ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a reassessment of American poetic culture from 1865 to 1904. Beginning with E. C. Stedman in 1885 and extending throughout the twentieth century, critics of American poetry have considered this period a poetic wasteland, and thus have almost totally neglected it. In recent years, however, there has been an increased scholarly interest in improving current formulations of nineteenth-century poetic history. To that end, I illuminate the function of meaning of poetry in the late nineteenth century, and particularly the range of ways poets conceptualized their roles in American culture.

I uncover a tradition of late-nineteenth-century poetry steeped in dramatic forms and techniques, including dialogue, characterization, and the dramatic monologue. I use the term “dramatic poetics” to refer to this pervasive aesthetic, and I demonstrate how it intersects with performative culture more broadly. Most specifically, I argue that a range of poets used this aesthetic to perform the terms of their authorship. These performances make legible the professional and cultural roles these poets assumed, the audiences they wrote for, and the political and cultural work they pursued. The Introduction explains the dramatic poetic tradition and diagnoses the reasons why scholarship has overlooked it. Arranged chronologically, the chapters explore the dramatic poetry of individual authors to illustrate particularly significant and representative brands of late-nineteenth-century
poetic authorship. Chapter 1 analyzes Walt Whitman’s role as a national poet, Chapter 2 Sarah Piatt’s role as a periodical poet, Chapter 3 Herman Melville’s role as a coterie poet, and Chapter 4 Elliott Blaine Henderson’s role as a local poet. The Coda gestures towards the continuities between the twilight interval and modernism.

This dissertation reaches three conclusions that provide a new framework for understanding late-nineteenth-century poetry. First, poetry was a popular, performative, and public form of literary discourse. Second, poetry was produced and received in various sites, from nationally distributed magazines to self-published books disseminated to small groups of readers. Third, the concept of dramatic poetics presents an alternative to dominant literary histories, revealing an American poetic tradition that does not conform to those that have been studies and canonized.
Dedicated to Jen
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am greatly indebted to my adviser, Elizabeth Renker, whose unrelenting enthusiasm, support, guidance, and intellectual engagement has helped sustain my confidence in this project and has enhanced it in more ways than I can enumerate. I thank Beth Hewitt for her astute commentary on my work, and Steve Fink for his careful reading of this document and for his invaluable mentorship throughout the last six years.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Susan Williams and Jared Gardner for their encouragement and assistance, and I thank them, along with Steve, for the opportunity to work on *American Periodicals*.

I am grateful to the Department of English for awarding me several fellowships that have provided the time necessary to complete this dissertation. I am especially thankful to Susan Williams, Debra Moddelmog, and Kathleen Gagel for answering all of my questions over the years.

This project could never have been completed without the companionship and support of many friends, particularly Scott, Theresa, and Jimmy.

The Desiderio family has encouraged and supported me in every way possible, and I am grateful. My brothers and sisters, Tony, Tom, Ann, Sarah, and their families,
have given me unrelenting friendship, guidance, and love, keeping me grounded and providing a necessary haven away from graduate school.

   My gratitude to my parents, Al and Nancy, is beyond words. Their unwavering love and support has brought this project to completion. They have stood by my side for each accomplishment and setback, never losing faith in me and helping me to overcome every hurdle. I thank them immensely.

   And finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Jen, who has seen me through every moment of this process. You have been my strength and inspiration. We began this journey together, and you share in every word.
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INTRODUCTION

DRAMATIC POETICS

On April 14, 1879, in New York City’s Steck Hall, Walt Whitman delivered the first of his Lincoln lectures. Consisting of reflections on the night of Lincoln’s assassination and its repercussions for American history, the presentation concluded with a recitation of his 1866 Drum-Taps poem “O Captain! My Captain!” At this time in his life, hampered by a series of health problems, Whitman, according to Jerome Loving, “needed something new” and expressed his determination to “make a small living as a lecturer and a reader of poetry” (389). Fulfilling what was his life-long aspiration to be an orator, Whitman would go on to give his Lincoln lecture at least ten times over the next eleven years, performing for hundreds of listeners including Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, James Russell Lowell, Edmund Clarence Stedman, and Silas Weir Mitchell. Unequivocally patriotic, the lectures, in conjunction with the poem—perhaps, at the time, his most popular, and certainly his most conventional—aided in reconciling Whitman with the broader American public and helped effect his transition from salacious rebel to the Good Gray Poet. In the same decades that Whitman was making these occasional public appearances, the 1870s and 80s, another poet, James Whitcomb Riley, was carving out an immensely successful career by traversing the country and presenting hundreds of readings of his Hoosier poetry. Following the example of Will Carleton, he gained an
audience for his poems largely through these performances on the lyceum and lecture circuits (Van Allen 135). A true literary star, unquestionably the most popular poet of his era, Riley performed his verse in front of sold-out audiences at local town halls and civic auditoriums “from Kokomo, Indiana to Concord, Massachusetts,” according to Angela Sorby, “providing a mass-entertainment context for poetry” (199). By the end of the nineteenth century, just as Riley’s career was slowing down, Paul Laurence Dunbar was achieving notoriety not only as the author of several books of poems but as a successful and entertaining expositor of his work. Joanne M. Braxton observes that from 1898 to 1902 Dunbar “enjoyed wide popularity on the lecture circuit” (xv), and Jean Wagner argues that “No one previously had combined all the talents of the poet, musician, dancer, and actor to the same degree. This made Dunbar the first truly great interpreter of the popular Negro temperament” (115). In the words of Dunbar’s friend and fellow poet James Weldon Johnson, “Dunbar’s success on the platform, and it was great, was due not only to his fame as a poet, but also to his skill as a reader. His voice was a perfect musical instrument, and he knew how to use it with extreme effect” (Along 159-60).

Though their positions in the American literary tradition have varied greatly over the last century, and though their individual reputations, particularly in the cases of Dunbar and Riley, have fluctuated wildly from period to period, critic to critic, Whitman, Riley, and Dunbar have endured as three of the most important American poets of the late nineteenth century. Public performance was an essential aspect of each of their careers, a fact reflected in scholarship on their work. A continuing strain of Whitman criticism, for example, investigates the influence of oration, theater, opera, and other types of performing arts on the formal construction and rhetorical stances of *Leaves of Grass.*
Like Sorby, many readers understand Riley’s verse as a type of mass entertainment that overlapped with vaudeville and burlesque acts. And almost every Dunbar scholar acknowledges the undeniable importance of both the minstrel tradition in theater and African-American tradition in storytelling as critical components of his work. Yet as useful as these observations are for comprehending and appreciating the literary productions of these authors individually, what has been completely overlooked is the extent to which their immersion in different kinds of public performance is representative of their poetic culture more broadly. Indeed, my dissertation will show that performativity is a central and recurring feature of a significant body of postbellum American verse. Ultimately, this focus provides a new critical framework for reading and understanding late-nineteenth-century American poetry.

In varying degrees Whitman, Riley, and Dunbar were immersed in their respective theatrical cultures. Whitman regularly attended the Bowery Theater as a youth, spouted Shakespeare passages on the streets and cars of New York, frequently expressed his admiration for and identification with actors, and continued to read the theater journal the Stage in the last years of his life. Between 1869 and 1876, Riley was an actor and performer in the Adelphian Dramatic Club in his hometown of Greenfield, Indiana, and he composed one verse drama in 1878 entitled “Flying Islands of the Night.” His readings of his poems, moreover, were deeply theatrical. After attending one of Riley’s performances, Henry Irving, perhaps the best and most famous English actor during the second half of the nineteenth century, remarked “Jim [Riley] would have made the greatest actor in the history of the American stage had he followed the stage seriously as a life work” (Boewe 18). For his part, Dunbar wrote and co-wrote several plays and
musicals, including *Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk*, which was produced on Broadway in 1898. Not surprisingly, the poetry of each of these writers bears the strong imprint of their interest in theater. Whitman’s early poems, including “Song of Myself,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and “The Sleepers,” are often called “monodramas” by critics, meaning that they present a speaker who actually goes through and performs an action rather than, like a narrator, describing an action that has already happened (Waskow 139). Additionally, poems such as “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” and “The Centenarian’s Story” from *Drum-Taps* clearly are constructed on dramatic models, comprised of various discernible characters and their speaking parts. Riley’s dialect poems, such as “When the Frost Is on the Punkin” and “Little Orphant Annie,” are dramatic monologues spoken by the kinds of stock rural characters common on the melodramatic and burlesque stage. No matter how much he may complicate and reject racial stereotypes, finally, Dunbar’s dialect speakers have their roots in minstrel performances. “When de Co’n Pone’s Hot” and “Accountability,” for example, draw on common minstrel representations of African-Americans as ignorant and humble clowns who derive excessive pleasure from the simple act of eating a hot meal or stealing a chicken.

In their theatrical impulse, Whitman, Riley, and Dunbar were far from alone in the late nineteenth century. Currently well-known poets such as Herman Melville and E.A. Robinson, recently recovered poets like Sarah Piatt and Rose Terry Cook, and little-known writers including Elliott Blaine Henderson and Lizette Woodworth Reese routinely infused their verse with techniques, tropes, and styles associated with oral performance and various types of theatrical productions, including multiple speaking
characters, interior and exterior monologues, spectacle, tableau, and interior and exterior dialogues. Piatt, for example, produced several poems in which the main action takes place in a theater, including “A Ghost at the Opera,” “At the Playhouse,” and “Beatrice Cenci.” More generally, nearly every poem she wrote can be categorized as either a dramatic monologue or a dramatic dialogue. Highlighting the extent of her immersion in the dramatic, her 1880 book collection was entitled Dramatic Persons and Moods, with Other New Poems. Melville, who had experimented in Moby-Dick (1851) with writing dramatic interludes, presented in his John Marr poems (1888) a series of vernacular monologues similar in kind to Riley’s popular poetry, though Melville’s monologues are spoken by New England seamen as opposed to Hoosier farmers. Robinson’s “John Evereldown” and “Luke Havergal” are reminiscent of the choral odes in classic Greek drama, and Robinson eventually published two plays, Van Zorn (1914) and The Porcupine (1915). Though Cooke is known primarily as a local color fiction writer, she produced much poetry as well, a large portion of which is constructed either in the monologue form or as a dialogue between two characters. And Henderson’s African-American dialect verse in books such as Plantation Echoes (1904) and The Soliloquy of Satan (1907), is, like Dunbar’s, intricately bound to the legacy and the conventions of the minstrel show.

