I'll sing." (1891-92, p. 218). At this point in the story, White has gone from an underpaid chemistry teacher to a drug-lord millionaire and the

deaths he sings are those of ten witnesses he orders to be killed in a disturbing montage. Here the show engages with the darker side of the individualism and endless quest to make a mark on the world that people like Whitman have become symbols of. With Whitman, his individuality was a means to unify and heal the greater whole he was a part of. With Walter White, the opposite happens.

When covering Whitman on the web, already in 2006 Jewell and Price found the online contributions to be fascinating and varied, with contributions like a music video. Other sites were mostly concerned with borrowing Whitman's generic figure. They were "[web]sites that use Whitman's fame to draw in tourists, and sites that narrowly define Whitman's identity (the "spiritual" Whitman, the "gay" Whitman, the "democratic" Whitman) in order to promote an explicit agenda." (p. 355). It ends with discussing The Whitman Archive, that gives access to both what he wrote and background information on how he wrote it, in addition to vast quantities of criticism and commentary from scholars. It is still updated today and has compiled probably as dense an understanding as one likely can get, bringing up extensive details on everything that can be collected about him and his life, both professional and private. No doubt in part made as an embrace of Whitman's democratic values, his poetry and the discussion of it is available to any person of any class or age.

Returning now to the topic of Whitman in the digital age, we can see that his style of poetry has come to resemble social media in an uncanny way, that diverges from other mass media adaptations. Before social media, texts that could reach the masses was reserved for print, and those who had access to the machinery necessary to produce printing. This technology belonged either to newspapers and book publishers, which limited both who could speak and what could be spoken of. Walt himself felt this, when after failing to find a publisher who would accept his odd poetry, he had to self-publish his first edition. Now, material means and

physical occupation play much smaller roles, anyone can share anything through most platforms.

This chapter found that there is a widely spread belief that Whitman precedes blog culture in key ways, it appears that the blog has a larger heritage than the birth of the Internet. It is different from mere adaptation of his material like with TV, instead there is a suggestion here that Whitman retroactively has become more relevant with blog culture. The feeling is there, but it has not been sufficiently explored. To further do this, we need a common understanding of what blogging is so we can see what it is that Whitman fits into and what the larger tradition it is that connects Whitman and blogging. In the following chapter, I turn to the blog genre as defined by media professor Jill Walker Rettberg in her 2014 book *Blogging*. To see the blog and *Leaves* in its wider history, we will turn to philosopher Michel Foucault's theory of *Technologies of the self*, which investigates the issue of self-writing in Western history.

Chapter 2: The Blog as Genre and the Blog in History

As *Leaves of Grass* has been read and reread through generations, the ways scholars and critics have read it has increased in proportion to how literary theory has developed. *Song of Myself* alone has received immense scrutiny. In 1989, scholar Edwin Haviland Miller compiled an overview of the reception of it from nearly 300 past critics, finding very little in the way of a consensus for what it truly is:

> A summary of the views of "Song of Myself" presented here is as complex and inconclusive as the guesses of the "I" of the poem in answer to the child's question, "What is the grass?" For "Song of Myself" is epic (proto-epic, autobiographical epic, or epical in scope), heroic poem, lyric, prophetic or mystical (inverted or no) vision, a conversion narrative, a love poem, a comic drama, a drama of identity, an American pastoral, an opera, a self-making (simultaneously of person and poem), a reverie or meditation. And perhaps there is no end. (Miller, 1989, p. xviii).

This excerpt came from a discussion of *Song,* but it applies to *Leaves* as well. The book is kept alive by this shifting analysis and will continue for the vast foreseeable future (most recently, passages were put into the programming language C++ to argue for digital humanities.[7] As long as the field of humanities changes, the way we read Whitman will change. This time I will look at *Leaves of Grass* through the eyes of the blog genre, a place many might associate with cooking recipes and frivolity, rarely a space for literature. As the history of interpretation suggests, my view is unlikely to settle the matter, but is a potential way to insight into this elusive book of poems.

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[7] The conversion of Whitman's poetry into code language is used as a means of better understanding the logic inherent within programming. Source: Gray, N. (2020). "Vivas to those who have failed:" Walt Whitman Electric and the (Digital) Humanities. *digital humanities quarterly*, *14* Retrieved April 28th 2022, from http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/14/4/000503/000503.html#p30

Leaves was not written to be identifiable as one thing, it is a creation that grew freely over time, only constrained by its writer and not adhering to the forms literature typically lives by. It baffled critics at the time and was not accepted as literature, something Whitman decided to wear like a badge. In his final statement on *Leaves* (a sort of essayistic epilogue titled *A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads*), Whitman refrained from calling his work literature, viewing it as a constriction of form over a mark of quality and importance. To future readers he advised: "No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or æstheticism."(1891-92, p. 438). Through this chapter and the next, I want to bring *Leaves* back into this "unliterary-ness", into the strange digital space that is blogging.

I will look at blogging, for two reasons: One, it is a new way of discussing *Leaves* and how we can understand it in our digital era and conversely this can be a new way of discussing blogging. Two, by bringing a literary work into the blogosphere I can examine what place literature can have on social media, if there is any space at all. If the blogging space can effectively carry Whitman, then it would be of great value both for blogging as a genre and for *Leaves* as literature for the people, for the working man as much as it is for his Harvard-educated employer.

For this to be possible, we need a common understanding of the blog. This chapter clarifies in more detail how we can define blogging as a genre and how it is used for this thesis. I draw on both 2014's *Blogging* by Jill Walker Rettberg and 2010's *Blog Theory* by media scholar Jodi Dean for my discussion of how to understand the blog as a genre. Then, to see it in history I look more deeply into the issue of self-exploration in blogging through using Michel Foucault's theory of "Technologies of the Self", a literary tradition where self-fashioning is seen as a recurring thread from ancient Greece to our very present. In addition to the history of use I also identify the history of mediums that books and blogs are at different ends of.

Finally, the chapter rounds off with an acknowledgment over the large history of poetic self-fashioning and justifying why Whitman is the one under the microscope.

The Blog as a Genre

What are blogs, exactly? They are a product of the Internet and as a result the blog is found with many a name in many a domain. In its basic form it surfaced around the late nineties, called a weblog and later shortened to blog (Rettberg, 2014). In the beginning, only those with a good understanding of coding could make a blog, because they had to make their own domains with code. After a while, websites like Myspace and Blogger were created that were open for users less skilled in programming. As more and more people began to share their thoughts, websites multiplied and grew exponentially. Blogging had gone from a niche curiosity to an accepted cultural practice. It did not take long for corporations to take notice and start creating *corporate blogs*, which served as advertising and building brand image. With this great increase of bloggers came a sense of loss for those who so enthusiastically championed them, by making them boring. It was then a seeming shift came. From the mid to late 2000s, new sites like Facebook and Twitter came to be widely used. A new word was coined to describe these platforms, *social media*. With the emigration of users from blog sites to social media, the blog came to be "dead" in popular belief.

Did Twitter and Facebook mean the death of blogging? To the layman it could certainly seem that way, that a new term means it is something radically apart from it. Because of the rapid changes Internet culture go through, it can be hard to identify causality between what it is in 2000 and what it is in 2021. New platforms and apps spring up in quick succession, with the promise of being something different, the quote-unquote "next big thing" that replaces dying trends. After weblogs comes regular blogs, then comes Myspace and then again comes Facebook, long live the king.

Though social media is a useful new term for describing specific platforms, it does not make them completely new. Facebook has different rules than blogging spaces like Blogger and MySpace but is not different on a fundamental level. Professor Jill Walker Rettberg writes: "Blogs were social media years before the term was coined and, in many ways, blogs still

form the backbone of social media. (…) The basic idea is the same: let everybody share their thoughts and discoveries online." (2014, p. 14).

Blogs have now accumulated at least 20-25 years of history, but what characterizes them? Because of the loosely organized nature of the Internet this can be hard to pin down, but there are certain aspects that separate a blog from a Wikipedia article or a news report. According to Rettberg, formally the blog is written and shared on the Internet, with standard features being hyperlinks and visual media. It is typically written in first person by a person or group that discusses a topic in a personal tone. The content can be stray observations, editorial opinions or attempts at journalism, but with this personal tone. The blog receives frequent updates and is also social, they are written with the expectation of being met by someone's gaze.

In this sense, as a genre it has much in common with journaling. Just like we are compelled to read someone's private reflections in a journal, we are compelled to read blogs, in this digital space that is both secret and public. People can share their selves here and be received by other people, very often strangers they have no previous association with. Some blogs get enough followers that they build communities of like-minded people who become interested in them.

Blogging, understood as encompassing both old sites and social media, has now become embedded into a great amount of people's daily life but it would be simplistic to say that everyone who participates all participate equally in sharing their lives. Places like Facebook has other functions than sharing one's own life, it can also be used simply for sharing events or links to other domains, as well as selling and buying goods and services. To meaningfully separate blogs, Rettberg has proposed we look at blogs as fitting into three types: filter blogs, topic blogs and personal blogs (2014, p. 17). Filter blogs are blogs that shares the blogger's activity on the web, for example links that they found interesting. Topic blogs are dedicated to sharing information about the user's interests, for example knitting or cooking. The personal blog is the type of blog that is dedicated to share the user's experience and life events, outside of the Internet. It is the personal blog that is the most relevant to this thesis, as it is the one that most concerns itself with giving a narrative to the blogger, where they are trying to give an impression of themselves to a reader. These categories are not rigid, one blog dedicated to sharing a lived experience will likely also include links to topics outside the life, but they can function as useful guidelines that helps us distinguish what is important. From now on, when discussing blogging, the examples I use will be *personal blogs*.

Like a journal, a blog is not written in a single instance but is built up continuously, bit by bit as the blogger finds something to blog about. The blog is inevitably created spontaneously, less of a polished idea and more of an ever-changing train of thought the reader is privy to. Reading it for weeks or even months gives us as readers a real-time peek into how the blog develops, one post at a time. The blog thus has a "cumulative process", that gives the feeling of gradually getting to know someone, a bit like watching a television series (Rettberg, 2014, p. 5). But unlike a tv series, the blog by its nature necessitates a certain loss of control on the author's part. With the lack of an ability to revise and curate the content as a whole, whatever narrative does occur is dependent on being written into itself. One example is *Dooce*, or rather Heather B. Armstrong, perhaps the earliest of what is referred to as "mommy-bloggers". Much of her blogging was her struggle with alcohol, which both opened her up for criticism and sympathy. Recently (April 2022), her tale has shifted into a recovery story, from shame to triumph. As long as the story is kept open, it can change as many times as the blogger wants it to. And this voyeuristic excitement fuels a lot of readership, the possibility of something personal or revelatory trickling out of the cracks of the blogger's image.

These formal features allows us to define it, but stopping here gives us little insight into what blogs try to achieve. The simple answer is to suppose that blogging on the Internet is like being on a street corner with a companion, one is inclined to converse to pass the time. The Internet allows for conversation, so naturally people use them to talk. But there is more to blogging than communication, it is not "just talk". Bloggers don't just share themselves, they share a certain "self" in their writing that creates an impression of themselves that they are comfortable to share with others. Anything shared can be spontaneous, but not entirely coincidental. "Just as we study ourselves in a mirror, shaping our features so our reflections please us, so we create a reflection of ourselves in a weblog. At the same time, we use our blogs to veil ourselves, not telling all but presenting only certain carefully selected aspects of ourselves to our readers." (Rettberg, 2014, p. 127).

Technologies of the self- the blog's historical background

This issue of the self that is and the self that we create is rooted in history. In 1982, the philosopher Michel Foucault had a series of seminars where he introduced his theory of "technologies of the self", to argue that the way we understand ourselves comes from the

"technologies" that are present in our own time and how we use them. Technologies in this context refer to both material things and techniques that the individual can use on themselves. This category includes letter-writing, journaling, prayer, meditation and other activities.

The use of these technologies, Foucault explains, "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."(1988, p. 18) In other words, these tools allows us to create an understanding of our identities and to possibly change them, if we desire to. He draws this phenomenon all the way back from ancient Greece to our own period, as a resurging tradition that has changed in tact with how our social lives are structured and what technologies are available.

Foucault demonstrated two main points of the history of these technologies, ancient history before and after Christianity's emergence. In the time of the ancient Greeks and the Romans, one should seek to know oneself both to understand oneself and to take care of it. When Christianity came, it was no longer enough to understand the self, one had to renounce and change the self through confession and prayer. This trend then went largely unchallenged until the eighteenth century, where an important change would come about.

From that point on, Foucault observed a new direction that broke from Christianity: "From the eighteenth century to the present, the techniques of verbalization have been reinserted in a different context by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self." (Foucault, 1988, p. 49). Foucault had plans to continue this field of study but died a few years after he established this theory. His work on this framework was however enough to give a framework for other scholars to build on, several having made connections between his theory and blogging. Already in the early 2000's media scholars Carolyn R. Miller and Dawn Shepherd made this connection (2004) and a decade later this has continued to be utilized (McNeill, 2014). Out of these the one I use is Jodi Dean's *Blog Theory*. Not all who write about blogs see them in this framework, but it has been immensely useful when looking at blogs not just as a current phenomenon but as a part of human history.

Jodi Dean has most explored blogging through these technologies, in explaining what purposes the blog seeks to fulfill, arguing that it is not enough to look at blogging as a genre: "Here writing is not simply a method for recording one's thoughts or reflecting on one's

actions. It is a way of making present one who is not there, of summoning a companion in the imagination in order to feel the pressure of the other's gaze." (Dean, 2010, p. 50). In her reading, she stresses the importance of the writer having a gaze that will read into him.