The primary objective of this dissertation is to identify and describe this significant and previously unrecognized tradition of late-nineteenth-century poetry. I use the term “dramatic poetics” to designate the theatrical and performative aesthetic practiced by postbellum poets. This aesthetic functions on both local and general levels. On the local level, dramatic poetics refers to the series of specific poetic techniques
postbellum poets routinely employed that are clearly associated with the drama. Throughout this study I account for drama’s influence on individual poets as well as for their motivated use of these dramatic techniques. For example, in Drum-Taps Whitman experimented for the only time in his career with writing dramatic monologues and dialogues. My dissertation makes sense of Whitman’s adoption of these forms as part of his national and political poetic project, while also illustrating his connection to other postbellum poets. This analysis represents a new intervention into Whitman scholarship, for critics have tended to disregard the dramatic elements of Drum-Taps and have overwhelmingly memorialized Whitman as an antebellum American Renaissance writer. On a more general level, dramatic poetics refers to the performative impulse of much late-nineteenth-century poetry. In using dramatic techniques so extensively, postbellum poets aligned their work with the performative and theatrical culture that was thriving in the period. My dissertation highlights the ways in which postbellum poets approached their poems as a series of artistic performances that were part of this larger cultural phenomenon, in the process making legible the kinds of cultural, political, and aesthetic work their poetry carried out. Henderson’s African-American dialect poems, for instance, invoke minstrelsy in order to rewrite the script of black identity, showing how the conventional stereotypes associated with the minstrel figure are performative myths rather than authentic renderings of reality. The concept of dramatic poetics, then, offers both a textual and a contextual approach for comprehending what I argue is a fundamental aesthetic principle of late-nineteenth-century poetry. Though some dramatic poetry was published in America prior to the Civil War, it is only in the postbellum era that a veritable tradition of dramatic poetry coalesces. While poems like Lowell’s The
Biglow Papers (1848) and Poe’s “The Raven” fit into the dramatic mold, and while theater and public performance were certainly critical components of antebellum American life, the theatrical and performative drive of both American poetry and culture did not fully materialize until the second half of the nineteenth century.¹

By emphasizing the importance of theatricality and performativity, my dissertation intersects with current critical interest in nineteenth-century drama and theater history. Susan Harris Smith’s American Drama: The Bastard Art (1997) argues that drama has been an almost nonexistent genre in American literary studies, particularly of the nineteenth century. Few scholars, Smith observes, teach, write about, or are even familiar with any of the American plays that were produced on the nineteenth-century stage, aside, perhaps, from the adaptations of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin. However, in recent years the study of nineteenth-century theater and drama has been gaining momentum, as signaled by the publication of Brenda Murphy’s American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940 (1987), Lawrence W. Levine’s Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America (1988), Jeffrey D. Mason’s and J. Ellen Gainor’s Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater (1999), and the three-volume Cambridge History of American Theater (1998-), which spans from 1600 to 1995. As these studies all remind us, despite its long-standing marginalization theater was, in the words of David Grimsted, “the major form of public entertainment available to all classes” in the nineteenth century, enjoying wide popular and national appeal (ix).² Recognizing this pervasiveness and popularity, a number of recent studies has explored the intersections between nineteenth-century drama and other kinds of literary production. Randall Knoper’s Acting Naturally: Mark
Twain in the Culture of Performance (1995), for example, underscores how Twain’s theatrical milieu was critical to his practice of and, in many cases, his skepticism about, the tenets of literary realism. Barbara Hochman’s Getting at the Author: Reimagining Books and Reading in the Age of American Realism (2001) demonstrates how the common evocations of theater in novels such as The House of Mirth and Sister Carrie are reflective of the realist author’s anxiety about the proper amount of authorial presence in his or her texts. Similarly, Alan L. Ackerman, Jr.’s The Portable Theater: American Literature & the Nineteenth-Century Stage (1999) contends that non-dramatic nineteenth-century authors, such as Henry James, Louisa May Alcott, and Herman Melville, routinely adopted theatrical tropes and styles into their writing as a way to imagine how their texts interacted with the American public. This dissertation, then, offers a new way to gauge and consider the theatricality of nineteenth-century literature and culture, assessing its importance to postbellum poetry.

As much as the poetic techniques I am subsuming under the heading of dramatic poetics have their roots in the theater, I also intend this term to signify the correlations between poetry and different types of performance more broadly, such as lectures, one-person shows, music, and expository rhetoric. The late nineteenth century was a veritable golden age of public performance, with dramatic reading, opera, minstrel skits, children’s shows, and plays all thriving in local theatres, lyceum halls, Chautauqua platforms, and the private parlors of middle-class homes. John S. Gentile’s study of the history of one-person shows in America, Cast of One: One-Person Shows from the Chautauqua Platform to the Broadway Stage (1989), for example, posits that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed “the unprecedented rise to popularity” of one-person
platform performers “as a form of public entertainment” (1). Similarly, Nan Johnson argues that there was “an upsurge in the public’s . . . interest in rhetorical performance as a social and community event” from 1850 to 1910, which led to “a burgeoning of popular education in rhetoric” (140-41). As both Gentile and Johnson explain, reading literature out loud, including poetry, was often a central part of these public and private performances, blurring the lines between textuality and orality, author and performer, reader and audience, theater and verse, and performance and reading. Dramatic poetics thus connotes a whole complex of performative culture in the late nineteenth century and the body of poetry that responded to, participated in, and was influenced by it.

By explicitly aligning postbellum poetry with theatricality and performativity, this study helps to illuminate the function and meaning of late-nineteenth-century poetic discourse. Ackerman hypothesizes that one of the primary reasons drama was so vital to nineteenth-century writers is the inherently public nature of the theater. He writes:

Theater played a crucial role in the process by which men and women imagined their relations as individual subjects to a public, “objective” reality. Unlike other modern forms with literary content, such as novels, poems, or essays, theater only happens in the presence of other people. A theatrical event, therefore, is necessarily social, but the form of the social experience in different kinds of theater may range widely, from a feeling of community to a sense of isolation, from antagonism to complacency. For this reason theater, studied in its relation to literary history, can foreground questions about the public or private nature of literature. Although dramas tend to be consumed in different ways than novels or poems, their performance and mode of consumption are commonly represented in other kinds of literature. The significance of these representations may be both thematic and formal, both aesthetic and ethical. In all of these ways, from the poetry of Whitman to the fiction of James, theater has conferred its benefits on genres other than drama. (xiii)

The social aspects of theater as Ackerman describes them are contiguous with the fundamentally communal and public impetus behind much nineteenth-century poetry,
though he does not make this connection himself, confining his discussion of poetry to Whitman. As Joseph Harrington recently has argued, up until the early 1900s poetry enjoyed a rich public life. Rather than being cloistered in the university, as it so often is today, poetry was a popular form of entertainment and edification for nineteenth-century Americans, used to debate political and social issues, to instruct, to commemorate public buildings and statues, to memorialize civic leaders, to enlighten, and to amuse. It was, as Shira Wolosky posits, a rhetorical form equivalent to speeches, sermons, and songs that proliferated in the nineteenth-century public sphere. In a 2001 essay, for example, Mary Loeffelholz focuses on poetry’s civic utility in Boston during the Civil War, demonstrating how poets such as Julia Ward Howe, Annie Fields, and Ralph Waldo Emerson composed poems about their city that registered a series of larger “skirmishes” about “the relations between poetry and oratory,” “the emergence of an autonomous realm of high culture,” and “the social body’s relations to the bodies of individual women and men” (213). She concludes that nineteenth-century poetry is a promising and untapped field that might provide “new life” for “the familiar problematics of Americanist cultural studies” (234). Loeffelholz, Wolosky, and Harrington all reaffirm what Robert H. Walker’s *The Poet and the Gilded Age: Social Themes in Late 19th Century American Verse* (1963) offers persuasively as its central purpose—namely, “to underline the public—rather than private—importance of [postbellum] poetry” (viii). By imbuing their poetry with the resonance of various kinds of public performance, the poets who practiced dramatic poetics explicitly underscored the essentially public function of their verse. As we will see in the chapters that follow, while the precise nature of this
function differed for individual authors, all are united in their formidable and unwavering public impulse.  

Highlighting the connections between poetry and the theater, as well as other forms of public performance, I present postbellum verse as a kind of popular art. Both Harrington and Alan Golding propose that the notion of poetry as primarily an elitist art form did not emerge until the early twentieth century, when the concurrent developments of modernism and the New Criticism created a taxonomy for evaluating poetry that emphasized characteristics such as erudition, difficulty, complexity, allusiveness, and irony. In particular, during these years the university English department institutionalized the reading and study of poetry as a “discipline” that required professional training and rigorous application. With the twin factors of modernism and New Criticism working together, poetry became more and more viewed as the special provenance of a privileged few who could make sense of it and who could discern “good” poetry from “bad.” This version of poetry, however, contrasts drastically with poetry’s status in the nineteenth century as a far more popular, widespread, and even democratic discourse. The signs of its permeation into the everyday fabric of American middle-class cultural life are everywhere. Poems constituted a regular feature of virtually every form of nineteenth-century periodical, from the daily newspaper to the children’s magazine, religious and political pamphlets, family monthlies, and literary journals. Poems were performed on the lecture circuit, recited at civic events, and read aloud in the family parlor for entertainment. As we will see in more detail in later chapters, the late nineteenth century was the age of what critics like David Perkins and Carlin T. Kindilien have referred to as the “handyman” or “do-it-yourselfer” poet, local, amateur, middle-
class Americans who, like Betsey Dole in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s story “A Poetess” (1890), composed verse as avocation when they could spare time from their jobs as farmers, housewives, and merchants. In the meantime, poets like Longfellow and Riley managed to become popular culture icons, as schoolchildren memorized their poems and celebrated their birthdays. Additionally, the rapid growth of literary clubs and chautauquas around the country provided numerous outlets and opportunities for Americans to read and learn about poetry. The combined impact of all of these factors led Edmund Clarence Stedman to declare in 1892:

> It has occurred to me—I think it may not seem amiss to you—that this eager modern time, when the world has turned critic, this curious evening of the century, when the hum of readers and the mists of thought go up from every village; when poetry is both read and written, whether well or ill, more generally than ever before; and when clubs are formed for its study and enjoyment, where commentators urban or provincial, masters and mistresses of analytics, devote nights to the elucidation of a single verse or phrase—it has occurred to me that this is an opportune time for the old question [what is poetry?] (41-42)

Rather than being circulated among a select few, then, poetry was a far-reaching popular art diffused widely throughout American society. In this sense, it is analogous to the nineteenth-century theater and to other forms of public performance. Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* explains that cultural stratifications between “high” and “low” art did not hypostatize until the beginning of the twentieth century. Theater, opera, symphonies, and other kinds of performative art cut across geographic and socio-economic divisions and appealed to Americans of all sorts, resulting in what he terms a “rich shared culture” that was not divided into “mass” and “elite” art. To be sure, as Nancy Glazener’s *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (1997) and Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* (1982) point out, the
proponents and articulators of a “high” cultural sensibility gradually were gaining momentum throughout the end of the nineteenth century. However, to a remarkable extent American society still enjoyed the shared public culture that Levine describes; as Sorby argues, for instance, Riley (like Twain) achieved both popular appeal and artistic distinction in this period. According to Gentile, during the late nineteenth century “divisions in culture were just then emerging” and for the most part much of the “literature we now consider elite enjoyed a truly popular audience” (8). “Only recently,” Daniel Walker Howe writes, “mainly in the twentieth century—did scholarship and some of the arts become so recondite and specialized, so consciously exclusive, as to be inaccessible to all but a handful of initiates” (14).

Part of the reason that until now there has not been a sustained analysis of the dramatic and performative foundations of postbellum verse is that there are, in fact, few comprehensive studies of late-nineteenth-century poetry to speak of at all. In his thoughtful and thorough 1885 book Poets of America, Stedman, at the time a leading American poetry critic, arbiter, editor, anthologist, and poet, characterized the postbellum years as the “twilight interval” of American poetry following a major phase headlined by Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant, Whitman, and Poe. Stedman’s epithet has proven remarkably durable, repeatedly invoked by twentieth-century critics who produced comprehensive histories of American literature and American poetry. Considered the age of the realist novel and the local color sketch, the late nineteenth century typically is cast as the era of minor poets composing hordes of decidedly minor poems. Neo-Romantics writing sonnets and ballads prettily turned, steeped in the genteel tradition and full of flowery and abstract diction and symbolism, they supposedly contributed little to the
development of American poetry, offering nothing that, in the words of Ezra Pound, would “make it new.” Edmund Wilson’s Patriotic Gore (1962), for instance, calls the entire era from Poe to Pound a “vast prairie” from which only Walt Whitman emerged. Roy Harvey Pearce is somewhat more generous, taking Dickinson seriously and giving Lanier and Timrod some attention in his influential The Continuity of American Poetry (1961, 1987), but he still claims that by the 1880s “American poetry had relapsed into a half-life” (253). Even Roland Hagenbuchle’s critical anthology devoted to the period, American Poetry, Between Tradition and Modernism, 1865-1914 (1984) agrees that “post-Civil War poetry remained in a kind of limbo” until the advent of modernism, marked by vagueness, abstraction, and idealistic platitudes (9). Most recently, an advertisement for a forthcoming volume of The Cambridge History of American Literature (2004), pitching the book as “the first complete narrative history of nineteenth-century American poetry,” discusses the Federalist period, the Fireside Poets, and the Transcendentalists, but makes no mention of post-Civil War poetry aside from mentioning the names of Melville and Crane. As a result of these kinds of judgments and omissions throughout the twentieth century, postbellum poetry as a whole receded further and further into the past, disappearing almost entirely from literary histories, scholarly debate, and the classroom.

In recent years, however, several new anthologies of nineteenth-century verse have emerged, making a substantive body of postbellum poetry widely available for the first time in decades. Yet critical work on these poets has been somewhat slow to follow. The continuing stumbling block for literary scholars invested in reclaiming a broader canvas of nineteenth-century poetry seems to be the question of aesthetics.
Namely, the difficulty lies in reconciling historicist and cultural approaches to literature, which tend to bypass discussions of aesthetics and refuse aesthetic judgments, with an art form that we often think of as foregrounding more than others its formal and aesthetic properties. For example, in a recent special issue of American Literary History (Spring 2003), Sacvan Bercovitch, the general editor of the Cambridge History of American Literature, explains that one of the two most challenging problems he and his contributors faced was integrating poetry into literary history. “Specifically,” he writes, “the difficulties involved dealing with traditions of poetry in what was basically a historical-cultural undertaking—that is conveying formalist lines of continuity and change within a context appropriate to broad historical developments” (2). Poetry, that is, resists historicization because it represents what Bercovitch calls the “literary extreme,” a phrase which suggests that as a genre, poetry is more purely aesthetic than other types of literature, formalistic, removed from temporal and historical contingencies, and thus less amenable to critical methodologies that approach literature as historic discourse rather than as aesthetic achievement. Both Harrington and Golding diagnose the invisibility of nineteenth-century poetry in recent criticism as stemming from the same cause. Harrington writes, for instance:

Now that “time, place, circumstance, cause and effect,” to borrow Shelley’s phrase, bear more interest for critics, “a poem,” it would seem, bears less. In the professional imaginary, the corollary of poetry’s hypostatization is the notion that fiction provides a privileged access to history. . . . By the same token, the assumption that we go to novels to find historical reality because novelists represent historical reality reifies field boundaries by producing a dichotomy between prose narrative as the bearer of historical value, on the one hand, and poetry as the repository of aesthetic value, on the other. (508-9)
Golding agrees, arguing that “the critical neglect of poetry in favor of prose forms (usually fiction)” in recent years has to do with the conception that the latter “have a superficially more ‘direct’ connection to social and historical reality” (xiii). Drawing further attention to this problem was a special seminar conducted by the American Antiquarian Society in February 2004 entitled “Poets and History: Approaches to the Study of Nineteenth-Century American Poets, Poems, and Poetic Culture,” which identified as its central premise the fact that “Historians and literary critics have struggled to integrate the lives and writing of poets into their accounts of nineteenth-century American culture.”

My focus on dramatic poetics addresses and helps to overcome the critical impasse between poetry and history by emphasizing poetry’s standing in the nineteenth century as public discourse. Rather than existing in an autonomous aesthetic realm, postbellum verse, as I argued earlier, was thoroughly engaged with its historical moment and cultural milieu, functioning, as Paula Bennett’s Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800-1900 (2003) so persuasively argues, as a kind of “public speech addressed to concrete, empirically identifiable others” (5). Moreover, by linking poetic practice directly to the dramatic and performative aesthetic that operated in postbellum culture generally, my dissertation offers a useful example of how literary scholars can historicize aesthetics. That is, rather than approaching the issue of aesthetics as primarily a literary problem, my concept of dramatic poetics exemplifies how aesthetics are historically contingent—embedded in, emerging from, and part and parcel of a larger cultural phenomenon. This historicization provides a constructive approach to the thorny question of aesthetic value (“is it any
good?”) that usually accompanies conversations about nineteenth-century poetry. By allowing us to understand some of the major aesthetic principles on which postbellum verse is constructed, my discussion of dramatic poetics enables informed distinctions about the aesthetic qualities of individual poets. The fact that aesthetics are historically contingent does not mean that, in Cheryl Walker’s terms, they “defy reassessment”; on the contrary, it means that as literary historians we have to work that much harder to make sense of and evaluate their cultural influences and meanings.  

Just as this study challenges conventional distinctions between poetry and history, it contests the critical paradigms that scholars traditionally have invoked for discussing and appraising American verse. As Golding’s From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry (1995) demonstrates, in the early twentieth century two dominant frameworks crystallized for understanding and canonizing American poetry. An extension of nineteenth-century anthologies like Stedman’s, the first of these frameworks stressed literary nationalism, including and championing those poets who struggled to create a uniquely American poetic. Timothy Morris has labeled this framework the “poetics of presence,” explaining that the proponents of American exceptionalism support those poets whose work most visibly reveals authorial presence:

The very concept of an American poetic tradition took shape around a nucleus of critical values that drew texts and critiques to itself, values of originality, organicism, and monologic language, which I group here as the poetics of presence. . . . The poetics of presence, by valuing those texts that most directly and immediately present the writer as a living voice, came to be a guarantee of the nationalism of canonical texts: an American writer sufficiently present in a work would automatically deliver the greatest amount of Americanism in that work. (xi)

Given these criteria, Whitman is often placed at the beginning of this tradition, with poets such as Robert Lowell and John Berryman following closely. The second prominent
method of canonizing American poetry is organized around the aesthetic values of the modernists and New Critics. Accentuating formal features like complexity, paradox, and irony, this method defines the poem as a transcendent, ahistorical textual artifact requiring formal exegesis. Eschewing the legitimacy of an essentially national poetic, the New Critical model valued poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound who inserted their work into a cosmopolitan and transatlantic poetic tradition. The poems that fit into this model survive the test of numerous and learned close readings, demonstrating how the poem acts as an autonomous aesthetic object.

The postbellum tradition of dramatic poetry does not conform to either of these two critical paradigms. I align it far too closely to the British literary tradition to fit the standards of the nationalist canon. Undoubtedly the emergence of a dramatic aesthetic in America during the second half of the nineteenth century is at least partly attributable to the influence of Robert Browning. By 1865 Browning had published Dramatic Lyrics (1842), Men and Women (1855), and Dramatis Personae (1864), all of which “went on selling—slowly, but steadily” in the 1870s and 80s, according to Louise Greer’s Browning and America (1952). Browning enjoyed a uniquely devoted following in America. Though several American critics, including Stedman, reprimanded Browning for his formal idiosyncrasies and his abstruse philosophical musings, many Americans took to Browning with unreserved ardor, professing themselves “Browningites” and “Browning disciples.” The enthusiasm of the Browning acolytes reached its apex in the 70s and 80s, when the Browning clubs and societies were formed and quickly spread in both small towns and big cities throughout the country. Comprised of a wide array of Americans, from college professors to housewives to fashionable young men and women,
these local clubs were devoted to the communal reading and analysis of Browning’s work. It is hard to claim a direct lineage from Browning to any of the poets I am including in the American dramatic poetic tradition, save perhaps for Sarah Piatt whose *Dramatic Persons and Moods, with Other New Poems* echoes Browning’s *Dramatis Personae*. However, given Browning’s ubiquity in the postbellum years it is probable that his work exerted some kind of impact on his American counterparts, forming a kind of transatlantic connection that utterly strains against the native preferences of literary nationalists. Moreover, by adopting the styles and tropes of the theater, an established artistic institution going back through the Renaissance to the Greeks, American poets betrayed the principle of formal and linguistic originality that is so central to nationalist models. As opposed to something like free verse, dramatic poetics seems derivative and conventional, the polar opposite of the nationalist project of creating an autochthonic poetic. Further, by presenting characters that speak rather than a first-person lyric “I,” dramatic poetry, on the surface, seems to occlude the authorial presence that Morris has argued is so central to theories of American exceptionalism.