> Foucault's technologies of the self rely on the installation of a gaze, of the perspective of another before whom the subject imagines itself. For the subject this gaze constitutes an Other who registers my acts in the symbolic network.'[8] (…) Absent that gaze, one may feel trapped, passive, or unsure as to the point of doing anything at all. To this extent, identifying with the gaze enables the subject's activity. (2010, p. 54).

Like someone writing a journal, we write our blogs with the desire to be watched by someone and we desire to be seen through that image we make of ourselves.

Someone who blogs desires both to put themselves out there and be seen and accepted for that self. Like a letter, what is recorded are usually ordinary things. Going for a walk, eating your lunch, reading a book, these things are not special or particular but precisely this ordinariness is important to Foucault. He highlighted an affectionate letter from the Roman Marcus Aurelius to his companion Fronto, which was filled with mundane details about his day-to-day activities: "in Aurelius' letter these details are important because they are you-what you thought, what you felt." (Foucault, 1988, p. 29). The mundanity gives both the writer and the reader a sense of this self, as affirming the identity one has created to be valid.

This happens, despite the fact that a blogger is completely free to make up their own story and the reader will most likely be aware of this. This brings us to what one of the main draws of a blog, the authenticity. Blogging, has to be "real" to the reader in some way, to give a sense of authenticity. When the blog is read, the reader has to get a sense of being a fly on someone's wall. In cases where it was discovered that a blogger invented their story entirely, readers expressed outrage and betrayal. For example, in the early days of YouTube, there was a channel named *lonelygirl15*. It was ostensibly just the vlog (video blog) of a teenage girl, but it was in fact a planned narrative created by a creative team. As that narrative was carried out, the audience eventually came to discover this and were outraged by this "betrayal" (Rettberg, 2014, p. 131). This outrage implies that blogs are usually not mediated narratives and that *lonelygirl15* was a fiction pretending to be a real person, when in truth much of blog culture depends on fictionalization.

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[8] The term "symbolic network" is from philosopher Slavoj Zizek's contribution in the book *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000).

Before moving on Whitman in this view, I want to pause a little over this 18th century "new self" that Foucault ended his lecture with. In keeping with the tradition of many philosophers, what precisely is meant by this new self is not defined but left as an open space for others to elaborate on. The closest example I could find was through a chapter in the book by American scholar Huck Gutman, who used Jean-Jacques Rousseau's autobiography *Confessions* and later work to look at a conception of the self from the 1700s. Gutman does not explicitly claim this is what Foucault's 18th century new self should be understood as, but his analysis is heavily informed by Foucault's theory.

Rousseau's *Confessions* is an autobiography, with which he exposed his life and failings to the masses. Gutman stresses that this came at a time when Rousseau was hated, despised and wrote this autobiography to protect himself from the world. He borrowed from the tradition of literary Christian confession, in which a Saint humbled himself in front of God, to create a moral example for others (one of the best known examples being Saint Augustine's Confessions). By contrast, Rousseau is an early Romantic who creates a secular self that is singular, autonomous and independent (divided) from the world that doesn't contain his subjectivity (Gutman, 1988). Division is at the heart of this new self, as it is through this act that it can emerge. With his imagination Rousseau created a self that is so substantial: "that he can treat self as some sort of external object to be examined, as a thing with existence apart from his consciousness."(p. 108). Gutman draws this out as the start of a new conception of the self, as an independent being that exists by itself as a "me" and society as "not-me".

Through this conception of the self, the individual is relieved of the weight it carries as a member of society and the world at large. Through drawing oneself out, one becomes liberated from what society imposes upon them. Rousseau's method is self-exposure, through telling everything he knows about himself and his life to others. This confessing is a means to liberation, but it also has an ironic effect, namely that the division leads to a kind of isolation. For the man Rousseau describes himself as is a fiction, that can give reprieve from the world but not replace it. As Gutman writes:

> Having divided the "me" from the "not-me", the "me" discovers itself apart, separated, isolated, alone. The world of totality, which was sundered in order to form a new whole, an individuated self, is no longer a totality. (...) Although the first reward of constituting oneself as a subject is the feeling of centrality and well-being, an inevitable consequence of that constitution, which depends on division, is isolation. (1988, p. 109).

If we accept this as an illustration of the 18th century's new self, where the one who uses these technologies creates a self to stand in for their physical being, then these are also the selves that are created in Whitman's time and follow to our own blogging days.

Foucault's theory of technologies gives a compelling view over Western history's relationship with self-writing and it is useful for finding a commonality between such different practices as poetry publishing and blog publishing. Yet there are also limits to this approach. Foucault emphasized examining the individual so much, that little examination was given to the material the self is created in. If taken literally, this view runs the risk of losing nuance. Dean is among the scholars that have criticized this implied oneness of all technologies: "The reduction of blogging to journaling overlooks the immense historical variety in practices of writing and their relations to different kinds of selves." (2010, p. 49).

Why Whitman?

Whitman preceded many in terms of style and how directly personal his poems were, but he was far from the first man to write his own story with poetry. In England, William Wordsworth wrote an autobiographical poem of epic length that he worked on throughout his entire life until his death in 1850. When it was finally published posthumously, it was named *The Prelude* by his widow. Like *Leaves*, *The Prelude* is an imprinting of the author's life and personality, it even has multiple editions that scholars have compared and contrasted the merits of. When compared, the editions show clear changes that came from Wordsworth's own development from a young man into an old one. Before Whitman, Wordsworth created and refined a poetic self for decades, to great success (the poem is by many considered his best work and of immense literary merit). Why then, is Whitman my sole subject and not Wordsworth?

Because unlike *The Prelude*, Whitman allowed his poetic self to come out into the public and be judged. Wordsworth only allowed his poetic self to be known when his life had passed, likely afraid of showing himself to the masses. With Whitman we can follow how he navigates becoming the national poet of a nation that ignores him, similar to how bloggers work to create a self that captures an audience. When the audience is only ever imagined, as it was for Wordsworth, the comparison holds less interest when it comes to blogging. Even if a blogger's audience is miniscule, it is there and the blog is written to be found by them.

Like Whitman, the blog concerns itself greatly with a direct correspondence towards the reader, where the writer presents himself. It is a part not only of its own network, it is also part of the larger tradition of *technologies of the self*, specifically as I conceive it within the 18th century and onward. So far I have argued that bloggers and Whitman are part of this tradition, but I have not examined in depth how they fit into this system. Therefore, the next chapter examines *Leaves of Grass* more closely, with this perspective in mind.

Chapter 3: Close Reading *Leaves of Grass* in the blog perspective

Leaves' most recurring subject was always Whitman's conception of himself. Towards the end of his career, Whitman summed up his aspirations in the afterword of his deathbed edition:

> [*Leaves*] indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature—an attempt, from first to last, to put a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me. (1891-92, p. 438).

In his choice of the words "freely, fully and truly" Whitman admits an expectation, that by disclosing himself he can free himself, that putting himself on record would be an act of liberation from the confines he finds himself in. But this "Person" he would record, is that truly the Walter Whitman[9] that had lived in relative obscurity before the publication of *Leaves*?

In the most basic sense it is; Walter Whitman is the writer of the book, and these thoughts are his as written down in his specific time and location. But we should not therefore understand it as a catalogue of his lived life, specific to him. He capitalizes *person*, as if it means something more than the noun that grammatically stands in for the person Walter Whitman, like the "I" that represents him figuratively in *Leaves*. He compels us to understand this "person" not only as a singular subject but a larger, universal concept. By putting himself on record, as he sees himself, he would aim to tap into a larger concept of personhood, where

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[9] Walter Whitman was his legal birth name, he was nicknamed Walt by his family and would use this nickname throughout his career.

everyone can find themselves in him. This does not mean that his "Person" is a cipher, his photo and his poetic voice speaks as a man with bravado, that is father, brother and lover to his readers. At the same time, he deliberately avoided topics like the poor family he came from and the private friendships he fostered. Whitman permits himself to be seen, but only partially. His creation of himself was not merely a vessel for his democratic mission but also an attempt to attain personal liberty, to define his person to a crowd. He began much in the same place someone starts out as a new user in the blogosphere, having to stand at the top of a molehill and shout to get anyone's attention, advertising himself while also disclosing only select parts of himself.

To further discuss how Whitman conceived this character, I start where Whitman started his literary life, with his first book, the 1855 edition of *Leaves*. *Song of Myself*, as it is the first poem that met the reader and played a fundamental role in defining his poetic persona through to the end of his career. When referencing a fragment of *Song*, it will be referred to by section (despite the first edition of the poem not being divided into sections) for the sake of ease on the reader's part and to better view the poem's progression.

The name for Whitman's epic poem is known to us as *Song of Myself*, but that title actually came very late in Whitman's career, no earlier than 1881. In the beginning it was untitled, then it became *Poem of Walt Whitman, An American*, then simply *Walt Whitman*. This change of title shows an important shift in how he encourages the reader to see his self, subtly changing the relationship between the text and author. Early on, the text is from Walt the American, stressing him to be see the man in relation to his country. Later, he emphasized his singular identity, until he named it *Song of Myself*. In making the poem the song of him, he changes the nature of it. He presents the poem as his song, by allusion making himself the singer. But the singer is not the same as his song, it comes from him, but is not a substitute for himself.

The sections will appear as written in that edition, including his unorthodox use of ellipses (which he later changed to line dashes in later versions). Ellipses in writing mark when something is omitted from the text, for example when a paper quotes a long text, ellipses show where some words were left out. But in *Song*, what is implied to be omitted is not accessible to the reader, making it necessary for reader to fill in that place themselves. This act of the reader bringing their own interpretation of Whitman is important for the first edition, because it involves the reader as a participant.

Further down I analyze later poems, like *As I Ebb'd* and select poems from the cluster *Calamus*, to argue that he later interrogates and problematizes his own self-conception. *Leaves* stands by itself now as a singular and complete book, but for this thesis it is important that we remember the work as a longer process, one edition a different statement from the next. Both of these aspects are important to contemporary blogging.

Building his autonomous self in *Song*

Whitman introduces himself to the reader by way of proclamation. As his first lines go: "I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (1855, p. 13, lines 1-3). From the earliest, the authorial "I" is established as a proud, carefree man who is by himself more than sufficient company. He sings himself and celebrates himself, and we as readers would have to assume that he is someone worth celebrating. He is in essence alone, not out of circumstance but because he is content to be there, where he will keep his distance from society. Whitman impresses on us that he is a man with an Emersonian, self-reliant attitude to the world. He will loaf over being active, finding pleasure in sights and nature: "I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease . . . . observing a spear of summer grass" (lines 4-5). Loafing is a passive activity, in

stark contrast with the American ideal of hard work, but it is through this solitary ritual that the majesty of *Song* commences. As a result, Whitman frames his individual mind and its powers to observe something as simple as the grass which through his imagination he will create the world the rest of the poem explores.

The first two sections function as a nearly Edenic celebration of the singular individual's soul and body, loafing along with the reader. Here is only "I" and "you" present, with the rest of the world as little more than a backdrop. In section 2 there are "Houses and rooms" that are "full of perfumes" (line 6), but those are only present for Whitman to walk away from, to forego the simple pleasure of distilled nature into the origin of it: "The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it. (…) The atmosphere is not a perfume . . . . it has no taste of the distillation . . . . / I am mad for it to be in contact with me" (lines 8-9, 13). Whitman is dominant in this situation, tempted by what conformity offers but able to move away from it with relative ease.

The fantasy of only him and the reader is enthralling, but Whitman is aware that he can not remove himself completely from the world he inhabits. Even as he is loafing, he is not participating but neither is he apart from society and it is when confronting that place he more establishes his self's identity, in section 4 of *Song*: "Trippers and askers surround me, / People I meet . . . . . the effect upon me of my early life . . . . of the ward and city I / live in . . . . of the nation," (p.15, lines 9-11). Suddenly, Whitman finds himself involuntarily enveloped with the participants of society, the 'trippers and askers' come as sudden intruders that take away his agency and suppresses this proud individuality. What was a ballad living in the present moment, instead becomes burdened with the past, his "early life" comes suddenly into view as the city that is his "ward" defines him through this relationship. Being warded provides a certain protection, but also means becoming defined on someone else's terms. He maintains this distance from these participants and from what they produce, but in doing so he has

assumed for himself a passive role, standing immobile while a catalogue of both personal and impersonal bonds, past and present events all pull at him. He shows little enthusiasm for them, but as he is passive, he cannot avoid them: "They come to me days and nights and go from me again" (line 17). So far, while his stance on the sidelines provides enjoyment, he has rendered himself helpless in most ways, by being idle and neither retiring away like a hermit or getting with the program. But at precisely this point he turns his identity away from a possible position of helplessness to a position of strength.

After the break of the line, he fully defines his self: "But they are not the Me myself. / Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am." (lines 18-19) The capital M "Me" of Whitman emerges as something singular, with a complete presence all by itself, that Whitman divides from the constraints of social life. This new grandiose "Me", that Whitman establishes is a singular and sovereign presence that breaks away from the constraints , in keeping with the tradition Rousseau established through his *Confessions*. Whitman defines "Me" as its own autonomous being, while everything that isn't "Me" belongs to what does not surround his subjectivity, i.e., the material world.[10] Passivity, standing still and reflecting on his own terms becomes a means of overcoming and escape, to become his own fully formed Walt Whitman. Through this act of individuation, he assumes a sort of literary superposition that puts him as a

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[10] Rousseau generally isn't thought to be a central figure in Whitman's work the way philosophers like Emerson were, though he had read his *Confessions* (and given how central Rousseau is to disciplines like philosophy and pedagogy even today, it seems unlikely Whitman could avoid being affected entirely). In his personal notebooks he discussed it (though it is dated only as written after 1850 and before his death, making it impossible to know for sure if it could have been on his mind before he wrote *Leaves*). Judging from his notes, Whitman was both fascinated and a little disgusted by the man and the bourgeoisie, European traditions he must have represented to the American visionary. He wrote that *Confessions* was a "frivolous, chattering, repulsive, book, [zic] that still has a great lesson in its pages". Rousseau is not named in any of Whitman's poems the way for example Plato or Hegel is, but there are signs here that he took inspiration from him, though it might only have been as an example of what he would avoid doing in his own book. Rousseau would elaborate his history in painful detail, Whitman would break from history and imagine himself into the present. Source: Kavanaugh, J. (After 1850). *Rousseau's Confessions*. Retrieved March 16th from https://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/marginalia/annotations/duk.00174.html

member of society and apart from it. On his own terms he is: "Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it" (line 23).