In its cosmopolitanism and evocation of a European artistic tradition, the dramatic poetic tradition appears to possess more affinities with the modernist and New Critical movements than with the nationalist ethos. And indeed, as my conclusion will argue, there are important continuities between postbellum dramatic poets and the modernists. For example, dramatic monologues like Pound’s “Sestina: Altaforte” or Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Proufrock” are in some respects extensions of the postbellum tradition. However, Pound and others were motivated by a starkly different set of cultural politics than their postbellum American predecessors. Whereas Pound and Eliot
self-consciously and unapologetically courted a highbrow audience made up of a small
coterie of literati, postbellum dramatic poets, as I argued above, were part of a far less
stratified shared public culture. Dana Gioia writes, for example, “By prizing
compression, intensity, complexity, and ellipsis, [modernism] cultivated an often
hermetic aesthetic. . . . Perfecting poetry’s private voice, Modernism—at least American
Modernism—lost art’s public voice,” which was, of course, so central to nineteenth-
century poets (79). Unlike Pound and Eliot, postbellum poets often wrote for a general
American audience, published in popular family newspapers and magazines, and
performed their verse in towns across the country. Moreover, the performative and oral
features of dramatic poetics conflict with the fundamentally textual focus of high
modernist poetics and New Critical exegesis. As both Gioia and Golding suggest,
modernism and New Criticism instituted a process whereby “poetry” became
synonymous with “lyric,” and a highly-compressed, convoluted, self-enclosed version of
lyric at that. This generic reconstitution, they rightly assert, has had the effect of
devaluing and obfuscating the tradition of pre-twentieth-century narrative verse; it is
simply not feasible to apply close reading techniques to something like Longfellow’s
Hiawatha or Melville’s Clarel. The same can be said for poetry that is grounded in a
dramatic and oral aesthetic. To approach postbellum dramatic poems primarily as
literary texts and aesthetic artifacts ignores their performative and public history,
reducing the experience of reading them to a one-to-one transaction between the reader
and the page rather than recognizing their interaction with the culture of theatricality and
performativity from which they emerged.
In addition to challenging traditional poetic canons and criteria, the postbellum era is a promising period for opening up our current narratives of American poetic history because several of its prominent poets and commentators were unsure themselves about how to characterize the period. Whether or not we agree with Stedman’s twilight interval epithet, he seems to have adduced correctly a general sense of change and uncertainty regarding the era’s poetic landscape. In Henry James’ 1888 novella The Aspern Papers, Juliana Bordereau tells the narrator, “There’s no more poetry in the world—that I know of at least,” a sentiment shared, ironically, by many late-nineteenth-century poets (48). Robinson’s 1896 poem “Sonnet,” for example, rather harmoniously resonates with Stedman’s twilight interval:

Oh for a poet—for a beacon bright
To rift this changeless glimmer of dead gray;
To spirit back the Muses, long astray,
And flush Parnassus with a newer light;
To put these little sonnet-men to flight
Who fashion, in a shrewd mechanic way,
Songs without souls, that flicker for a day,
To vanish in irrevocable night.

What does it mean, this barren age of ours?
Here are the men, the women, and the flowers.
The seasons, and the sunset, as before.
What does it mean? Shall there not one arise
To wrench one banner from the western skies,
And mark it with his name forevermore?

Robinson’s evocation of a “barren age” and of “songs without souls” was echoed three years later in Dunbar’s poem “Prometheus”:

We have no singers like the ones whose note
Gave challenge to the noblest warbler’s song.
We have no voice so mellow, sweet, and strong
As that which broke from Shelley’s golden throat.
The measure of our songs is our desires:
We tinkle where old poets used to storm.
We lack their substance tho’ we keep their form:
We strum our banjo-strings and call them lyres. (13-20)

Though both of these poems were published in the last years of the nineteenth century, they refer to a poetic culture that has been enfeebled for some time: Robinson explains that the Muses have been “long astray,” and Dunbar intimates that no true poet has emerged since Shelley, who died in 1822.

In diagnosing the reasons for the twilight interval, Stedman develops several hypotheses. The mass casualties of the Civil War, he speculates, deprived the country of great poets and countless passionate poetry admirers; the age has become scientific, and an imaginative and aesthetic art like poetry no longer complies with the American world view; the country devotes its energies to economics, and in the Gilded Age material advancement dominates the concerns of most people. In addition to these anti-poetic forces, Stedman also considers the rise and the popularity of prose fiction, particularly the realist novel. Claiming that imaginative men and women of literature who at one time would have been poets are now pursuing careers as romancers and novelists, Stedman writes in Poets of America:

[Americans] crave the sensations of mature and cosmopolitan experience, and are bent upon what we are told is the proper study of mankind. The rise of our novelists was the answer to this craving; they depict Life as it is, though rarely as yet in its intenser phases. Those who, besides meeting Mr. James’s requirement that “the mind of the producer shall be displayed,” do reflect life in something more than a commonplace aspect are the chroniclers, chiefly, of provincial episodes, confined to sections so narrow that it is scarcely needful to linger in them throughout the narrative of a sustained work. (464)
Stedman argues that American readers no longer craved old-style romantic poems and myths, nor the kind of poetry as artifice that he saw as so prevalent in the 1880s. Instead, Americans demanded a poetry more in tune with their actual “Life,” that was, like novels, more realistic. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, a well-known genteel poet but not one who belongs in the dramatic poetic tradition, recognized the same trend in his 1884 poem “Realism”:

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Romance beside his unstrung lute
Lies stricken mute.
The old-time fire, the antique grace,
You will not find them anywhere.
To-day we breathe a commonplace,
Polemic, scientific air:
We strip Illusion of her veil;
We vivisect the nightingale
To probe the secret of his note.
The Muse in alien ways remote
Goes wandering.
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Though Aldrich suggests no poetic response to the ascendancy of realism, Stedman advises poets to turn to one kind of poetry in particular—dramatic poetry. Stedman continues:

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Individuals, men and women, various and real, must be set before us in being and action,—above all, in that mutual play upon one another’s destinies which results from what we term the dramatic purport of life. Thus rising above mere introspection and analysis, poetry must be not so much a criticism as the objective portrayal and illumination of life itself—and that not only along the uneventful, quiescent flow of rural existence, but upon the tides of circumstance where men are striving for intense sensations and continuous development. In other words, the time has come for poetry, in any form, that shall be essentially dramatic. . . . I think that our future efforts will result in dramatic verse, and even in actual dramas for both the closet and the stage.
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Ostensibly able to depict real characters and real action more accurately than either lyric or narrative poetry, dramatic verse and poetic dramas are for Stedman the poet’s reply to prose fiction realism. Stedman’s correlation of dramatic verse with a realist ethos appears to have had some lasting validity. For example, Bennett terms Piatt’s overarching aesthetic “the poetics of dramatic realism,” arguing that in her mature dramatic poetry “Piatt moves toward a species of dramatic realism or realist dialogue that effectively strips away both her juvenilia’s romantic excess and the idealism of the genteel style itself, grounding her poems, as [her husband] puts it, in the ‘expression of life’ instead” (Palace-Burner xxxiv). These dramatic poems, she continues, “plunge into the ‘real,’ carving out political vision in poem after poem dedicated to the everyday dramas of family and social life and the life of the nation” (Palace-Burner xxxiii). Whereas Bennett identifies setting and dialogue as manifestations of a realist impulse, other critics have linked the characterization and colloquial speech of dramatic monologue speakers with realism. Harold K. Bush, Jr., for instance, argues that Riley’s control of Midwestern dialect and his skill in creating believable characters, combined with his ability to transform into these characters on the stage, were important contributions to Twain’s own theories of performance and, consequently, to the development of American realism. Bush writes, “Riley . . . was in the right place at the right time due to his mastery of the skill of ‘absorbing’ his personas. As such, he should also be recognized as one of the contemporary leaders in the movement toward the realization of the Real in American literary culture” (43). Indeed, Riley’s Hoosier poetry routinely is associated with an important subset of realist fiction, the local color movement, as are Dunbar’s monologues in African-American dialect.
It is not a fundamental claim of this dissertation that dramatic poetics is the verse equivalent of prose realism. However, the relationship between the two literary genres will animate several of my chapters, particularly those covering Henderson and Melville. The importance of dramatic poetics as a potential response to realism is that it counters genre-exclusive accounts both of the realist movement and of the late nineteenth century. Emphasizing the cross-fertilization of realism suggests that much more was going on in the literary world of the postbellum era than just the development of the realist novel and the local color tale, and it indicates that, contrary to traditional critical opinion, poetry was a primary site for exploring and working out the period’s defining literary issues. More generally, however, I would argue that the rise of realism, and of prose fiction in general, was just one of many professional and cultural factors to which postbellum poets reacted through the use of dramatic poetics. In addition to negotiating their status in an age supposedly dominated by prose writers, postbellum poets turned to dramatic modes to explore how to perform a wide range of poetic roles within their society. Ultimately, the body of postbellum dramatic poems constitutes a series of poetic performances that illuminate the specific terms in which individual poets conceptualized their authorial identities and functions. These performances reveal the kinds of authorship poets practiced, from professional to amateur, national to local writing; the kinds of audiences they imagined, from periodical readers to a self-selected coterie readership; and the kinds of political and cultural work their poetry pursued, from healing the nation after the Civil War to demystifying racial stereotypes. Through a consideration of these poetic performances, then, we can delineate not only the specific authorial projects of individual poets, but, taken as a whole, the various roles of poetry in the postbellum period.
Each of the individual chapters of my dissertation is organized around a major poet who employs dramatic poetics to construct and perform one of the prevailing poetic roles of the period. While I do not devote chapters to either Riley or Dunbar, they figure prominently in my discussions of other poets. Given their status as two of the most successful and popular writers of the era, I have chosen to demonstrate how their respective poetics illuminate the work of authors whose verse is either little known or little understood. I also do not include Dickinson in the dramatic poetic tradition. Dickinson, of course, has been a central figure in American poetic histories. Typically, scholarship presents her as a hermetic poet who was unconcerned with her social context and who rejected her literary culture.13 In my account, Sarah Piatt represents a contrary case as a professional woman writer who was well-known in her day and who published extensively in magazines. Much more than Dickinson, Piatt is amenable to my dual interests of offering a new historical analysis of postbellum poetic culture and of providing an alternative narrative of American poetic history.