This establishing of his identity, which does not renounce the self but expands it, is the necessary declaration that the poem rests upon, that Whitman is something unique and singular. Through signing himself and *dividing* himself, the self he created with his book can stand on its own. From this section onwards he is emboldened enough to explore American life and landscape, as that literary loafer. Throughout *Song* he observes and participates where he chooses, with men and women, with slaves and free men alike. In a sense, having defined his self on his own poetic terms is what allows him to move through America in his book. It also allows him a place of refuge for himself, as a companion.

In section 14, Whitman is out in the countryside, where a wild gander is leading his flock. The gander's "Ya-honk!" (p.21, line 1) sounds like an invitation to Whitman and like the flock he follows through to the animals, where he sees in them and himself "the same old law" (line 8). Whitman is compelled to align himself with that law, as well as the men that live alongside them: "I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out." (line 15). He is so enraptured by what he sees that he is on the verge of becoming a part of the landscape, just as they are, when he abruptly brings back himself as the focus: "What is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest, is Me," (line 16). Here the "Me" is brought back as if to ward off that harmonious existence Nature is offering him, like a reflective insistence upon itself for its own sake. Whitman is tempted to obey that old law everyone obeys, but refuses himself that conformity, to enjoy it but not linger. Therefore, he brings his self back and embraces it, even if it pales in comparison to the grandiose completeness Nature can bring. Like in section 2, where Whitman foregoes the "perfumes" for the purity of Nature, he enjoys it but does not linger there. Whitman's "Me" may be common and cheap compared to Nature, but it is *his* individual nature, that permits this identity.

I have noted that a lineage of the self-presentation between Whitman and Rousseau, so it is necessary to distinguish them as well. Though they define themselves similarly, what they sought through this process was evidently not the same. Rousseau would protect himself from the world, through disclosing his sins and failures, to allow himself to be as he wishes. Whitman draws himself out, not through a chronological retelling but through his present body and mind, as it exists to him. That self can then go forth as his representative and be this companion to the people that he is not able to, tied down as he is by his personal history and body. Both are still instances of creating a self through text, that comes to interact with the external world (the readers) and Whitman's self creates a community that is apart.

Through his specific choices, he becomes both his own person apart from the crowds and within it. If that man is special, so is anyone else: "I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal/ and fathomless as / myself; / They do not know how immortal, but I know." (p.17, lines 16-18). The self is not celebrated by itself but is a means to reaching the wider world.

Ordinariness in *Leaves*

Walt Whitman is in his own words "a kosmos, one of the roughs", but he chooses to inhabit a very ordinary landscape. *Leaves* is an American Epic, but the pieces that come from them are often quite ordinary and mundane. He does this early on in *Song*, where he shifts his focus from death and the soul, to "the blab of the pave" (p. 18, line 1), the ordinary little things that make up the stuff of life but which are not important to us. For pages at a time, he catalogues observations of the city and nature, with sights that any person can have. Nameless strangers walking and talking, going to work, these are ordinary motifs to any person living in the city.

If the preceding sections have made him into a large, prophet-like figure in the mind of the reader, these mundane observations must work to make him more into an ordinary person. If

this grand figure sees what the reader can see, then maybe this Whitman has something in common with the reader. This also works the other way around, to suggest that the reader may have something in common with him. Stray observations, ordinary things listed, these do not look important but are, as discussed in chapter 2.

In their simpleness, ordinary things build an image of a stable identity that is appeasing to the imagined crowd and to the writer themselves. In the ordinariness, the reader is compelled to find a common place to sit with the poet. Critic Basil de Selincourt has noted the importance of these ordinary scenes: "The import of this haphazard envisagement of concrete things, (…) is in their power of ballast. For the more a man shows us that he has seen what we see, the more we believe him when he professes a new vision."(Miller, 1989, p. 71)

That is not to say that it is the ordinariness alone that creates the connection between reader and the text. Take the first two lines of section 8: "The little one sleeps in its cradle, / I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand." (p. 17, lines 30-31). In isolation, these lines are written so plainly that they do not look particularly poetic in form, but like a direct transfer of thought to writing. In and of itself, this is a direct observation of a mundane scene, not stated in a manner that is surprising or original. The poetic power comes from the underlying progression between the lines, as seen here:

> The youngster and the redfaced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,
> I peeringly view them from the top.
>
> The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
> It is so . . . . I witnessed the corpse . . . . there the pistol had fallen. (lines 32-35)

The lines are still simple and direct, but between them we see a clear progression and logic to the scenes. It starts at the early stage of a life with a baby sleeping, then we see a young couple about to make love. They are outside, linking nature with lovemaking. Then, we return

to the bedroom where a life has ended. Life, then love, then death, he hints at an order underlying otherwise disconnected scenes. Next comes a much more complex scene:

> The blab of the pave . . . . the tires of carts and sluff of bootsoles and talk of the promenaders,
> The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,
> The carnival of sleighs, the clinking and shouted jokes and pelts of snowballs;
> The hurrahs for popular favorites . . . . the fury of roused mobs,
> The flap of the curtained litter—the sick man inside, borne to the hospital,
> The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,
> The excited crowd—the policeman with his star quickly working his passage to the centre of the crowd;
> The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,
> The souls moving along . . . . are they invisible while the least atom of the stones is visible?
> What groans of overfed or half-starved who fall on the flags sunstruck or in fits,
> What exclamations of women taken suddenly, who hurry home and give birth to babes,
> What living and buried speech is always vibrating here . . . . what howls restrained by decorum,
> Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips,
> I mind them or the resonance of them . . . . I come again and again. (p.18, lines 1-15)

For the remainder of section 8 he employs a much more complex progression of scenes but contains all of them as parts of the life being lived presently on the streets. They convey a complex and revolving picture of the city, notably the street life, while the three earliest scenes are from the domestic sphere or in nature. The beginning and the end of life at home and the ever-changing present outside those two points, are all brought together and centered to him as a witness to the lived life. And as he is witness to it, so are we.

This aspect of his poetry is collectively referred to as "cataloguing", stringing along separate observations that are unified into a section. The cataloguing is frequent and recurring throughout all of *Song* and much of *Leaves* as well. He spaces off his observations with line breaks to inform us that these are separate ideas, but what the relationship is between them is not stated. There are similarities to later imagists like William Carlos Williams, who would place different images beside each other (often mundane ones) and suggest a relationship between them but not state them (though Whitman lacks the minimalism and strict word economy that characterizes imagism).

With this informal tone and rapid change in subject and meaning, which characterizes much of everyday conversation, he lulls the reader into a sense of familiarity with himself. His lines in their composition *appear* spontaneous, like they were just written down. The spontaneous listing of events and places, these are things that the blog retains from Whitman. The sharing of personal thoughts and observations are not only made to leading to a point, the sharing is precisely the point as it allows a sense of connection between the reader and the writer. The moment of sharing is powerful, what comes afterwards may be less so. For when the blogger has disclosed something, they open themselves up to scrutiny.

Whitman anticipated the consequence of what it could entail if his writing was understood as describing factual events from his life, to be seen as having done what he exclaims. Therefore he guides reader away from looking at the events listed as factual and instead invites the imagination. His use of tense is vital to having this effect. Wherever our bard finds himself, he is there in present tense, projecting himself into the reader's view. He doesn't tell us that he once waved a fly away from a sleeping baby or that he once peeped on a couple making love, he tells us he *is* doing it as we read. The words then do not *claim* to be a recollection of factual events. They could very well be retellings of his experiences, or they could just as well not be, he avoids the form of a diary. Many blogs are often thought of as digital diaries

because they presume to chronicle what occurred, guided by a principle of spontaneity that is strictly enacted. If a blogger says something happened, it has to have happened, otherwise it is simply a lie. When the blogger discloses something that can be construed as imagination or exaggeration, quickly that blogger finds themselves under scrutiny. For example, one of the most common practices on the blog platform Instagram is to post pictures of oneself camping at aesthetically pleasing spots that likely would be less pleasing to sleep at (for example 1 meter away from a steep cliff). After some time, several users felt the need to call out this behavior and started using the hashtag #youdidnotsleepthere, to criticize this perceived artificiality. By suggesting events, Whitman avoids issues of verifiability (though this is not to say he entirely avoided scrutiny, he was often construed as immoral to the public, simply because of his poems).

Whitman understood what bloggers now understand, that spontaneity and the ordinary is an effective way to foster a powerful connection between author and reader. As in *Among the Multitude*, we are encouraged to understand ourselves as suddenly entering into a life, to be invited by 'faint indirections'. What we do find is not an accidental peek into their lives, but a highly mediated presentation of the self, which may tell us something about the blogger but also serves to veil that person. (Rettberg, 2014, p. 127). Nonetheless, while we may know the veil is there, we also feel compelled to keep reading because we don't know what might come and the blogger does not either. The blog has a certain episodic 'openness' when made into a narrative. Bit by bit, the pieces come that give rise to a larger story as we read. That larger story will be partial and incomplete compared to the sense of completion and wholeness novels or films can offer, but the surprise that they added up at all is compelling. (Rettberg, 2014, pp. 118-119). When the end is reached, all will not add up. It will simply be an ending, much like life.

If we look at 1855's *Song* as if it were one very long blog post (I'm being farcical on purpose here), we see both a self-contained narrative and a moment that anticipates something more. In the very end of *Song*, Whitman anticipates an ending: "I depart as air . . . . I shake my white locks at the runaway sun, / I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags. / I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles" (p.56, lines 3-6). *Song* began with Whitman's conceptualization of himself (his birth), following him as the poet of democracy and finally rounding off with his imagined death. Life, then love and then death and all the messy present events in between those extremes, that was *Song*'s focus and there was more to come. The book went on and the editions went on, with that promise of death on the horizon. The story could have ended with the first edition, with it he already had the letter of approval from Emerson. Instead, Whitman kept the story open, in essence keeping the book open through new editions, to better live that projected life. This allows a continued engagement but at the same time, there is a tremendous risk inherent to keeping the story open: The reader and the writer could both learn things they may not want to (this will be discussed later through *As I Ebb'd*). All stories depend upon a reader to, but especially *Leaves'* narration in particular engages with the reader as part of the process.

The Writer-reader relationship in *Song*

If the closest subject to Whitman is himself, the reader is never far behind. Just as he has celebrated his own greatness, he brings the reader into the fold: "And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (p. 13, lines 2-3). He calls out and addresses the gaze of his unknown reader, which he then sets his terms for. As I noted in Chapter 1, these words are not a reader's first meeting with this odd poet. First, they will

have met the engraving of Whitman posing, then a lengthy preface detailing his poetic aspiration. The reader will know by then something of what he aims for, but not of who he is. In effect, he has provoked the reader to turn the pages and join him, and now is the time he sets the ground rules for their engagement.

By starting his poem with his own celebration, he asserts an authorial authority as the dominant part in the power relationship between him and his reader. The reader is the one who will follow him and "assume" what he does. This word has multiple meanings, first it means to believe without proof. He will believe without proof because as a follower of Transcendentalist philosophy his faith is first and foremost in intuitive belief over rational knowledge. Assuming also means beginning to take control, having a promise of empowerment as the reader's reward for becoming a follower. Then the relationship shifts, when he states that any part (atom) that he can own the reader can own as well. In essence he and the reader are made equals, through following his words.

Our bard monologues like a prophet, but his aim is not to create unthinking subjects. His aim was to oppose religious dogmatism that left no room for individual thought, so he needs to build a room for the reader as well. In section two he turn his attention directly to the reader and asks if they have: "felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems" (p.14, line 3). This is an acknowledgment of the reader's presence, as well as a confrontation with that person, compelling them to examine for themselves their own assumptions about poetry and what it means for them. Through this process, the reader: "shall possess the origin of all poems" (4) if they listen. But he emphasizes that this possession will not be merely an acquisition from him: "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand . . . . nor look through the / eyes of the dead . . . . nor feed on the spectres in books" (lines 6-7). He encourages the reader to turn to themselves and not look for the "spectres" that he associates with books. This is a surprising phrase from someone who communicates purely through a book and suggests a distrust with

the very medium itself. The act of reading alone is not the end of it, but rather the start of a larger process, that supposedly will turn the reader active in creating meaning.

Following him does not mean copying him: "You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself" (lines 8-9). In building the self, he will also reach others, to make his figure less like a statue to be admired and more like a companion that is holding out his hand to the people. Section 2 is in essence a social gesture, like a friend reaching out over the table to hear what others have to say before continuing his train of thought. I say "gesture", because while the lines act as if anticipating an answer from a conversation partner, this conversation that will never happen. Whitman is aware of this, that his voice in the book is a "phantom", but he trusts that this phantom will reach others as well.

Whitman takes great measures to keep a certain conversational tone throughout his epic. As mentioned before, he uses no fixed meter and informal language, which is both to distance himself from poets of his day and yesterday and to reach his audience. It also allows him to create a familiar presence to the reader. Even when discussing matters of the soul and God, one has the sense of getting to know this Walt Whitman (at least the Walt he intends for us to know). Whether writing for a small audience or a large one, people who blog generally write in an informal style, with a light and oral tone. They are written as if speaking to someone, even if they are not directly visible. Like Whitman, they bring themselves out to be met by a reader that will think they are getting to know someone. Where the book and the blog differs is of course that here the audience can actually talk back to the writer and engage in a conversation.

In chapter 2 of *Blogging*, prof. Jill Walker Rettberg discusses the emergence of blogging in the larger context of how our cultures preserve information. The general line has been a transition from an oral culture to a literal one, where writing is privileged over speech, until

this last century. Rettberg builds on scholar Walter Ong, who argued that with tv and radio came a "secondary orality", where the spoken word became important again. Rettberg sees blogging as part of this orality as it comes to print which unlike a book is not silent, it allows dialogue. (2014, pp. 38-39). When we share our thoughts in a blog, someone can pick up on those thoughts and respond so a conversation develops. Reading had elements of orality before of course, but with the arrival of the Gutenberg press and that shift towards mass printing and standardization, the way we would receive information through text moved from reading aloud to crowds to silent reading with the reader being alone with the text (2014, p. 45).

It is ironic how Whitman so embraced the image of the bard, while completely divorcing himself from the oral culture bards represented. In place of a man stands the silent book, the reader can question and object to any word in it, but the book will not respond. As a voice coming from print, Whitman has reached a limit to his ability to speak with the people. Through all of *Song* there is a distance between himself and the men and women he supposedly celebrates. Without fail, these men and women are nameless, characterized by their outward appearance and have no lines of their own. They are always exterior, because Whitman's own self-making is so interior. The book being so silent upholds an inherent limit to his ability to be truly social, no matter how many times he addresses his reader, they can not speak back. Instead, they have to imagine him, as he imagines engaging with them. There is a sense that Whitman is dissatisfied with this absence, that he is working against the form of the book. With this in mind, the blog could seem like a final fulfillment of the conversation the book reaches for, that closes the gap between Whitman and the reader.

In his next version of *Leaves* that came the following year, he added an entirely new section at the very end, titled *Leaves-Droppings*. Here he reprinted Emerson's private letter with a very long essayistic response given back, detailing his vision for a new America of poets: "Lands

of ensemble, bards of ensemble! Walking freely out from the old traditions, as our politics has walked out, American poets and literats recognize nothing behind them superior to what is present with them(…)."(1856, p. 354). In addition, he included reviews of his first edition, both positive and negative.

His reprinting of Emerson's letter has been criticized as disrespectful towards his "Master" and a desperate reach for notoriety and fame. While it is true that Whitman built a rather generous image of himself, I argue that he is doing something different than advertising. The name *Leaves-Droppings* motivates us to read these articles as if growing or being excreted from his book, an organic process that reinforces the image of the book's connection to nature. It suggests that this section is a continuing development, that organically grows from this section.

Scholar Edward Whitley has recommended we look at *Droppings* as a *paratext* (Whitley, 2001). Strictly speaking, a paratext is a text about an author's work, written by the author to guide the reader's understanding of their work (examples include forewords or acknowledgments). The paratext is outside the main text and works as a contributor to how the main text is perceived. Whitley strains this definition a little because *Droppings* includes pieces not written by Whitman, but the integration of these texts and their placement is Whitman's choice. In essence, he puts the voices of other men about his book into it, attempting to unify his voice with that of others. It serves to self-promote himself as the poet of America. In comparison with a blog, it strongly resembles the comment's section, where voices outside the author is integrated under the author's post. The difference is that a comment section on social media is much closer to an oral conversation, response and elaboration is intended by both parties. Whitman's project was democratic, to bring together people and speak with them, not just to them and this is a strong attempt to break up the monologic nature of the book. It is an admirable democratic gesture, by both bringing in positive and negative reviews, but it does not make the book a social arena.

Droppings has the appearance of a conversation, but in reality this is a mediated narrative by Whitman. The book can do many things, but by nature it does not allow for discourse, that must happen outside of itself.

The next editions of *Leaves* would not feature these "droppings", instead the book would speak for itself. Instead of building the book to be *dialogic*, he would continue to build his relationship with the reader in the *imaginative space*, what I for this thesis call the place we as readers go to when reading *Leaves*.[11] The imaginative space is not physical in a strict sense, it comes to be through the act of reading and is at the same time shared and personal. It is shared because we all read the same book and receive Whitman's voice, but it is also personal because we interpret it differently. Through this, readers build an *imagined community*. I borrow this term from historian Benedict Anderson, who coined it in his work on nations (Buchanan, 2010). To Anderson, a nation sustains itself as through having a shared idea all members agree upon, despite the fact that most members do not know each other personally. Similarly, Whitman's community sustains itself through a shared idea of him.

Part of the reason why it is so culturally tempting to look at Whitman as an early blogger is how effortlessly he built his presence as the bard. Had he owned that blog, one could (in theory) have commented and heard his response, that closer meeting between reader and author could have finally been gained. But that moment would also have been a moment of loss. When we read *Leaves*, Walt's presence is in that imaginative space, where he truly can be the father, friend or lover to the people because we create him in our own mind. The real Walt Whitman is one limited person, the textual one can be anyone and can 'contain multitudes'.

As an example of what happens when the imaginary persona gives way to the real person, I turn to an example from Whitman's lived life. The British critic Anne Gilchrist was one of

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[11] Suggested to me by my supervisor Joseph Paul Tabbi.

Whitman's rare champions during his lifetime and one of the first great critics of *Leaves*. Not only was Gilchrist early to discover Whitman's poetic greatness, she also fell in love with the man himself, just from reading his book. For years she corresponded with him through letters, where she made it quite clear how destined they were for each other and how she would be the perfect woman for him. In response, Whitman encouraged her to see him as that person, but later tried to correct her fantasy, writing in one letter: "The actual W.W. is a very plain personage and entirely unworthy such devotion" (Kaplan, 1980, p. 333). She continued, even with his dismissal. Even the real writer of the work could not dispel the powerful myth built from the book, until she came to America to visit him. They met at a hotel, where she discovered that the man she had imagined as her destined husband was in fact someone unable to return her love (they did however maintain a strong friendship from that point on, Whitman wrote a poem dedicated to her upon her death) (Alcardo, 1998). The imagined Walt could be her mate and companion, the real one could only be her friend.

To bring us back to blogging, let's use a hypothetical situation. Let's say I find a travel blog from someone in Australia and that blogger's most recent post tells me something I find interesting about the blogger's perception of Canberra and I comment my approval. In the moment where I post that comment, I can imagine the blogger's response a myriad of ways, I can imagine them being offended or approving of my message. The blogger, so far, exists in my imaginative space. But then the blogger responds, the fantasy gives way to reality, the relationship becomes more defined and more segmented. The more the blogger interacts with their audience, the more it becomes clear who the blog is for and who it isn't for. When everyone can speak, the result is not universal inclusivity but a defined and bordered community.

Self-creation as alienation

Song is a journey and like most heroic journeys there are trials to overcome. In section 37, he becomes trapped, held down by the image of prisoners and sick men. "What the rebel said gaily adjusting his throat to the rope-noose, (…) These become mine and me every one, and they are but little, / I become as much more as I like." (p. 42, 1855, lines 32 & 39-40). In imagining these men, he becomes like them, trapped and wretched. This does not refer to a moment from his biographical life, he was never in prison, but he was able to imagine it. And through tenderly imagining the reality others less fortunate than himself lives in, the possibility of violence and illness becomes real enough in his mind to arrest him too, to co-opt a vision that at first was his. Society does not need to exercise its power over him physically, the possibility of oppression is enough to disrupt his mind. In his weakest moment, the "askers" that surrounded him in section 4 have come again: "Askers embody themselves in me, and I am embodied in them, / I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg" (p. 43, lines 34-5,). To Whitman, it is the "askers" which seem to embody more than anything the antithesis to his philosophy. His way of moving through life's uncertainties, to face the possibility of ill fortune was to imagine and project his self unto the world, to interpret and imagine life and death in order to master them. An "asker" would be someone who would seek an already existing answer, to demand someone else give them the solution and therefore suppress their own individuality. This is why in every instance of the word *ask* appearing, Whitman tells us that he does in fact *not* ask (this happens in sections 11, 33, 40 of *Song*).

The presence of a cruel reality in his mind can hold him, but as his world is in the imagination, he can use the imagination to take away these stifling forces as well, which he does in the very next section: "Somehow I have been stunned. Stand back! (…) I discover myself on a verge of the usual mistake. (p. 43, lines 17 & 19). He can break out of society's hold on him, as long as he maintains a picture of who he is. Even his own inevitable death is

not able to hold him, as section 49 demonstrates: "And as to you death, and you bitter hug of mortality . . . . it is idle to try to alarm / me." (p.54, lines 19-20). Truly, this Whitman would seem to be invincible to both his own body and the society that governs it, nothing can touch it. It is odd then, that at this height of seeming transcendence, he complicates his own identity.

When we reach section 50, the poet has been winding down on his journey of self-making. In literary form he has traveled through the American land, he has celebrated himself and both man and woman. His journey is made and his mythology is built, and it is just then there is a mysterious sense that arrives into him. He muses, like a Prospero anxious to see the curtains fall:

> There is that in me . . . . I do not know what it is . . . . but I know it is in me.
> Wrenched and sweaty . . . . calm and cool then my body becomes;
> I sleep . . . . I sleep long.
> I do not know it . . . . it is without name . . . . it is a word unsaid,
> It is not in any dictionary or utterance or symbol. (4-8, p.55)

At the journey's end he is met not with a confirmation of his mastery of life but a challenge to it. This presence is unlike anything he has met before, not from society and not of nature. He is unable to name it, which in essence makes him powerless. Whitman's way of creating order through his poetry lies in his ability to give names to the world he inhabits, much like Adam from the Bible did with the animals (not coincidentally, Adam is a resurging presence in *Leaves*, one cluster even named *Enfans d'Adam*). As Whitman wrote in his notebook: "Poetry itself is no other… than a right Naming."(Kaplan, 1980, p. 61). If something threatens him, he can divide it from himself, make a bothersome person into an "asker" and make his person into the solitary "Me myself".

But here Whitman is unable to name it, he specifically points out that he does not possess the word that would help him understand what is in him. It must then be something beyond the

words, beyond his world of the printed page. Faced with this presence at the end, he retreats into the community he has built in his mind: "Perhaps I might tell more . . . . Outlines! I plead for my brothers and sisters." (line 11). In the last lines he has fully retreated back into ideas and concepts, holding his sermon for the imagined masses: "It is not chaos or death . . . . it is form and union and plan . . . . it is eternal life . . . . / it is happiness." (lines 13-14). Instead of directly naming it, he names what it isn't or what it is can be associated with, to try and get at it indirectly, but here he stumbles. He can only stand in awe of this unnamed "that", and he leaves us at a place of unease, hoping that the unnamed will be named, that order will come after him. It is a small sermon of happiness and order that doesn't convince, leaving a tension that is not resolved.

A common reading of this passage is that this is Whitman reaching the creative peak of his transcendental journey, in the calm before the fulfillment of the larger philosophies that have guided him will come to be, to stand before a point of universal unity and cohesion that anticipates a transcendent moment of divinity. (Miller, 1989, p. 134) Here, my reading differs from this line of thinking. In my reading, he does indeed stand before a point, but not the sign of a divine plan about to be enacted. Instead, what he has reached is the border of his imagination. He has journeyed as far as it will take him, and what is in him is that which is not the imagination, the world in its totality. Upon reaching this conclusion, the imaginative nature of his entire world becomes apparent to him and he is left a little shocked, like Alexander the Great weeping because he can conquer no more territory. He shouts "Outlines!" to reflect how these borders come to him, but he does appear a little reluctant to fully accept this, pleading for his imagined brothers and sisters to come for him. He lectures for a little longer on this coming "Happiness", before his last two sections come and round off his journey.

With the end of *Song*, Whitman has fully defined his bardic self, which would impress itself upon an entire world. This proved a monumental achievement, but when one creates a self so openly and declares it so strongly, it brings with it some inherent questions about itself. In an analysis of *Song*, critic Stephen Black has noted this ambiguity that lies at its very heart: "If the atoms that belong 'as good' to others as to himself comprise his body, is it fair to ask who is the me to whom the soul belongs to? (…) What begins as a celebration of the self becomes a troublesome question. Who or what am I?" (Miller, 1989, p. 49) This question became apparent in Whitman's later poems, most clearly and elegantly explored in his poem *As I Ebb'd With The Ocean of Life*.

As I Ebb'd was published first in a newspaper and then added to his 1860 edition of *Leaves*. In it, Whitman placed the poem at the beginning of a new cluster, confusingly titled *Leaves of Grass*. If he would title it as such to make a status report over his project's direction (which at this point had gone on for five years), then he makes a crushing contrast to the jovial bard readers would meet in *Song*. This Whitman is weary and anxious, in need of letting go of himself instead of bringing that self to life. The setting for his revelation is by the shore of his home Long Island (named *Paumanok* here), where Whitman's "I" is standing by, watching the tide: "As I ebbed with an ebb of the ocean of life, / As I wended the shores I know, /As I walked where the sea-ripples wash you, Pau- / manok," (Whitman, 1860-1861, pp. 195, lines 4-8).

The poem employs much repetition, which is common for Whitman, but here it is utilized to the specific effect of estrangement. The repetition in the poem incorporated at the early stanza is carried through to end the next one, as seen here: "As I wended the shores I know, / As I walked with that eternal self of me, seeking / types." (p. 196, lines 12-14). This specific repetition, which appears at the end of the third stanza as if halting the progress of the poem, evokes the feeling of a tide. The tide goes outward for a while, but inevitably brings itself

back to where it began, much like Whitman is unable to go further in this poem than wending the shores, before again being confronted with his "eternal self".