Chapter 1 offers a new perspective on Whitman’s career by situating him within a postbellum, rather than antebellum, literary tradition. It argues that Whitman uses dramatic poetics in *Drum-Taps* and its *Sequel* to enact the role of the national poet during the Civil War. Though Whitman’s self-conscious identification as a national poet is almost universally acknowledged, the dramatic forms of his war poems have received minimal attention. I show that, in dramatic dialogues such as “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” and “The Centenarian’s Story,” Whitman performs an interpretation of the war to effectively train readers in his ideological perspective of the war’s meaning. I also contend that Whitman experiments with the dramatic monologue form in poems like “By
the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” and “The Veteran’s Vision.” In these pieces, he invites readers to reproduce this ideological interpretation, thereby creating a readership “drilled” in the Union cause. Whereas Whitman channeled his energies mostly into book publication, other postbellum poets published much of their work initially in periodical venues. Chapter 2 explores how Piatt employs dramatic poetics to perform the role of the periodical poet. Though critics like Perkins have recognized the importance of magazine publishing for postbellum poets, they have typically dismissed magazine verse as minor, derivative, and blatantly conventional. In Chapter 2, however, I demonstrate that Piatt responded to the rhetorical challenges of writing for the broad, national periodical audience by creating a strategic, complex, and multifunctional aesthetic. Drama is essential to this aesthetic in two ways: first, the theater provides Piatt with a model for a profoundly public and popular art, appropriate for the very public venue of the magazine; and second, like many nineteenth-century theatrical performances, Piatt presents in her dramatic poems a heterogeneous aesthetic that transgresses putative boundaries between “high” and “low” art. Piatt’s example suggests that periodical poetry was far more artistically nuanced than previous scholars have assumed.

While the first two chapters analyze poets who wrote for a national audience, the last two chapters consider poets who conceived of their authorship in more circumscribed terms. Chapter 3 looks at how Herman Melville experiments with dramatic poetics to perform the role of the coterie author. In the late nineteenth century, many writers, often amateurs, circulated their work to a small group of friends, neighbors, and family. Most critics have regarded Melville’s John Marr and Timoleon collections, both self-published in editions of twenty-five copies that Melville presented as gifts, as evidence of the
writer’s withdrawal from his literary culture. By exposing how this type of coterie authorship was common in the postbellum era, however, I contend that Melville balanced the private and public dimensions of his writing. In the dramatic monologues of John Marr, Melville performs the terms of his coterie authorship in his representation of the close-knit sailing community. Using the popular language of sentimentality and writing nostalgic monologues that have many affinities to Riley’s poetry, Melville engages in his literary culture while imagining an intimate relationship with a small coterie of readers.

In Chapter 4 I concentrate on an author who conceptualized his coterie in expressly local terms. Until now, Elliott Blaine Henderson, an African-American from central Ohio, has been an almost completely unknown writer. I discuss Henderson as an illustrative example of the phenomenon at the turn of the century of the local poet. In his first book of poems, Plantation Echoes, Henderson uses dramatic poetics to perform his role as a local poet. More specifically, Henderson explores the relationship between the local color dimensions of plantation literature and his immediate local context. Henderson’s dramatic poems complexly destabilize essentialist notions of African-American identity, exposing the character of the plantation slave, who was popular at the time both in plantation literature and on the minstrel stage, as a performative stereotype. Henderson’s work suggests that this stereotype disconnects African-Americans from occupying a legitimate place within their local environment. Finally, my Coda meditates on the relationship between the dramatic poetic tradition and modernism, showing that, in their dramatic impulse, the modernists share an important connection with their postbellum predecessors, despite their frequent claims of revolting against nineteenth-century Anglo-
American poetry. Thus I end by rethinking the common assertion that the modernist period represents a renaissance of American poetry.
NOTES

1 An example of an antebellum lyric and narrative poet who seems to have become interested in dramatic poetry during the postbellum period is Longfellow. *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, a series of monologues predicated on the model of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, was published in 1863. In 1865 he published the first volume of his translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. And in 1868 he brought out a full-fledged verse drama, *The New England Tragedies*.

2 In particular, theater flourished as an institution in the years immediately following the Civil War. As Randall Knoper states, “Between 1864 and 1870 . . . there was a 67 percent increase in the number of theaters in the country, and an 85 percent increase nationally in gross ticket receipts—all accelerated by population growth and the westward expansion enabled by railroads” (194). As the railroad infrastructure grew and solidified, “theatre in America,” Walter J. Meserve contends, “began to flourish in ways that had once been only in dreams” (127).

3 Local lyceums had been important institutions in American cities since the early nineteenth century, figuring importantly in the careers of American Renaissance writers like Emerson and Thoreau. Gentile argues, however, that by the 1850s the local lyceum gave way to the touring lecture system, where communities hosted seasonal programs of traveling speakers and performers rather than presenting only those who lived in their immediate vicinity. Gentile attributes this change to “the improvements in transportation, the growing desire for educational and cultural activities, and the antislavery movement” (19). The touring lecture system reached its apex with the various American reading tours of Charles Dickens from 1858 to 1870, which created a popular sensation unprecedented in American history. Yet the preponderance of the platform achieved arguably its greatest height from the 1870s to the early twentieth century with the founding and rapid rise of the Chautauqua movement. Begun in 1874 by John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller, the Chautauqua Assembly created a national program for promoting culture that emphasized relaxation and edification. The first chautauquas were permanent rural camps that advertised as vacation spots where busy Americans could enjoy bucolic repose but also could attend lectures, sermons, public readings, and classes all intended as a means of intellectual and spiritual refinement. The proliferation of chautauquas throughout the country was intrepid, as small towns and big cities alike from coast to coast followed the model of the Chautauqua Assembly. By the turn of the century, the permanent chautauquas were being supplemented by “tent chautauquas,” which traveled throughout the country. In its various manifestations the Chautauqua movement offered ample opportunities for a range of public performance. “As the nineteenth century came to its close,” Gentile writes, “the nation’s authors, poets, actors, elocutionists, and humorists sought the artistic fulfillment, fame, and financial rewards accorded to successful platform performers. By the end of the century, Americans could see a one-person show in any city or town that subscribed to a lyceum or built a Chautauqua” (64).
Dramatic reading was an essential component in the programs offered by most lyceum and Chautauqua circuits. Staying away from staging full-fledged theatrical productions, the organizers of these events preferred one-person shows. Thus Fanny Kemble achieved great renown in the mid-century as a reader and interpreter of Shakespearean monologues, to the point that Longfellow memorialized her skill in his poem “On Mrs. Kemble’s Readings from Shakespeare.” In the 1870s Charlotte Cushman rivaled the success Kemble had enjoyed with her own recitations, which were, like Kemble’s, heavily comprised of passages from Shakespeare. However, Cushman, according to Gentile, also read from “a host of other poets, including Browning, Tennyson, and Longfellow, as well as ‘a variety of humorous and dialect poems’” (34-35). Cushman helped pave the way for dialect poets like Carleton, Riley, and Dunbar, all of whom forged substantial reputations and earned considerable income on the lyceum and Chautauqua circuits, epitomizing what Paul H. Gray terms the phenomenon of the “poet-performer.” Other poets, including Whitman, Howells, Harte, Aldrich, and Holmes made less frequent but important appearances on the platform stage. And undoubtedly many others read verse in front of lyceum and Chautauqua audiences, whether it was their own or something more famous. As Sorby relates, for example, as Riley traversed the country his performances typically were prefaced by local poets who read their poems to packed auditoriums and lecture halls.

4 The period from 1850 to 1910 was characterized by a popular rhetoric movement which, according to Johnson, “campaign[ed] to make speaking eloquently and correctly every literate person’s ambition” and “strove to make the cultivation of rhetorical skills a priority in every office and in every parlor” (141). Johnson explains that this interest in rhetoric and oratory was instigated by the many public, civic, and familial events that encouraged speech-making and rhetorical performance. Central to the popular rhetorical movement was the notion that conversation and public speaking skills could best be developed through dramatic readings of classic literature, which improved both the performer’s and the audience’s rhetorical abilities while also providing them moral and intellectual refinement. Johnson traces the stress placed on dramatic readings of poems and selections from other kinds of literature in the popular rhetoric books, manuals, and anthologies that were so prevalent during this period. Gentile offers a succinct description of these readers:

Anthologies of declamatory literature, known as “readers” or “speakers,” dominated the teaching of reading. These books, filled with the great American orations . . . and literature emphasizes the oral/aural qualities (such as Longfellow’s “Psalm of Life” and Poe’s poem “The Raven”), could be found in schoolhouses and homes across the country. McGuffey Readers were preeminent among this class of textbooks in the nation’s schoolrooms for over seventy-five years after their initial publication in 1836. “It is sometimes forgotten,” writes Boorstin in his discussion of American oratory, “that these books, out of which generations of American schoolchildren learned to read, aimed to teach boys and girls how to read aloud.” (9)
According to Johnson, readers like these made rhetoric and elocution a part of everyday middle-class American life: “By stressing that the dramatic reading of a poem or essay at a backyard picnic was just as likely a means of practicing and acquiring forceful powers of expression as the giving of formal lectures and orations, the popular elocution movement made rhetorical training relevant to a whole group of people for whom formal training in oratory was irrelevant or impractical” (157).