To the same rhythm as the tide, his earlier poems come back to him, once sources of individuation that now force his way to introspection. He would later change "eternal self" to "electric self", which brings to mind *I sing the body electric*, a poem that represents Whitman at his most joyous and celebratory.[12] This means he made the connection of that eternal self to his own specific mythmaking more clear in later versions, but already here it is apparent enough that his eternal self is nothing more than his poetic one. The pride that allowed him to express himself leads him to the lonely shore, where that self is "seeking types". As is usual in his style he plays on both meanings of the word, he is both looking for particular people and for letters of print. With the latter he creates the former, again building that space that will liberate him. But the only thing that meets him is the sea that wends up debris from other places and scatters them, indifferent to the poet that loves her. Nature has chiefly been a welcoming place for Whitman, but now like the waves, it pushes him back and his celebrative self turns itself around and becomes confessional.

To "Paumanok" and to the reader he confesses he has not come to a place of unity or higher divinity:

> O baffled, balked,
> Bent to the very earth, here preceding what follows,
> Oppressed with myself that I have dared to open my
> mouth,
> Aware now, that, amid all the blab whose echoes
> recoil upon me, I have not once had the least
> idea who or what I am,
> But that before all my insolent poems the real ME

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[12] *I Sing the Body Electric* was written in 1855 but not titled as such until 1867 (and did not have 'electric self' until then)

> still stands untouched, untold, altogether un-
>
> reached,
>
> (p. 196-97)

Note how the word "oppress" is now the verb for what his poetry does. What was once the source of his freedom, became what constrains him. The "Me" in *Song* was what gave Whitman his voice and life, now it has not just put the world at a distance but himself as well. He admits that the self he fashioned is not anything more than what he would want to see himself, a creation that is a "Me", but not fully the "Real Me". By putting himself into writing, into the imaginary world, he has distanced himself from the material one. And inevitably, the consequence of that is that "Whitman" becomes distant to himself as well. We can see an evolved consciousness around how he perceives his self. Before, the self he created was what protected him from the toil of the world. Now it is that self that threatens him.

It is tempting to look at this poem in relation to Whitman's career as a writer, which was at a low point. He had given himself to the world, which took turns ignoring him and mocking him. The fact that 1860 was a time of intense political polarization that was just about to erupt into full war, would not have given Whitman much to feel happy about as the self-proclaimed national bard. But his failure is not with the world but with himself, and it is that problem he addresses.

This is in line with the tradition within "technologies of the self", that Gutman explored with Rousseau. After Rousseau created a compelling fiction of himself in *Confessions*, Gutman notes that Rousseau's later works dealt with the unease that came through this process. After having put himself into the imagination, the imagination turned oppressive to Rousseau and made him paranoid. As Gutman writes: "The grand conspiracy that emerges as his constant theme in the second half of the *Confessions* [and his other autobiographical works] is the

structural result of that move Rousseau made in dividing himself from the rest of the world."
(Gutman, 1988, p. 108).

This manner of self-imposed exile is prevalent within the personal blog's history as well. One of the pioneering bloggers is Justin Hall, a programmer who as early as 1994 created the site *Justin's Links*. The site was a continually updated autobiography written by Hall, and quickly became both popular and known for its "oversharing", within which Justin shared extensive details about his personal history and private moments, like his father's early death. For years he gathered a loyal following, that often raised concerns over his tendency to share more to strangers than many would be comfortable with. This got to Hall as well and in 2005 he published *dark night*, a ten-minute video that shows Hall in dark room as he has a nervous breakdown over what he calls his "art" and where it has gotten him. In the video he howls over his deep anxiety over whether or not he will be able to be in a relationship with a woman he is dating and generally expresses feeling entirely alone, despite having a substantial following (especially for a pre-social media site). Ironically, the man connected to hundreds of strangers feels completely cut off from the world.

This may sound like a peek into the personal life of a real human, but this too is a part of Hall's mediated presentation. In addition to making the conscious choice of filming himself, there is editing and text laid over for dramatic effect (he emphasizes that he has been blogging for 11 years). What Hall conveys throughout the video is that it is his "art" (the blogging), that has made him so alone and unable to connect with the world. Put another way, it is the character of *Justin* that he has perpetuated throughout those 11 years (and which he still perpetuates with this video), that has isolated him. The self-writing continues to isolate, even

when the audience is so directly present.[13] Since 2005, isolation has not ceased to be a problem for blogging, whether they write on their own domains or social media.

Whitman found himself unable to close the distance between his self and the material world, even to himself the "Me" became separate from him. While this realization must have been troublesome, he did not abandon the imaginary. In fact, as I will argue, through the cluster *Calamus* he embraced this distance and the value of it.

Calamus: Whitman's Ars Poetica

Much of the *Calamus'* reception has been to see it as illustrating Whitman's relationship between himself and his (most likely) forbidden sexuality.[14] The subdued nature of the poems and mysterious allure over who exactly Whitman is speaking to, plus phrases like "manly love of comrades" give much weight to the reading that this is Whitman "coming out" in poetic form. This line of reading came as early as 1948 from critic Malcolm Cowley (2004) and has since then given rise to seeing Calamus as a part of Whitman's contributions to the "Homosexual tradition" in American poetry (Martin, 2004). While this is an interesting line of reading, regarding *Calamus* I find readings like Cowley and Martin's unconvincing, because they rely heavily on assumptions about Whitman's personal life that have never been fully proven and rely much on examining specific poems without relating it to the whole of the cluster. Scholar Russel A. Hunt has argued for reading the cluster in its entirety as an *ars poetica*, a poetic statement on the nature and mission of his poetry (1975). Hunt looks at the

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[13] Hall has since married and become a father.

[14] There is much discussion over if Whitman should be understood as homosexual or not. He himself could not have identified as homosexual, as that term was not in use during his time. Instead, male romance was understood as sodomy, something unnamable. On one hand, in our records of Whitman there is hardly any romantic history between himself and other women and he never married. On the other, he never openly admitted to having made love to men or being romantically interested in them, even to close friends. Historians have found very passionate correspondences between him and other men found in letters, but the issue is how to interpret those letters, if they display romantic love or passionate male friendship. Ultimately, *Leaves of Grass* is not a historical record but a poem and will be read as such.

entire cluster as a unified statement towards this goal, one I am inclined to agree with. I argue that this cluster is better read as another meeting between Whitman and the reader, that the "comrades" he sings manly love for is of that between him and his readers. Though I look at it as both a celebration of the bond between himself and his readers and a restatement of their relationship and the necessity of the distance it is characterized by. Due to the narrow scope of this thesis, I look here at a select few poems from the cluster, which I argue best demonstrate this theme. I analyze *In Paths Untrodden*, *Whoever You are Holding Me Now in Hand* and *Full of Life Now*.

Throughout *Calamus* a recurring theme Whitman plays with is distance, of placing oneself at the "margins". The very title *Calamus* reflects the importance of the margins. Calamus is a plant that looks much like grass, but unlike grass it only grows in specific places, by lakes and marshes. It is then a much less universal symbol than the grass is, a less universal stage compared to what Whitman loafed in with *Song*, though not directly personal either. It is a matter of degree, by coming to where the calamus grows we move from the universal into someplace more specific. This is because Whitman has a very specific agenda here, not to reveal himself to his readers but to reveal his distance.

The Whitman that greets us here is at his most mysterious and subdued, not concerned with grabbing the reader but with simply being, to converse after travelling so long. Whitman always concerned himself with the placement of every poem in his book, how their order would impact how we read him. *Calamus* was placed far in the middle of his 1860 edition, after *Song* and right after the cluster *Leaves of* Grass where *As I Ebb'd* was placed. The reader who would read *Calamus* would have travelled far through his pages, to get to this point. The first poem, *In Paths Untrodden* sets the stage, with the bard meeting us in a place of obscurity: "In paths untrodden, / In the growths by margins of pond-waters," (p.341, lines 1-2). Here, he places himself in the margins. He has retreated from "the life that exhibits itself"

(line 3), to speak with us, the readers more closely. It would be easy to call our poet hypocritical for claiming he is apart from that life which *exhibits* itself, that he is different from those who need to show themselves for others to see. After all, who has exhibited himself more than our dear poet? But that is precisely why he has to move away from exhibition into this more secluded place where he can speak.

He has been grandiose and a little arrogant which he acknowledged in *As I Ebb'd*.[15] With this cluster he draws himself away from that, willingly seeking obscurity. Whitman now sees the necessity of that retreat: "for in this secluded spot I can respond as / I would not dare elsewhere" (lines 13-14). His protective persona of the bard, which helped him erect a barrier between himself and the reader, permitted him to speak with his own voice and find his own personal voice away from the conformities that social life demands. He ends the poem with these lines: "I proceed, for all who are, or have been, young / men, / To tell the secret of my nights and days, / To celebrate the need of comrades." (p. 342, lines 3-6). In isolation, it is a celebration of friendship that is private, not public and secretive. But if we read the poem as a part of the whole of *Calamus*, it is a prelude to a larger conversation between him and the reader.

In the third poem, *Whoever You Are Holding Me Now In Hand*, the scene is first set to suggest a romantic meeting between himself and an unnamed "you". He plays the role of an unattainable figure that teases the would-be lover, that is "holding him in hand" (p. 344, line 24). Already there are suggestions that this does not describe a remembered meeting between two people. Lovers hold hands and are held in each other's arms, but for Whitman to be held *in* someone's hand, he would have to be quite small. He warns us: "I give you fair warning, before you attempt me further, / I am not what you supposed, but far different." (lines 26-8). It

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[15] Note: We cannot know for certain when exactly *Calamus* in its entirety was completed and if he wrote it before or after *As I Ebb'd*, but suffice it to say he published both in the 1860 edition, meaning he encouraged us as readers to see these trains of thought together.

plays like a ballad between the two, with Whitman teasing the possibility of them ever meeting but in the last instance backing out of any arrangement. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the one who is holding him in hand is not a person in the book. Rather, it is the reader, who through holding the book is holding Whitman.

He challenges the reader, asks what their intent is for coming all this way: "Who is he that would become my follower? / Who would sign himself a candidate for my affect- / tions? Are you he?" (p. 345, lines 1-3). Why would one read all this way, to meet with him? If our goals as readers are to fully reach him, to gain some understanding of him he warns us that it is "dangerous" to come all this way and become his follower: "You would have to give up all else (…) / The whole past theory of your life, and all conformity / to the lives around you, would have to be aban-/ doned;" (lines 6 & 10-12). To Whitman there is a fundamental barrier between him and the reader, inherent in the roles both play. What stands between us is the fact that he is "I" and we are "you", two imperative categories of language that cannot be overturned. Whitman cannot truly be reached because in the way of himself is the reader and everything they bring into their meeting with him, only if they could obliterate their own being would they be able to reach into that person.

Whitman knows that the one who would be his lover is never dissuaded by danger, so in the next stanza he appears to change his mind and teases the possibility that he and the reader can meet: "Or else, only by stealth, in some wood, for trial, / Or back of a rock, in the open air," (lines 17-18). Multiple times Whitman changes the fabled place where the reader could possibly meet him, never committing to defining where he would be waiting and greet us with the "comrade's long-dwelling kiss". Like a daydream, the place of meeting changes abruptly, for it does not matter where that place would be. It is only a playful dream he is presenting to us, a melancholy fantasy where he imagines the reader comes for him to kiss, a beautiful dream but nonetheless a dream, entertained but not fulfilled.

The second, more likely alternative, is in the reader: "Or, if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing / Where I may feel the throbs of your heart, or rest / upon your hip," (p. 346, lines 1-3). What the reader would thrust on them is the book, where he is the imagined companion. Having him in us, but at a distance, is less daring but the better choice: "For thus, merely touching you, is enough—is best" (line 4). By holding him in our imagination, we may not fully reach him, but that "touch" provides enough.

If Whitman is to have any form, he prefers it to be elusive, unreachable and uncontained: "(For in any roofed room of a house I emerge not— / nor in company, / And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, / or dead,)" (p. 345, lines 19-22). He is completely elusive and immaterial, unwilling to be contained in any place, or in any person's gaze: "Even while you should think you had unquestionably / caught me, behold! / Already you see I have escaped from you." (p. 346, lines 12-14). Even in his own book, it is not he himself that has been written into it. In the text, he has not left clues to be solved, but a means to something further: "For all is useless without that which you may guess / at many times and not hit—that which I / hinted at," (lines 25-7). Whitman expects that we will "guess" many times who he is, and not find that out, but through that guessing we tap into that shared place of community built around him. In the final line, Whitman urges: "Therefore release me, and depart on your way." If we cannot reach him, we are left to imagine him as best we can. It is up to the reader to imagine him.

From the first poem of *Calamus*, he teased that he would reveal a secret of himself, maybe something personal. But in the final meeting, we discover that Walt is the secret, a mystery that does not want to be solved. He built anticipation with the reader that we will be privy to his secrets, only to reveal to us that beyond that veil is even more of a mystery. Trying to figure out who the "real" Whitman actually is, that is just as impossible to us as it has been to him. Walt Whitman is, in the final analysis, an enigma. Upon that departure, the reader is both

set free and burdened with the responsibility to imagine Whitman, to keep him there and not expect to be able to find him further. And be holding him there, Whitman can emerge, time and time again through the imagination.

The final poem in *Calamus* is dedicated to the readers he expected to have after his death, titled *Full of Life Now* (p. 379):

>FULL of life, sweet-blooded, compact, visible,
>I, forty years old the Eighty-third Year of The States,
>To one a century hence, or any number of centuries
>hence,
>To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.
>
>2When you read these, I, that was visible, am become
>invisible;
>Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems,
>seeking me,
>Fancying how happy you were, if I could be with
>you, and become your lover;
>Be it as if I were with you. Be not too certain but I
>am now with you.

Whitman here is not as indefinable or uncontained, he is a person with a specific age, in a specific time. When we read him, he is no longer "visible" to us, meaning not only dead but not available for us to see. Previously, he lamented life "exhibiting" itself, yearning to go below that surface into seclusion. Being visible does not to Whitman mean completely disappearing, but to go into that place below the surface of things, where he has to be felt or imagined.

And to the reader, who is visible may wish he could come up to our side, he encourages us to "be as if I were with you" and act as if in reading him we have found him. But we should not delude ourselves that he really is there, he urges us to know that he isn't there but to believe in our senses that he is: "Be not too certain but I / am now with you". Both keeping faith and questioning it, this is the tightrope that we as readers can walk if we choose to imagine but not know where he is.

The paradox of Whitman's community is this: With *Leaves* Whitman develops a strong, personal relationship between himself and the reader, that creates a meaningful connection even over the generations. That connection gives a strong sense of a potential meeting taking place, but that whole community is predicated on the two never actually meeting. This is interesting in relation to social media, which has its *raison d'etre* on participants meeting directly. What remains to be seen then, in the final chapter is to look at if his tradition can be carried through to the blog itself.

Chapter 4: Closing the book

Chapter 3 saw that *Leaves* does bear affinities with the blog genre and does find a lineage with the larger history of self-writing from the 18th century onwards. Like the blog, *Leaves* navigated the problem of constructing a self that creates a larger community. It did also find that the book as a medium is very important to this effect, and the blog is fundamentally different from a book, it is part of a transition from the silent print culture. The question that remains is if the Whitmanian tradition of self and community can be carried through to the blog space.

This chapter discusses two instances of where Whitman's poetry has been converted into blog form and one instance of poetry a blog that very deliberately tries to bring the Whitmanian bard unto social media. In Whitman's case, he makes the transition very well to Twitter but not so much unto Facebook. The poetry blog I discuss is Steve Roggenbuck (introduced in chapter one) and his work on YouTube. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion over if web reading (which is different from print reading) could affect the potential that web publishing represents.

I've made the case of similarities between what Whitman does and what bloggers do, but does the experience he offered with Leaves make the transition into the blog itself? My criteria for judging if his poetry in blogging is successful or not is narrower than simply to discuss if the words can be put into a post and can be read. In order for Whitman's poetic tradition to meaningfully carry over to the blog, it has to be possible to imagine that bard and not demand that it conforms to strict binaries of real/fake as has been the case with blogs like *lonelygirl15*.

Facebook Whitman

If we turn to Facebook and type in the words "Walt Whitman", at this time a profile page named Walt Whitman is the first result (Whitman, n.d.). The profile has over 455 000 followers and about as many likes, not an insubstantial following for a dead author (for comparison, the popular and alive author John Green's page has about 1 million). Anyone who is new to Whitman is likely to choose this page for more info and therefore the profile has the power to shape the perception of his legacy.

It bears the tag @WaltWhitmanAuthor and has a blue checkmark in upper case next to the profile name, which means that the platform has verified it as an "authentic" site for this public person. Calling it an authentic site is a curious choice of words for a poet who died before even tv existed, but it is the word that sells on social media. The profile informs briefly about his life and death, with further information being a link to his profile page on the publisher Penguin Random House. The page gives a much more substantial overview over the author's life and further down are different books taken from Whitman's writing available for purchase. Walt Whitman's blog on Facebook reveals itself then as a *corporate blog*, whose interests will lie with promoting him as a brand than share his complicated life and poetry.

Looking at posts from today to around 2018, the page mostly consists of links to other websites, primarily informative pieces or products that draw on his poetry. Beyond creating context, the sites linked to are celebratory, followers are encouraged to join in on the celebration and share their positive experiences of Whitman. A few times the posts go to more serious places, like discussions over the inclusion of LGBT landmarks in New York. The most interesting type of post that the profile produces however, are ones that make use of his poetry.

The posts that share them share snippets, of larger poems like *Song*, wrapped up in a comfortable layout. They are put out largely without context and emphasizing lines that are pleasing to the eye in favor of complexity or controversy. It is not new to have Whitman's work and persona be focused into various directions before, Whitman scholar Ed Folsom has noted the same occurrence in book culture: "Bookmakers, like all readers of Whitman, have continued to make Whitman over in various guises, to create new Walt Whitmans- [examples of Whitmans created, including a socialist Whitman and an ecological Whitman]."(Folsom, 2006). If previous printings of his poetry have defined Whitman as an early hippie or a gay icon, then this profile defines him as poetic comfort-food. It no doubt works well as promotion, but by that same measure it can be limiting to understanding the poet's legacy. Lines that were political or could be considered controversial are not displayed and the discussion that comes of it is clearly encouraged to be of a similar tone. For this thesis I went over two years worth of posts and noticed in the comments a sense of frustration with this codified image of him.

Over a year ago, one user (who is kept anonymous for this thesis) claimed that Walt Whitman was a white supremacist, despite the post only being a book promotion. In another instance, in the thread over a regularly cheesy snippet, another user decided to post a picture of Whitman with one of his less comfortable quotes to the side. It reads: "The nigger, like the Injun, will be eliminated: It is the law of races, history, what-not." The user gave no reason for posting this quote, or where it came from. I choose to read this placement here as a protest against the blog's presentation of Whitman as nothing but an all-loving grandpa. It jars with the tone of the blog and shocks readers into questioning if the poet is such a static figure. The quote is real, though from a private letter to a friend of his and not a statement he made to the public. Whitman has been embraced as a figure for racial equality, but as a person he was unable to completely transcend the racist values and attitudes from the world he was born into

(Hutchinson & Drews, 1998). Of course, quoting him out of context (even if the quote is damning to modern eyes), does not give a more "correct" view of his character either, but it is a part of the author's history which the blog so glosses over.

The problem with selectively sharing poetry that only pleases the mass market, goes deeper than bordering on revisionist history/making a real person into a brand. By sharing the lines so selectively, they draw away from how much the meanings in his poetry are built on repetition. For example, one post links to a listicle over singular lines of poetry and copies from the final lines of *Song*: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles."

On its own, this quote can be read and understood as Walt preparing for death, using a familiar, earthly motif of dirt and the grass. But what is the grass? If one reads just this section all on its own, grass is simply a plant that grows from the dirt. But if one reads the section in context of the larger body of the poem, it takes on a larger and more impactful meaning than the word grass alone implies. From the very beginning, the grass is a recurring motif, with Walt at the start as he is observing "A spear of summer grass" in the first section. Throughout his journey, he develops the grass into a much more complicated, rich image. It becomes a "uniform hieroglyphic" in section 6, a symbol of the universal cycle he explores, where life and love and death follow each other, into his cosmic order of the universe. The grass is both a plain triviality that anyone can recognize and the recurring image of a greater truth beyond the material. If one reads it this way, as the composition dictates, the excerpt I started this discussion with takes on a much greater meaning. Walt giving himself to grow from the grass becomes a ceremonial rite of passage from one world into the next, to give himself into the cosmic order he has so far described. All this is lost when clipped out and reduced to a small post. The next profile, over on Twitter, distinguishes itself by going in the completely

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opposite direction. It gives us every line from the poems, in its own way, separate from how the book does.

Whitman on Twitter

On Twitter sits the profile @TweetsofGrass, an anonymous account that posts all of the 1855 edition of *Leaves* (excluding the very long preface) ([@TweetsOfGrass], n.d.). The account also uses Whitman's name and likeness, though more with a sense of irony and humor, under the profile's listed location it informs he is located "under your bootsoles". The profile is entirely devoted to redistributing the 1855 edition, with no deviating commentary from the anonymous user. Day after day, the profile redistributes the poems as posts, line by line reproducing the entire work while conforming to Twitter's strict 140-280 character limit. The anonymous user did this as a form of protest against quoting Whitman out of context and reducing him to just cheesy lines (Rosen, 2013). I argue that this Twitter Whitman is not simply a redistribution of his work, but a successful conversion of the bard that does not reduce him but allows a different reading.

There are many other accounts like this, even automated accounts that are programmed to reproduce classical works like Shakespeare's plays or accounts that post selected snippets from a particular author, like Samuel Beckett or Jean Rhys. Twitter is already used frequently for networking between academics, it is no surprise that accounts like this pop up. But this profile garnered attention as more than just a cute novelty but in fact transformative of the work as a whole. Professor Noel Jackson noted in his interview: "Individual lines take on lives of their own this way. Standing separate from the whole, each line is free to be engaged and quarreled with." (Rosen, 2013). Of course, it is perfectly possible to do this with the book alone, but

following the account practically necessitates a focus on the lines as individual units which emphasizes each separate line as units in and of themselves rather than as part of a stanza.

The account also deviates significantly from the norms of Twitter discourse, which is characterized by a kind of urgency and rapid communication (Thomas, 2020, p. 57). Communication happens in live succession, so users are compelled to write quickly and efficiently to get their message across. By comparison, @TweetsofGrass is slow and methodical. In fact, the process of reading *Leaves* is a much slower process and requires a much longer commitment than reading the actual book would entail (Rosen claims an entire reading would take six months). To become a follower of Whitman on Twitter, like in the book, requires investment and patience, to forego conventional practices of quick satisfaction and wait for the narrative to eventually be unfolded.

Through the time I followed the account, I observed a few times followers chose to leave comments, even though they know he is unable to respond (and the anonymous user has to my knowledge never used the account for anything other than reposting). The point of commenting here is less a means of interacting with the author and instead serves as a ritual of affirmation, to mark oneself as one of the multitude Whitman addresses. Finally, the nature of the profile effectively erases the concept of both beginning and ending, as the profile never finishes its train of thought. When the last line from that edition is read up, the journey begins all over again. *Leaves of Grass* on Twitter formally never ends, but is posted again and again, as a companion to the reader no matter where they are. It has been that way for over ten years now, and could continue for ten or twenty more years in the future, provided Twitter can sustain itself.

Of course, it should be noted that Twitter reading is rarely this singular. For this thesis I have looked at this one account alone, but should we follow more profiles (which by all accounts (no pun intended) appears to be the norm), then the tweeted line will appear above or below

anyone else we follow. For example, someone we follow can comment on a current political issue in the exact same feed that a line like 'I am large, I contain multitudes' sits on. Reading on a social media platform is much more situational than reading in the book. This does not strictly need to be detrimental to the reading, but it does change it. When we read the book, the next line strictly follows the previous, the potential reading of *Leaves* in Twitter form is completely different. Media scholar Bronwen Thomas likens this form of reading to *metalepsis*, the technique of jumping from one narrative to the other and therefore breaking the immersive boundaries of a text, which can work to give a refreshing perspective to a work (2020, p. 58). There is here a *potential* for Whitman to speak now, not only apart from the masses but along that multitude of voices. Take for example this line from section 3 from *Song*: "I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . . the talk of the beginning and the end, / But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.". On Twitter, there are a myriad of "talkers" that are talking, that Whitman can emerge as a counter-voice towards that blab.

On Twitter it is much more up to the reader than the author how a text is read on Twitter and at least Jackson found it to be a welcome addition, accompanying his daily feed as part of the 'blab of the pave'(2013). Out of the account's 47 thousand followers, there are likely both those who will receive a post with care and attention like Jackson and there are those who will give it a passing glance before scrolling upward to catch the latest football news. Twitter allows for both, but may prefer the latter, as those who scroll longer and read as much as possible are those who generate the most clicks on ads.

So far, we see that Whitman (when put through the blog properly), does stand, altered but not reduced or diminished. Of course, this has so far been with the caveat that Whitman is already dead, so by sheer function he is not able to directly correspond with anyone on his profile. The next section concerns itself with someone who tried to follow the Whitmanian tradition through,

directly into the blogosphere as a self-proclaimed bard of the web. It is time to discuss Steve Roggenbuck, who has been alluded to earlier but not discussed in depth.

Steve Roggenbuck: Blogger, poet, Whitmanian bard?

Steve Roggenbuck (introduced in chapter 1) is the poet who has emerged most clearly as the figure of a Whitmanian bard on the web. His entire career came about as a direct challenge to the assumption that blogging isn't a place for the literary. Roggenbuck explained in an interview that he was enrolled in an MFA program for poetry, when he made a sharp turn. He had submitted a poem and received a comment from his professor over a particular line that he included for the sake of humor: "And then she says this thing 'save this stuff for your blog' and I'm just like; A blog is potentially so much more powerful than all these literary journals that you submit to."(05:14, Channel, 2016). He was greatly enthusiastic about the medium's capability for wide reach and communication, so he decided that the literary establishment was lagging behind and dropped out of his program. He became part of the self-styled "Alternative Literature" movement (or Alt Lit), a literary movement by American young adults united by having all grown up with the Internet and by being familiar with the unique lingo and culture on there. As such, they published poetry and short works on their site that worked with the conventions that had formed online, such as abbreviations and working within genres not considered literary, most importantly pushing for using social media as a means of publication in favor of traditional publishing. For example, their own site was named The YOLO pages. Yolo is an acronym for You Only Live Once, a motivational meme that was trending until and very quickly came to be used ironically (Walsh, 2012).

The connection to Whitman's legacy is very clear. We have an outsider with great aspirations to reach the American public, who finds that the contemporary literary establishment lives in

an ivory tower and do not adequately reach the people. He takes it upon himself to change poetic convention by breaking from the current literature. Walking outside those conventions, he attaches himself to a literary movement that too works to oppose societal trends (though much less political than the Transcendentalists), to bring a new kind of literature to the digital shores of the new world that the Internet represents to many young adults. In 2014, The New Yorker enthusiastically covered Roggenbuck, in their article named *If Walt Whitman Vlogged*, naming him "one of the bright stars of Alt Lit"(Goldsmith).