5 Other important scenes of performance and dramatic reading during the postbellum era were the literary clubs and the parlor. Local literary clubs and societies prospered in the postbellum period. In her analysis of the Browning societies, Greer provides a broader discussion of the phenomenon of the literary club in late-nineteenth-century America:

In the 1870s and 80s [literary clubs and reading circles of various kinds were already scattered over the country, their members meeting for purposes of mutual enlightenment and pleasure. The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, founded in 1878 as an off-shoot of the Chautauqua Assembly, was directing an ambitious program for home study—a four-year plan leading to a certificate, with further provision for post-graduate work—“carried on,” according to the Encyclopedia Americana, “in connection with local reading circles.” Its enrollment in 1883, according to an unofficial report, was 36,800. No village or country community was too small or remote to have a reading circle of some kind; and women, enjoying more leisure than formerly, were laying the foundations of the women’s clubs of today. (163-64)

In a small town like Springfield, Ohio, for example, there were several literary and intellectual clubs from 1870 to the early 1900s, including the Woman’s Club, the Men’s Literary Club, and the Young Men’s Literary Club. Though he published A Standard History of Springfield and Clark County, Ohio in 1922, Benjamin F. Prince, an esteemed member of the Springfield community for decades, claims that his was the age “of organization” and of communities that were “‘clubbed’ to death” (520). The Browning clubs and societies are perhaps the most visible example of the impulse among postbellum Americans to form and participate in local literary groups. Many of these clubs seemingly sprang up overnight. Greer documents how after a few of Levi Lincoln Thaxter’s public readings of Browning in Philadelphia in the early 80s, “he aroused so much enthusiasm that a Browning club was formed and there was such a demand for Browning that libraries and bookstores had to order fresh copies from other cities to supply the demand” (165). Similarly, Professor Hiram Colson of Cornell University provided lectures on and readings of Browning in Syracuse and Baltimore, which resulted in the immediate formation of Browning clubs in both of these cities (167). Despite being led by distinguished academics such as Colson, the Browning societies were not composed entirely of the intellectual elite. Rather, they attracted a “representative cross-section of American society,” becoming so popular, according to Greer, that they were attended for a time by fashionable and trendy young men and women who really had no interest in Browning at all (170-73). Although Browning societies devoted much of their time and effort to dissecting the meaning of Browning’s
philosophical and metaphysical allusions, they also, of course, performed the poems aloud and with passion. Colson, for instance, spent a full two years with one local Browning group reading *The Ring and the Book* in its entirety. And one is reminded of Stedman’s 1892 declaration that the “hum of readers” “go[es] up from every village” as everyday Americans devoted nights to the communal study of poetry.

American performance and literary culture was not confined solely to designated public venues and organizations, however. Indeed, one of the more fascinating and complex facets of nineteenth-century middle-class American life was the domestic parlor. Katherine C. Grier’s *Culture & Comfort: Parlor Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850-1930* (1988) contends that the parlor functioned as a “comfortable theater” for nineteenth-century Americans, serving the dual purpose of an intimate living room for the family and a space of self-presentation for the family’s audience of guests. The parlor, though, was more than just a metaphorical theatrical space; many families, particularly children, entertained themselves and friends and neighbors by transforming their parlors into domestic theaters and putting on highly elaborate stage presentations. Robert Lewis describes how these performances commonly were comprised of classic plays and tableaux and often reflected a substantial level of production value. They were announced formally with fliers, included intricate homemade and store-bought set designs, and required several full costume dress rehearsals (53). On other occasions they were not as carefully planned and included less serious forms of entertainment such as puppet shows and toy theaters. Perhaps the most obvious and revealing literary example of the parlor theatrical are the performances enacted by the March girls in Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868). Their example attests to the level of passionate enthusiasm many Americans brought to these domestic productions. As Florence C. Smith asserts, “Giving performances before an audience of family and friends was an important part of socializing for Americans in the last half of the nineteenth century. Amateur performances might be impromptu or carefully planned, and they took many forms” (1).

In addition to various kinds of plays and skits, the theatrical space of the parlor was also a primary site for family and communal readings of literature. Several scholars have posited that parlor readings were important family and neighborhood events. Kenneth M. Price’s and Susan Belasco Smith’s *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America* (1995) proposes, for instance, that “the tradition of ‘parlour literature’ in the nineteenth-century—the practice of reading for informal gatherings of family and friends—made books and especially periodicals a central source of entertainment in the home. The works of British and American fiction and poetry in the periodicals . . . were a staple of such evenings” (7). Similarly, Grier explains that a “a common genre of print” illustration in the nineteenth century “depicted families praying or reading together around a parlor center table” (12). And Gentile argues:

*The Victorian interest in literature extended beyond solitary silent reading. Home reading-aloud circles were common family events. Children would gather together at the family hearth to hear father or mother read aloud from David Copperfield or “Rip Van Winkle.” So universal was this practice that authors felt compelled to write texts appropriate for family consumption and were restricted from explicit handling of adult themes; a*
nove read aloud in the home had to be pure enough for a young girl’s ears. Platform readings by authors and elocutionists were, therefore, fully accepted as wholesome entertainment; they represented nothing less than the professional extension of a favorite family activity. Celebrity readers, in turn, through the glamour of their public appearances on the platform, lent a prestige and heightened credibility to home oral readings and schoolroom elocution lessons. Reading aloud, to use Philip Collins apt phrase, was truly “a Victorian métier.” (8)

6 Melville provides a possible exception to this public impulse. As we will see in Chapter 3, Melville’s poetry presents a complicated interrogation of the public and private nature of poetry.

7 The “twilight interval” might seem to contradict Stedman’s statement about the plethora of poetry written and read in the postbellum era. Yet these claims are for him mutually reinforcing. Stedman asserts that poetry in this period was produced at an unprecedented rate, yet almost none of it was a major achievement.


9 Bercovitch and the other editors appear to be sincere in their efforts to address a range of nineteenth-century poets, but based on the advertisement they seem to have perpetuated the notion of the “twilight interval.”

10 My argument here is similar to Joanne Dobson’s proposal for reclaiming sentimentality as a literary discourse. Dobson writes that “Only by understanding how this body of work [mid-nineteenth-century sentimental literature] constructs the literary can we read individual texts as agents operating within a literary field rather than merely as cultural artifacts” (263). Countering the dominant trend among literary critics to read sentimental writing only from culturalist or historicist perspectives, Dobson suggests that we must interrogate how these texts operated aesthetically in order to fully appreciate and understand the kinds of “cultural work” they performed. In a similar way, my focus on dramatic poetics bridges aesthetics with history. In her early and important study of nineteenth-century women’s poetry, The Nightingale’s Burden: Women Poets and American Culture Before 1900 (1982), Cheryl Walker contends that in terms of aesthetics most nineteenth-century women’s poems are essentially irrelevant, with their only value inhering in their status as historical documents that convey information about “women’s lives”:
So what is the value of this poetry? As an indication of what women may have felt, it is an invaluable resource . . . Read as poetry, the lack of compression, of originality, the rareness of fresh insight or humor in women’s poems are disturbing. On the whole, this body of work defies reassessment. The critical standards it invokes are so invariably those of its own time that one feels anachronistic in applauding or condemning it. These poems are not alive to the possibility of contemporary renewals: their language is too stilted, their convictions too predictable, their rhythms too monotonous. (58)

My project challenges an argument like Walker’s precisely by embedding poetic practice within its historical moment. Instead of dismissing nineteenth-century aesthetics on the basis of contemporary or universal standards of value, it seeks to understand the aesthetic principles at work in postbellum culture and interrogate how specific poets used and manipulated them.

11 George Santayana, for one, claims that Browning, “with his historico-dramatic obsessions,” was one of the “seductive”—and, in Santayana’s eyes, negative— influences on late-nineteenth-century American poetry (76).

12 I am indebted here to my discussions with Elizabeth Renker, who first introduced me to the connections between poetry and literary realism. See her essay, “‘I looked again and saw:’ Teaching Postbellum Realist Poetry” in the forthcoming MLA Options for Teaching volume on nineteenth-century American poetry.

13 See, for example, Pearce’s account of Dickinson as the most purely private, individual, and egotistical poet of the nineteenth century (174-86).
CHAPTER 1

WHITMAN’S “MANY-THREADED DRAMA”

In 1893, one year after Walt Whitman’s death, John James Piatt published a memorial poem entitled “To Walt Whitman, the Man.” Set in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War, the poem details an encounter between the two poets as Whitman was coming home from a Union army hospital. The poem ends by declaring Whitman the personification of charity, praising him for his selfless devotion to the soldiers. In its entirety, the poem reads:

Homeward, last midnight, in the car we met,
While the long street streamed by us in the dark
With scattered lights in blurs of misty rain;
Then, while you spoke to me of hospitals
That know your visits, and of wounded men
(From those dread battles yonder in the South)
Who keep the memory of your form and feel
A light forerun your face where’er it comes,
In places hushed with fever, thrilled with pain,
I thought of Charity, and self-communed:
“Not only a slight girl, as poets dream,
With gentle footsteps stealing forth alone,
Veiling her hand from soft timid eyes
Lest they should see her self-forgetful alms,
Or moving, lamp in hand, through glimmering wards
With her nun’s coif or nurse’s sacred garb:
Not only this,—but oft a sunburnt man,
Grey-garmented, grey-bearded, gigantesque,
Walking the highway with a cheerful stride,
And, like that Good Samaritan (rather say
This Good American!), forgetting not

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To lift the hurt one as a little child
And make the weakest strong with manly cheer,
On Red-Cross errands of Good-Comradeship.”

Both an elegy and an encomium, Piatt’s poem is also a kind of verse epistle. Like a letter it is addressed directly “To Walt Whitman, the Man,” and its content is manifestly personal, communicating Piatt’s internal musings regarding Whitman the unsung war nurse rather than Whitman the controversial poet.