Another place where history appears to repeat itself is how Alt Lit after a few years faded, though for very different reasons than the Transcendentalists did. The Transcendentalists faded away after not having gained traction in the long term but leaving a legacy behind to inspire Whitman as well as Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson. Alt Lit faded away due to several of the most prominent members being exposed as having engaged in sexual harassment. In its wake, print is still the dominant medium for publishing novels and poetry. Roggenbuck himself denounced the actions of those involved and distanced himself from the movement, though a few years later he would end up in much the same boat. In 2018, multiple young women came forward and accused him of demonstrating manipulative behavior as well as "romantic coercion" and "sexual coercion" through a period of over five years (Zimmerman, 2018). All were significantly younger than Roggenbuck when they came into contact. In response, he made a public apology and retired off the grid, very likely fearing backlash. One of the young women, simply named Frances, predicted that he would return in six months but this has not happened. As of this writing, he has not returned to any kind of publishing anywhere on the web (that we know of). We should note that being exposed can constitute significant backlash, but for example the author Tao Lin who is also from Alt Lit has been able to keep a career despite similar offenses (though Lin currently sticks to print as his mode of publishing).

Roggenbuck is gone from the web, but he has left behind a sizeable body of work, with numerous videos on his YouTube channel as well as numerous posts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Will the passage of time remember him as the web's very own Whitman? It is tempting to leave the question open and not risk being proven wrong, as critics who claimed that *Leaves of Grass* would leave no lasting trace unto American literature demonstrably were. They were constrained by what they believed literature ought to be, as it is very possible we who write about literature are now. Roggenbuck himself has admitted that he isn't sure if a YouTube video can be a poem, but one thing we can be certain of is that video is a different medium from a printed page. In the following section I look at Roggenbuck's building of a bardic self through this completely different medium, namely YouTube. Roggenbuck has utilized other apps, but YouTube is where his Whitmanian inspiration is evident, as well as his most interesting work is located. As I have established, Whitman's community relies on impressing upon the reader a strong persona, that encourages the reader to imagine the person and imagine themselves in relation to it. Thus, it is important to examine if that imaginative space is retained into this blog platform.

Roggenbuck's mission statement is most clear in his video: "*AN INTERNET BARD AT LAST!!!" (2013) ARS POETICA*. The title is a reference to Whitman, who in one of his anonymous reviews of *Leaves* wrote: "An American bard at last!". The review was Whitman's attempt to promote himself as the new voice of America, here Roggenbuck declares himself to be following this tradition, but now it is the Internet that is his frontier. As the rest of the title tells us, this video is his *ars poetica*. He explains that he is influenced by the Romantic tradition and aligns himself with the English poet John Keats and Walt Whitman. He explains that Walt Whitman in particular changed his life and gave him a mission he wants to get further. He uses a simple metaphor of the poet as someone who is "texting people pictures of the sunset", referring to a story of a friend who sent him a picture of the sunset. At that time Roggenbuck

was in a different time zone, so to him the sun was not setting yet, but that message communicated the importance of the sunset to him and oriented him to go out and look at the sun in his corner of the world. The poet's role is similar in his view, someone whose function is to communicate the majesty of nature and life to other people, to point a finger that reorients them to life and nature. He does not refer explicitly to Whitman's preface, but he demonstrates a similar understanding to Whitman's poet, the Namer and Seer that conveys the world to the masses. He further aligns himself with Whitman by being a poet aiming for the people and not concerning himself with an elite readership. There is not even a paywall behind any of his poems, or ads for that matter (he instead made a living through crowdfunding). Roggenbuck points out that poets like Whitman expressed themselves through books, as that was the technology that was available at the time and now he is carrying that tradition on social media. He further says that now, we have the technology of blogs, that allows an instant reach and connection: "We have the opportunity to be in people's lives every day." (1:10) The poet is meant to be as close as possible to their audience and communicate, so naturally the poet's ability to come into people's timelines at any time is undoubtably a good thing. He closes his video saying: "You know that Walt Whitman would die for this, that Walt Whitman would be on Tweetdeck, kicking his legs up and going hard!" (4:26).

He demonstrates a very naïve assumption that this poetic tradition is instantly transferrable to the blog and that the increase in potential readership and the limitless possibility of discourse is only a good thing, in fact an improvement over the conditions Whitman wrote under. Our poet very strongly implies that the potential blogs represent is a closer fulfillment of these poets ambitions, that a blog is practically just like a book that keeps getting more pages with every update. This is of course not the case, a blog is inherently part of a shared network, a small piece of the large blogosphere. Everything on YouTube is part of everything else on the platform, when a video is finished, new videos are immediately recommended (most often not

a video by the same creator). By contrast, a book's text is contained within the confines of the back and spine of it, everything the author wants to convey is contained in the book. The print author retains a degree of control, while the author who engages with the blogosphere engages within a *secondary orality*. As mentioned earlier, a *secondary orality* means somewhat of a return to oral culture, with communication that is current but it also retains some of the permanence of print culture. Once an event has transpired, it is archived into a fixed text. When this thesis is written, the conversation on Roggenbuck's channel has largely died down and what remains is a text. This means this thesis is limited somewhat, by not being able to perceive how the conversation within his community has developed and how it developed through time. Although much of the comments stand by and are archived, in some cases comments show up that respond to users that cannot be seen anymore.

Walt Whitman created a persona using his book, which is tied to the medium of print. One of print's most important capabilities, according to historian Benedict Anderson, was its potential to create *imagined communities* (Buchanan, 2010). Imagined communities are like nations, a shared idea that unites people and encourages them to act under the belief that they are a group even though they don't know each other individually. Perhaps Whitman's greatest accomplishment was his ability to not just build his character, but to build his young country's national character. Through his poems he was able to imagine millions of readers, who all imagined him back. This is possible because the book allows for this persona to be created.

Although Roggenbuck very clearly emphasizes the reach of YouTube as one of the most important aspects, I will not factor in his view count as a measure of whether or not he successfully has made a YouTube bard. It is possible to look at a video's accumulated views, but this also does not tell us much about the quality. The (currently) most viewed video on the platform is a music video of a children's song called *Baby Shark Dance*. Broad appeal does not correlate with artistic merit.

Whitman built a democratic persona, going down to his very vocabulary of informal and even slang words utilized, in addition to the break from meter. Roggenbuck's video also show signs of attempting to tap into web users' collective language. Video is his tool for composing poems, working within the vlog genre. Vlogs (video blogs) is a form of blogging, only that the creator uses a handheld video camera and editing software to share their thoughts and experiences online. The genre is amateur in origin, anyone can use it, which has attracted followers to look at them and discover something about the vlogger. Ever since YouTube was created in 2005, users have been vlogging. The first video ever posted on YouTube was by one of the site's creators (*jawed*) at the zoo, looking at elephants. Roggenbuck taps into this vocabulary of shared experiences, to craft a style of his own.

Having viewed many of his videos, I give here a few descriptions of his style as I perceive it. Our Internet bard's style is that of an amateurish aesthetic that uses improvisation and editing to create a poem in video form. In his videos he is the visible speaker, always in front of the camera and speaking to his audience. He speaks into a handheld camera, often holding it with one hand, addressing the viewer directly. When addressing the viewer he performs an exaggerated character, who for example is bratty or effeminate or aggressive without reason. A common thread with his performances is that they are playful, like a child or teenager acting out, not intended to be taken as a serious representation of who he would be outside the frame. His vocabulary is also unserious, frequently using crass language and swearing, even having deliberate spelling mistakes (his website is named livemylief.com, intentionally misspelling life). The characters he performs are improvised, partially planned before recording but only acted out when the camera is turned on. As he explained in an interview with the art organization *Louisiana Channel*, before he started filming he created a character or idea that he wanted to explore, knew halfway what to say and then performed that character in front of his camera (Channel, 2016). After taping the video, he edits it into a poem, which

then is published. All poems are the products of editing, but with Roggenbuck the editing is very visible. In the span of one video, he can change clothes, location and the time of day. This allows us to see the improvised nature of the poem more clearly and makes it clear that what is captured is not random but a conscious effort. We see the poet mediate between different representations of himself, thereby consciously making us aware of how spontaneous and constructed a person's digital identity is. In addition, due to how visible the editing cuts are, they might best be understood as line breaks in a poem, as they build on what they have seen and demonstrate a change in mood or subject. Doing this he achieves a sense of immediacy that is surprising.

Roggenbuck's videos experiment much with tone and subject, for this thesis I will settle with analyzing one of his videos, *make something beautiful before you are dead (2012)*. It is the highlighted video that shows up when one clicks on his channel, implying that this is a video important to his channel, a representation of what he aims for. It also showcases very strongly his connection to Whitman's legacy and how he attempts to being Whitman's style into the fold.

I will refer to the persona presented here as "steve", the bard he is playing. The video begins with a closeup of his face at home, talking about "finding the best deal" in an exaggerated, nasal voice (Roggenbuck, 2012, April 13). The nasal steve continues "you give me some options of where I can find it, and I'm gonna say there is a better deal" (0:01-05). After a quick transition to an unnamed LA street, steve is now in the woods, screaming: "Two words jackass, Dog the bounty hunter! / Two words jackass, YOLO!" (0:08). Then he quickly switches back and forth between scenes in the woods and at home, where he wears a hat with fake leopard fur and ears. When he wears this hat, he appears exaggeratedly effeminate and childish (saying things like "I love kissing / I love hugging"), while in the woods he is overly serious and screams things like: "As the Marxists say: Superstructure reinforces the frickin

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base." (0:34), without any clear indication of what Marxism has to do with it. In Whitmanian fashion his poem moves swiftly between separate images and ideas, in scenes that appear completely ordinary. Due to the footage being filmed on the fly, neither his room or nature is presented in a manner that is particularly beautiful, what he shows looks like something anyone could film. The lighting and camera movement is amateur, at times the sunlight even fogs up the lens. Like Whitman through cataloguing, he presents a very ordinary and even mundane situation, which he moves through in poetic fashion.

For the majority of the video, steve switches back and forth between his different modes of being, in a manner that appears truly aimless, like someone trying to express themselves but not even knowing what it is they want to convey. It hearkens back to very early vlog videos, which in many cases were simply teens and children putting a camera in front of their faces and uploading it. He gives the impression of randomness, encouraging us as the audience not to take him seriously, likely even laugh at him. He gets the viewer's guard down, while also subtly setting up a turn to sincerity later on.

A turn comes before the minute is up, that subtly conveys that there is more to his video than just an unloading of emotions. At 0:45, we see the moon lighting up the night sky, while an unknown female voice notes that it focuses in and out of view as the camera tries to capture it. The moon is a larger theme in Roggenbuck's poetry. In *ARS POETICA*, he states that his "job" as a poet is to point at the moon, as a metaphor for the poet's role to give the reader a perspective.[16] Now, Roggenbuck is pointing at the moon with his camera, but (as the female voice points out) it fails to properly contain it, shifting out of focus. Roggenbuck can only point to the moon but not capture it, he can only contain it within a few seconds before it fleets away, as all things do. Everything in the video appears fleeting, each clip lasts only a

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[16] Furthermore, Roggenbuck has other videos like «I am not responsible for anything the moon does this month (2016)», in which he explores the moon and what it means to him and his poetic mission.

few seconds before moving on to something else. It is as if steve here is unable to contain even himself within the camera lens. Immediately after the moon shot, a clip from the movie *Dead Poets Society* plays, where a teacher (played by Robin Williams) quotes Whitman to his students. The quote goes: "That you are here—that life exists and identity, / That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse." It is from the poem *O Me! O Life!*, in which Whitman explores the question of how one can appreciate being alive, when one's own life appears futile or worthless. The quote performed in the movie is the explicit answer to that question, that one's own life is a reason in and of itself and part of a larger whole, that permits us to make ourselves known.

This intertextuality changes how steve's antics look and begin reflecting something more. His exaggerated yelling is a joke, but it is also a conveyance of his deeper wish to be connected to life and to others. As steve changes location to Santa Cruz in California (intentionally misspelled SATAN CRUZ CA), he wanders the fields again and starts speaking to a tree trunk. He wants the tree trunk to hear about YOLO, but he yells that it can't. He then looks directly into the camera and says that it can't: "Because everything dies, because everybody dies! / I'm not trying to be sad, your cat's gonna die!" (02:00). From this point on, steve speaks with a much more normal voice, neither childish or deadpan serious. It is implied that the aimless bantering before was steve trying to distract himself with playacting but is now confronting his fears and anxieties in a more honest way. He continues looking into the camera and expresses in a much more earnest way how he is dissatisfied with the planet and how "humans are fucking up! (…) We can do better than this!". He puts the camera very close to his face, looks intently and urges the viewer to: "Make something beautiful before you are dead" (02:30). In this moment, steve looks sincerely at us, aware of how fleeting both the moment he is speaking in is and aware at some level how fleeting life is. He starts running through the field, smiling and yelling that the grass and rain is beautiful. He urges us to "stand

in the rain", to enjoy life for its own sake as part of that "powerful play" alluded to earlier, as he is in his moment. As the video turns off, he turns away from the camera, to enjoy the moment. The video has ended and the moment is over, we are left with a message to experience our own lived lives.

The message is simple, there are many other messages like it, but how it is conveyed is important. "You Only Live Once" was one of these messages, that we are only alive for a finite time and should act in accordance with that awareness, a sincere message that quickly became a joke as it was disseminated through thousands of users and collectively lost its meaning. By 2012, YOLO was only used ironically, so in this 2012 video Roggenbuck was likely aware of this datedness. He utilized the apparent joke to catch his viewers off guard, to go from reckless joking to sincerity. There is clear artistic intent meant to convey these important themes, that doesn't come through when stated as a quick sentence. By building up to that moment, by confronting us with our guard down, Roggenbuck can move towards the viewer and build a relationship. That relationship will be fleeting, in the video the moment is already over, but also with a kind of permanence as the video remains like a text.

Roggenbuck's persona works to build a community. Like Whitman, he stands as the bard for his followers. In the hands of everyone, YOLO means nothing more than a joke, but in the hands of Roggenbuck YOLO means that we should stand in the rain and face up to our own mortality with a smile. Though Roggenbuck's community is different. There is an extensive comment's section on his videos, where people participate and discuss their reactions to the work. Roggenbuck's user comments back as well, so there clearly is a type of community fostered through the work and the platform's participatory nature. The question is whether this could be said to be an *imagined community*. Imagined communities don't need to be physically present, but rely on a shared idea, that is communicated to a large number of people who do not necessarily know each other.

I argue that there is an idea of a community fostered here, but one much less imagined. YouTube videos keep a fairly accurate tally of exactly how many have watched it and embedded into the same web page as the video itself is the like/dislike button and the comment's section, where any user can post a comment. There is always a much higher number of views than comments, but nonetheless this must contribute to a community that is quite different from a book community. This community is present in the work itself, much less a fanciful idea than a material reality, as the members are present right there in the work.

I argue this lessens the ability for the reader to imagine themselves into the conversation, because the conversation is already catalogued and accounted for with replies and likes and dislikes (Note, as of now dislikes are invisible to viewers, but I include them here as this is how users have operated for a long period of time). I noted that the members of this community are materially present, but they are of course not present as their legal selves. To comment and like, one needs an account, so everyone presents their voice as an idea of themselves. In this sense, the community relies on a level of imagination. It is an open question how this type of community functions compared to a regular community and if one is more "real" than the other. One could argue that the distinction is not meaningful, as all social life relies on some level of self-presentation. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to meaningfully address this question at a wider level.

Roggenbuck's community relies on him as the bard, the unifying voice of this mass and he is present in the comment section. I looked through the comment's section of 10 of his most seen videos (including *make something beautiful before you are dead*), to see how he interacts with the community he brings together and how that effects the imaginative space of this YouTube bard. In general, most of his contributions were replies to fan comments and the relationship established was that of a fan and artist. For example, in the video I analyzed, one user by the commented: "we're touched by this because Steve has the guts to be whatever he feels he wants

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to be. thank you Steve, precious lesson" (Roackarul, 2017). Roggenbuck replied: "thank u for this super nice comment <3". This type of interaction is emblematic of the larger conversation Roggenbuck has fostered. The discussions also don't go much further than a simple comment of praise and Roggenbuck acknowledging it.

Compared to a book's reception, the comment section is interesting, because it can function as criticism but is not separated from the work the same way book criticism is typically absent from the book itself. Though criticism can be integrated into the work and serve a larger purpose, as Whitman demonstrated in 1856. In chapter 3 we touched upon the section *Leaves-Droppings* as an example of paratext, which unified disparate voices into the myth of the book itself. Whitman used the letter from Emerson to narrativize his career as something more than a publisher of an odd book of poems, but as *the* emerging American poet. He synthesized the reception into a narrative, that harmonized with the narrative of the work itself. I argue that in Roggenbuck's case, his interactions does serve to build a narrative, though one that does not harmonize but deflect from the video's narrative. One could argue these are not comparable because the comment section is automatically attached to the video. This is true, but a comment section is not required, the uploader has the freedom to turn it off (and Roggenbuck had other platforms he could utilize for communication). I therefore see the use as an active choice, rather than an involuntary necessity.

Roggenbuck's interactions with his admirers are brief and positive and reinforce an idea that the reader's experience is similar to being at a concert. The video is the performance and the comments section is the after-party, where fans are allowed to briefly interact with the performer as they head off the stage and go on with their lives. The assumed interaction that takes place when the concert is over is that the concert was a show, and when fans are taking their selfies (maybe even getting a hug) with the performer, they get to be with the "real" person with their stage mask off. These two modes are separated by time, but on the web page these

moments are brought together on the very same page. Through the comment section, the "steve" present in the video does not appear to carry through, instead it gives the impression that the one in the comments section is in the fact simply the real Steve Roggenbuck.

Here the participatory nature of the medium works against the persona. In the video, the reader is encouraged to imagine a relationship between themselves and "steve", possibly even the person Steve Roggenbuck but when scrolling down, that fantasy is lessened because we can see him. He is there in the comments and what he has to say is "thank u <3". One might object that correspondence between author and admirer in print culture is a common practice and this is true. Whitman himself received many letters all over the world and he corresponded back with them, but that correspondence stayed between Whitman and the admirer and did not interfere with the relationship of reader and writer, with the exception of Emerson's first letter to Whitman of course. Besides, Whitman's reprinting of the letter served to build his myth as the emerging bard of America, approved by a contemporary authority within American philosophy. Roggenbuck's interaction with fans only serves to lessen his impact.

Make no mistake, there is still a distance to speak of on YouTube, everyone operates as users which keeps some distance between the two. But in comparison to the distance of book culture, the distance appears close to erased by its participatory nature. The silent book was to Roggenbuck an unfortunate limitation Whitman had to deal with, he assumed instead that social media was the further evolution of the bard's potential, but that limitation was something Whitman used to great effect. Our internet bard failed to recognize the limitlessness of the imagination. Instead, he went for the nearly limitless web space and that near infinite potential ironically stifles the imagination.

The lack of distance turned out to be especially detrimental to Roggenbuck's persona, as the story about his misdeeds with multiple fans came to light in 2018. It is important for legal persons to be held accountable for what they do, but in matters of art is crucial that we can

separate the art from the person, to have that space that differentiates the two. During Whitman's time he personally received much controversy around his person, and this would be noted but not be decisive when reading the book itself. Even if many found his publication of Emerson's letter disrespectful and his person unsavory, the book was read separately from him. In our time, it has been discovered that Whitman made statements that we today can only read as racist and misinformed, but this has not caused *Leaves* to be taken out of the national canon. The book, by virtue of its physical presence as apart from the author and by the cultural norms we have around it, allows a space away from the author and their history. By contrast the blog (at least in Roggenbuck's case) closes that space detrimentally. When I looked at the comment section, one user had written: "an abuser that was grooming underage girls. i can't believe what you did, steve. your content meant so much to me. your actions are inexcusable. stand with survivors." (hazlett, 2019). Another wrote: "Fucking sucks having to watch this beautiful video with Steve's bullshit in mind. I'm glad I had 7 years to feel inspired by this before it got shit & pissed on. (…)" (Matus, 2020). Some users demonstrate a more forgiving side, but regardless it is apparent that they have trouble distinguishing the video's "steve" and the real person.

This closeness likely does not need to be inherent, but it is in the history of the blog that the author is expected to be as close as possible to the work. For example, the mommy-blogger *Dooce* was fired from her job for talking about how much she hated her boss. The profile did not protect her, it condemned her. In cases like lonelygirl15, a team of writers and actors created a narrative around a person. When the narrative was revealed in fact be a written narrative, the team was not met with praise but with scorn for having "tricked" them.

I do not argue that users should be given total leniency, in many instances it is necessary that users can be held accountable for their actions online, especially in politics. When operating under the web, if there is no established practice that allows the user to be seen as a persona, it will damage the necessary distance required for the poetic figure to function. It is debatable

how much the system of YouTube allows the users to build their own community and dictate the rules. YouTube is after all a corporate space, driven by algorithms that always recommends videos it believes the user will want to see. It does not exist to produce art, it exists to perpetuate itself. This system allows many different types of content, but it is not as neutral a surface as a piece of paper is. It has specific guidelines, for example it censors swearing (in some of Roggenbuck's videos there is swearing, but the transcription function automatically leaves out curse words). Anyone who works with YouTube works within this system and must either take it or leave it. As such, any content is at the mercy of the platform's policies, as enforced by the system. Finally, working under this system also means a potential lack of permanence. The existence of all of these videos are dependent on the platform itself being operative. Should that place fade, we may truly be back to an oral culture, where the only place stories reside with some permanence is memory. Roggenbuck's reasons for leaving are known only to him, but it is likely that he believes that he is unable to return and continue to operate as Roggenbuck the poet and not be seen as Roggenbuck the predator.

Conclusion

This thesis was built to explore a question at length: Does the Whitman tradition carry into the blog? The surprising ways in which Whitman appeared to anticipate blog culture warranted a closer examination than what had currently been done at length. This thesis found a common framework between the blog and Whitman with "technologies of the self", both creating selves that divide from the world. Where Whitman and bloggers differ are not in intent, but in how the nature of their work. The blog is different from the book, the book is from a culture of silent reading while the blog is a part of the new *secondary orality*, which works through a participatory culture. This can prove troublesome for Whitman's mode of communication, because his community relies on its *imaginative space*, a space only maintained through a distance between the real persons who do live between the work. Blogging, when it demands material reality, works against this imagination.

With this I conclude that while the personal blog does have a significant lineage with Walt Whitman's mode of self and community, currently it has not quite come to a place where it has managed to carry his tradition with it. The bardic persona relies on the imagination, as does the blogger's profile, but the culture around the blog still insists on the blogger leaving that imagination and being verifiable in some way. This may come as a blow to those still enthusiastic about the blog as the new place for poetry publishing, but it should not be seen as a fatal one. It simply means that once again, the present has not quite caught up with Whitman, it was much the same when he was alive.

The blog is certainly different from print, by nature building the self online is different from building the self in a book, but as I see it this does not mean an inherent obstacle to the blog as a surface for literature. In fact, this apparent willingness to see Whitman and the blog together and to integrate his persona into this new space in just a few decades, I would argue this suggests

a willingness with the blog space to mature into form. Whitman in his day and the bloggers of today are not so different. Whitman's persona is a fiction and the blogger's profile is a fiction and these fictions do create connections that are real and meaningful. But for those fictions to sustain themselves, they must be embraced as just that, to not lose sight of what keeps it alive (namely, the imagination).

Much of the troubles between dividing person and persona may lie with the simple fact that these platforms are young and need time to develop a sophisticated understanding of how to build a self and community and bring it to life. YouTube (one of the older apps discussed here) is hardly more than fifteen years old, hardly any time compared to the centuries of book culture. Though the book does have a type of permanence blogging may lack. A book printed 400 years ago can still be picked up and read today (though likely with a little difficulty in terms of standards of print). Videos on the app Vine are only available through preservations on other sites, since Vine went under years ago. If this turns out to be symptomatic of blogging at large, it may end up staying eternally young, with an ever revolving door of platforms with new rules. Alternatively, it is possible that traditions established can last, if they can be carried over from one place to the other.

This thesis is limited by looking so specifically at examples that advertise themselves with the Whitman name. There could very well be personal blogs out there that have built bardic communities, that simply aren't discusses because I have not found them. This is the issue with discussing the blogosphere in general, it is vast like an ocean and murky when one does not know where to look for it. Further research could be done on how a poetic community is built on the web, for example with Instapoets, who are an intersection of the influencer and poet identity. Instapoetry is in essence a hashtag functioning as a literary movement, where the most successful ones have managed to not only be widely shared but to become successful in the publishing world. The most successful is Rupi Kaur, an Indian-Canadian woman who has

positioned herself as another blog poet voice against the literary establishment, her by virtue of being a non-white woman making waves in poetry book-publishing. As they operate with an already established role of influencer, it would be interesting to see how self and community is built through the attention economy of Instagram. This could be an instance of blog poetry similar to Roggenbuck or very different, as Instagram functions in a different way to YouTube. Instagram is a young platform, but already very well documented and critiqued by media scholars like Crystal Abidin. As the Instapoet trend is currently still ongoing, it allows for a much more comprehensive study of them than was available with Roggenbuck. Media scholar Rob Wittig has an interesting concept of *netprov* (networked improvisation through online media) that he has developed for ten years, which could provide an interesting source for discussion and comparison.

Inherent within the discourse of self on the web is the question of identity and how we should understand it, if digital identity means fake and the non-digital one means real. There are signs that this may change. Recently (2021) a book called *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity* by Daoist philosopher Hans-Georg Mueller and associate professor Paul J. D'Ambrosio has come forward to argue against the idea of the profile being seen as inherently superficial. Instead, it moves to look beyond claims of authenticity into how it communicates and becomes real. Literary studies, which already deal much with identity through media, could potentially find common ground here.

This thesis may provide new ways of discussing Whitman's long and ever-expanding legacy, how should we understand him in our own time? It might also bring some awareness to the challenges a poetic persona currently faces in the blog space. With an awareness comes the ability to navigate these problems (though how to proceed, only the poet knows). All we know for sure is that the blog and the digital culture it represents is a different kind of beast from print culture. We cannot say for sure if the blog poet will rise, all we know is that the proof of the

poet is that their country absorbs them as affectionally as they have absorbed it (to paraphrase Whitman's 1855 foreword). Right now, like Emerson did in 1844, we cannot see them and wait. Whoever they are, they will have to grapple with the participatory nature of blogging in some way (it does not necessarily have to be only one figure, blog culture is inherently collaborative).

The blog dazzled the world through the immense potential it represented and as I conclude this thesis, the potential it represents still dazzles, but with some achievements to its name. That is the blog's virtue and its vice, it can always get better but it may just as well get worse. It can bring people from all corners of the world into contact and it can alienate us at a profound level. This text will remain static and unchanged for decades, but the blog can reinvent itself countless times (and potentially make every point of this thesis less and less relevant). Just before this thesis was completed, it came to my attention that billionaire Elon Musk has purchased Twitter and made it clear he intends to change it, what this means for Twitter literature nobody knows. Throughout all of this, what has not changed and will not change is that Whitman's dream is still our dream. It is the dream of a liberated individuality that finds an embracing community and that dream is always worth carrying.

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