Indeed, Piatt’s poem complements a far more famous letter to Whitman, Emerson’s 1855 correspondence marking the arrival of *Leaves of Grass*. While Emerson’s letter is prospective and “greet[s]” Whitman “at the beginning of a great career,” Piatt’s letter is retrospective and takes stock of Whitman a year after his career had ended. Whereas Emerson’s letter endorsed the first edition of *Leaves* —to the point that Whitman used it without Emerson’s permission to advertise the second edition— Piatt’s letter posthumously monumentalizes Whitman by valorizing his Civil War heroism. And just as Emerson’s letter reveals connections between Whitman and his immediate literary predecessors, Piatt’s letter suggests associations between Whitman and his literary successors. Yet in spite of what these letters reveal about Whitman’s career, Emerson’s has endured as the stuff of literary legend, a signal incident not only in Whitman’s professional life but in American literary history, while Piatt’s has faded into obscurity. In part this difference is due to Emerson’s standing as an American cultural icon as opposed to Piatt’s status as a minor genteel poet. More significantly, however, it is indicative of the tendency in Whitman criticism to privilege Whitman’s early career and antebellum literary relations over his later career and postbellum literary connections. Despite the fact that Whitman did not begin publishing *Leaves* until 1855, and despite the
fact that his career spanned almost thirty years after the Civil War, the majority of Whitman scholarship deals with his relationship with American Renaissance writers and embeds him in the cultural milieu of the antebellum United States. In comparison, far less attention has been given to how this major author figured in the literary culture of the postbellum years or to his artistic associations with the generation of poets that emerged after the Civil War.¹

This chapter offers one constructive approach for situating Whitman within postbellum poetic culture. In his collection of prose memoranda, Specimen Days, Whitman refers to the war as “that many-threaded drama,” an expression that aptly describes the artistic direction he takes in his Civil War poetry (117).² In 1865’s Drum-Taps and 1866’s Sequel to Drum-Taps, drama is a vital component of Whitman’s efforts to poeticize the war. Throughout these collections, he experiments with a type of dramatic verse unprecedented in the first three editions of Leaves of Grass. “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” and “The Centenarian’s Story” are both structured as mini-dramas: here Whitman eschews his signature, all-inclusive lyric “I”—the first-person speaker who enfolds all voices into his own—and divides the poems into the speaking parts of various discernible characters. Additionally, poems like “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” “The Veteran’s Vision,” and “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown,” can and should be classified as dramatic monologues. If these dramatic poems mark a departure from Whitman’s pre-war aesthetic, they serve to ally Whitman more closely with his postwar peers. In adopting the techniques of the drama, Whitman participates in the tradition of dramatic and performative poetry that emerged and enjoyed widespread currency during the postbellum years.³
Though many critics have noted and interrogated the performative dimensions of Whitman’s early poetry, they have generally ignored the more overtly theatrical elements of the war poems. Yet Whitman’s dramatic techniques are, in fact, integral to articulating and fulfilling his project in the war verse. In these poems Whitman portrays himself as the national poet, what Kenneth M. Price terms “an unofficial poet laureate” (71). Throughout the nineteenth century, of course, critics from Fisher Ames to Emerson to E. C. Stedman called for the emergence of the truly national poet, a role that various poets aspired to, beginning with Barlow and Freneau and extending to Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow, and Riley. It is in the mid-to-late nineteenth century that Bryant, Longfellow, and Riley became American cultural icons, having their birthdays celebrated in schools and their names attached to public parks and buildings. Whitman always had fashioned himself as the poet of America, famously asserting at the conclusion of his 1855 Preface that “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (Leaves 729). In the dramatic poems of Drum-Taps and the Sequel, he interrogates the role of the national poet during the fratricidal conflict that threatened the very existence of the nation. In these poems Whitman performs the terms of his authorship: he presents himself as a Union backer who embraces the war as a necessary purifying agent for America and who envisions the country arising successfully from the ashes of the battlefield. Through his creation and deployment of the poet-character, Whitman offers a script for making sense of the war within the context of democratic ideology and the historical evolution of America.  

4  As I will argue in more detail, this script provides the reader with a hermeneutic framework for understanding the dramatic monologue poems, which are devoid of the poet-character and his interpretive
commentary. Ultimately, then, the drama functions for Whitman as a public platform on which, as the national poet, he can inculcate readers in the proper ideological and teleological methods for grasping the war’s meaning.

I. Theater and the Dramatic Form

Whitman’s interest in the theater spanned throughout most of his life. In his last years he reminisced to Horace Traubel, “I spent much of my time in the theatres then—much of it—going everywhere, seeing everything, high, low, middling—absorbing theatres at every pore. That was a long, long time ago—seems back somewhere in another world. In my boyhood—say from nineteen on to twenty-six or seven” (1: 455). In Specimen Days, Whitman maintains that all of this time at the plays and opera “had a good deal to do with the business” of the formative years of his youth and of the “gestation of Leaves of Grass” [sic] (19). David S. Reynolds has documented Whitman’s idolization of the Shakespearean actor Junius Brutus Booth, citing his rhapsodic memories of the actor’s portrayal of Richard III. And Whitman famously recalled to Traubel his memories of “spouting” out passages from plays on the streets and coaches of Broadway. Indeed, Whitman was more of a devotee than a casual fan of the theaters, deeply interested in the art of acting and performance. In one conversation with Traubel, he remarked, “I have always had a good deal to do with actors: met many, high and low. . . I have always had one question for actors. . . . How is it that whatever the conditions . . . they can turn their backs on the common life, away from distractions, and engage in the new role at once [?]” Traubel continues, “He ‘felt that none of the actors had ever been able to explain.’ [Whitman said,] ‘I suppose that’s the art: that’s the secret of the
profession” (1: 519). Even in his last few years after he had ceased attending plays, Whitman followed the happenings of the theaters by reading the *Stage*, the one periodical, according to Traubel, that he found pleasure in perusing regularly (1: 516).

Reynolds speculates that Whitman was attracted to the theater in part because it confirmed for him the role art could play in American democracy. The theatrical performances Whitman attended would have been marked by profound social and class heterogeneity, as theaters in the nineteenth-century typically included patrons representing a broad spectrum of occupations and social positions. According to Lawrence W. Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988), “All observers agree that the nineteenth-century theater housed under one roof a microcosm of American society” (25). Far from sitting silently during the performance, this wide and diverse audience often participated in the spectacle of the evening’s production. Levine offers an evocative analogy to help current readers reimagine the theater of the time:

To envision nineteenth-century theater audiences correctly, one might do well to visit a contemporary sporting event in which the spectators not only are similarly heterogeneous but are also—in the manner of both the nineteenth century and the Elizabethan era—more than an audience; they are participants who can enter into the action on the field, who feel a sense of immediacy and at times even of control, who articulate their opinions and feelings vocally and unmistakably. (26)

Nineteenth-century audiences commonly yelled, booed, threw food, broke out into spontaneous choruses, talked back to the actors, and repeated memorized lines along with the actors. Reynolds posits that this dynamic interplay between the audience and actors was “By far the most important aspect of the theater experience for Whitman” because it “reinforced his notion of the relationship between the artist and the people in a democracy” (157). The theater, that is, symbolized an egalitarian space where artist and
audience could exist in an ideal symbiotic relationship. For Whitman, it exemplified a truly democratic art form in that it successfully facilitated the contributions of every kind of American: not only could the heterogeneous audience members interact with one another, but they could all participate in the overall experience of the play, just as, in theory, American democracy permitted them to take part in the machinations of the body politic.

Critics have long recognized the centrality of theater and drama in Whitman’s own aesthetic, but typically they have confined their discussions to the antebellum verse. In addition, they have measured the drama’s importance for Whitman not in concrete formal terms—that is, as a genre with specific conventions that he directly adopts into his verse—but as a general influence on the approach and posture of his lyric “I.” For example, Gay Wilson Allen and Charles T. Davis, and later Howard J. Waskow, have labeled many of Whitman’s most familiar lyric poems “monodramas,” including “Song of Myself,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and “The Sleepers.” Waskow’s Whitman: Explorations in Form (1966) explains that the monodrama presents an “‘actor,’ a speaker involved at the present time in an action, not describing an action and giving us guides into it, like a narrator, but actually going through the action” (139). The monodrama privileges process over conclusion and organic performance over mimetic representation, putting into motion the speaker’s internal struggle rather than simply stating it. James E. Miller, Jr.’s A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass (1957) deploys similar language to sketch what he calls Whitman’s “dramatic structure”: “[Whitman’s] poems are plays; he is the protagonist. These ‘plays,’ like those of the stage, have as their parts a number of ‘acts’ created out of an unfolding action. . . . Whitman was not stating philosophical
truths so much as he was dramatizing himself and his life of the imagination” (4). Miller, Allen, Davis, and Waskow all build off of Whitman’s own characterization of his authorial project, which he articulated in a letter to William O’Connor on 7 October 1882: “I have dashed at the greater drama going on within myself & every human being—that is what I have been after—” (Correspondence 3: 307). Recent critics have continued to isolate drama and performance as important concepts in the political and aesthetic agendas of Whitman’s antebellum lyrics. Kerry C. Larson’s Whitman’s Drama of Consensus (1988) proposes that Whitman sought consensus with his readers and for his country in the first three editions of Leaves by approaching the page as a dynamic, performative space rather than bounded finished product. “By placing his auditors at the center stage of his verse,” Larson writes, “Whitman hopes to bring forward and actualize the movement from isolated individuality to affirmed unanimity” (6). Similarly, Alan L. Ackerman, Jr.’s The Portable Theater (1999) argues that Whitman’s antebellum poetry is deeply theatrical in that it works to develop, through performance, a persona of the “American character” that could facilitate collective experience and communal identification (88). For all of these critics, then, Whitman’s early verse functions as a metaphorical stage on which he dramatizes the interplay between the “simple, separate person” and the “multitudes” of American democracy.

Given that drama, performance, and theatricality have endured as key terms in Whitman criticism, it is striking that comparatively little has been said about the explicit dramatic form of various poems in Drum-Taps and its Sequel. In poems like “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” “The Centenarian’s Story,” and “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” the dramatic and performative posture of the early lyric poems becomes a self-
conscious and concrete \textit{formal reality}: these poems are either poetic dramas that include multiple characters engaged in dialogue or Whitman’s renderings of the dramatic monologue. “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” is the most obviously dramatic poem in the collections. Unlike the first-person lyric that appears in almost all of Whitman’s verse, this poem represents a dialogue between four characters: the Child, the Father, the Banner and Pennant, and the Poet. As in a drama, the speakers’ names are capitalized, and their speeches are set apart from the other characters’, with their names used to delineate when they are speaking. Two other poems approximate the dramatic structure of “Song.” “The Centenarian’s Story” is constructed around the dialogue between the poet and the Centenarian, and “The Dresser” presents the interaction between the poet and a group of children. Meanwhile, “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” “The Veteran’s Vision,” “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night,” and “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown” are all dramatic monologues.

That Whitman wrote dramatic monologues is a claim requiring some clarification. The speaker in the traditional dramatic monologue is marked as a specific character and not the universal or authorial “I” of the lyric poem. Fittingly, Whitman’s war monologues express the thoughts of different imagined characters from the war front. In “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” for example, the speaker is definitely someone at an army camp, presumably a soldier, and not Whitman himself, who spent his time in Washington area hospitals. True, at times the speaker’s voice differs little from the usual voice of the Whitman “I,” and this similarity limits the dramatic quality of the poem. Whitman’s dramatic monologues run the gamut from the very loose dramatic element of this poem and “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” to the more recognizable
dramatic element of “The Veteran’s Vision,” which I will discuss in more detail later. In fact, it could be argued that what I am calling “loose” dramatic monologues are not dramatic monologues at all, given that in all of his poetry Whitman assumes the identity of other people. For instance, in “Song of Myself” he writes, “I am the man . . . . I suffered . . . . I was there”; “I am the hounded slave”; “I am an old artillerist, and tell of some fort’s bombardment”; “I laughed content when I heard the voice of my little captain.” “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos” was, of course, never a slave, an artillerist, or a sailor; in this poem, he is trying to “merge” the different elements of his country into one representative American—namely, himself. In this sense, we might argue that Whitman’s early long poems offer a series of dramatic monologues that the main speaker slips in and out of so as to explore the connections between different American character types. This basic technique remains consistent in the war poems, but its overall effect is altered by a significant change in structure. When Whitman speaks as the slave in “Song of Myself,” he does so within the framework of a long poem that is meditating on the theme of identity. In a piece like “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” there is no accompanying framework. Taken as a unit by itself, the poem provides no evidence that it is really “Walt Whitman” speaking. Instead, we are meant to believe that the speaker of “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” is a soldier, at camp at night, even if intuitively he echoes Whitman’s “I” imagining himself in the soldier’s shoes. Put another way, in “Song of Myself” the identity of the “I” looks like a composite picture of all of the different identities Whitman can envision—he is everything and everyone at once. On the contrary, the “I” in the loose dramatic monologues of Drum-Taps represents one particular identity at one particular moment. Whitman wears one mask at
a time, even if the mask seems relatively transparent. The end result, I would argue, is that the expansive but clearly identifiable poetic personality that emerges in poems like “Song of Myself” and “The Sleepers” is somewhat deflated in the war poems. Here Whitman favors more discrete speaking personalities and, at least on the surface, a less cohesive authorial subjectivity.

Neither the dramatic dialogue nor the dramatic monologue form in the war poems has garnered much critical attention. The existing commentary on the aesthetic qualities of “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” for instance, is brief and mostly disparaging. Roger Asselineau writes, for example, that “the alternation imposed by the very form of the dialogue” in the poem “remains mechanical and rather rigid” (375). M. Wynn Thomas claims that the poem is “as poetically unsuccessful as it is morally unpleasant” (197). Burton Hatlen concurs, arguing that “Song” is a jumbled and disingenuous botch, a piece that disregards artistry in favor of overblown ideological rhetoric (200). More symptomatic of Whitman criticism is the total neglect of interest in the poem. As Hatlen correctly adduces, “the paucity of critical discussion on ‘Song of the Banner’ itself constitutes proof that the poem has generally been judged a failure” (207). Whitman’s use of the dramatic monologue has been subjected to a similar fate. Aside from occasional acknowledgements that a poem like “Vigil Strange” is a monologue, there are to my knowledge no extended discussions of Whitman’s investment in the form or of its implications in Drum-Taps. Through both dismissal and neglect, the issue of the drama has been elided in serious discussions of Whitman’s war aesthetic.
And yet, as Whitman’s prose writings indicate, he conceptualized the war in decidedly dramatic terms. For instance, the full passage from *Specimen Days* to which I have already alluded reads:

> The hospital part of the drama from ’61 to ’65, deserves indeed to be recorded. Of that many-threaded drama, with its sudden and strange surprises, its confounding of prophecies, its moments of despair, the dread of foreign interference, the interminable campaigns, the bloody battles, the mighty and cumbrous and green armies, the drafts and bounties—the immense money expenditure, like a heavy-pouring constant rain—with, over the whole land, the last three years of the struggle, an unending, universal mourning-wail of women, parents, orphans—the marrow of the tragedy concentrated in those Army Hospitals . . . those forming the untold and unwritten history of the war—infinitely greater (like life’s) than the few scraps and distortions that are ever told or written. (117-18)

At various other moments in *Specimen Days*, Whitman again refers to the war as a “tragedy;” he calls President Lincoln’s death a “tragic” “drama;” and he sketches the numerous indelible dramatic “scenes” that he encountered while working as a nurse. In light of the way Whitman repeatedly couches his account of the war in the language of the theater and the drama, it is not surprising that he makes extended and direct use of dramatic models in several of his war poems. To date, however, we have not fully recognized the contours and the implications of this formal choice—a choice that is critical for understanding Whitman’s sense of his authorial role in *Drum-Taps* as America’s national poet in a time of civil war.

The epistemological issue at the heart of *Drum-Taps* is to determine the overall meaning of the war, particularly in regards to its implications for the past and future of American democracy. As Whitman imagines it in the dramatic dialogue poems, the project of the “unofficial poet laureate” is precisely to make sense of the war’s traumatic violence and to articulate his understanding in clear and unequivocal terms for the
American people. *Drum-Taps* was printed in April and May of 1865, the two months that witnessed the end of the fighting, the assassination of Lincoln, and the first days of post-war reconstruction; it came out, that is, at the very moment when Americans were grappling with the immediate fallout of the war and beginning to ponder its ramifications for the future of their country. In “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” and “The Centenarian’s Story,” Whitman uses the dramatic form and the character of the poet to perform an interpretation of the war that redeems it as a painful but necessary part of America’s historical evolution.

II. “It is well—the lesson like that, always comes good”

Though it is the fourth poem of the collection, “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” could well be considered the proem of *Drum-Taps*. In it, Whitman objectifies himself in the character of the Poet. Through the Poet’s dramatic and dialogic interaction with the other characters, Whitman depicts what he considers to be the poet’s proper response to the war, setting the tone for the rest of the collection. The debate between the characters in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” is a sustained interrogation into the questions of whether the war deserves to be endorsed and what its ultimate significance is for America. After the opening prelude and a short invocation to the bard, the poem proper begins with a child looking up at the Banner and Pennant, which are, respectively, the American flag (the Star-Spangled Banner) and a war flag. That Whitman conflates these two emblems into one speaking character is suggestive, and it becomes the Child’s, the Father’s, the Poet’s, and the reader’s job to determine how they fit so closely together. The Child intuitively responds to the Banner’s and Pennant’s possible symbolic
resonance, but he needs their exact meaning to be explicated for him. He turns to his
father and asks, “Father, what is that in the sky beckoning to me with long finger? / And
what does it say to me all the while?” (5). In requesting that his father explain to him
what the Banner and Pennant “say,” the Child is asking for a literal transcription of their
meaning. But this is a weighty task for the Father because the Banner’s and Pennant’s
register is symbolic. To him, they are visual objects that are not speaking but are instead
noisily “flapping” in the wind. Any response the Father develops for the Child, then, is
only one possible interpretation of what they mean. And given their signification, his
response is also an interpretive reading of both the Civil War and of America itself.

Yet the Father patently rejects the interpretive challenge the Child bestows on
him, answering the Child:

Nothing, my babe, you see in the sky;
And nothing at all to you it says. But look you, my babe,
Look at these dazzling things in the houses, and see you the money-shops
opening;
And see you the vehicles preparing to crawl along the streets with goods;
These! ah, these! how valued and toil’d for, these!
How envied by all the earth! (6)

The Father wants to strip the Banner and Pennant of any semiotic meaning, and instead
deflect the Child’s attention to the surface attraction of the material goods around them—
the “dazzling things,” the “money-shops,” and the “vehicles.” The Father, as Michael
Moon proposes, “can only hear nonsense in the song of the Banner” and is incapable of
comprehending the nonverbal songs it puts forth (184). However, in refusing to consider
the Banner and Pennant in favor of looking at the commercial products, the Father still
provides a backhanded interpretation. When he tells the Child that these commodities are
“envied by all the earth,” he reveals that he sees America in fundamentally economic
terms. He identifies the country’s most salient feature as its capitalistic commercialism, and he attempts to indoctrinate his child in his beliefs. The Child, though, is not convinced by the Father and is not attracted by the commodities. He replies to the Father, “O my father, I like not the houses; / They will never to me be anything—nor do I like money; / But to mount up there I would like, O father dear—that banner I like” (14).

Although he rejects the Father’s reading, he can only vaguely assert that the Banner and Pennant represent something “wonderful,” “full of people.” The Child still needs someone to articulate an alternative reading that will explain to him his sense of the Banner’s and Pennant’s splendor.

The Poet’s role is to provide this reading. The Banner and Pennant ask him, “For what are we, mere strips of cloth, profiting nothing, / Only flapping in the wind?” (11). In direct response to the Father’s economic mindset, the Banner and Pennant challenge the Poet to define the true “profit” and “value” of the United States: does it reside in its material fecundity or in something else? The crucial difference between the Poet and the Father, however, is that the Poet’s interpretation is imbued with unquestionable validity. Unlike the Father and the Child, the Poet can hear the voice of the Banner and Pennant speaking intelligibly and directly to him. As a result, his reading of their semiotic signification becomes a literal retelling of what they say to him. The Poet is thus the national poet par excellence, actually expressing and disseminating the voice of America. Not surprisingly, his words are directed not only at the Child but at his fellow citizens as well. The Banner and Pennant tell him: “Speak to the child, O bard, out of Manhattan; / Speak to our children all, north or south . . . / Speak, O bard! point this day, leaving all the rest, to us over all” (11). The Poet’s job, then, is to make the visual imagery and
inchoate “flapping” of the Banner and Pennant comprehensible. As the Child and the reader listen to the Poet’s performance, they are being told how to understand both the Banner and Pennant and their corresponding signifiers, America and the war.

The question the Banner and Pennant pose to the Poet is one that reappears in various forms throughout much of Whitman’s writing, in particular Democratic Vistas (1876). Whitman begins the essay by acknowledging that America’s wealth and economic splendor should be a source of national pride:

> Not the least doubtful am I on any prospects of [America’s] material success. The triumphant future of [its] business, geographic and productive departments, on larger scales and more varieties than ever, is certain. In those respects the republic must soon (if she does not already) outstrip all examples hitherto afforded, and dominate the world. (363)

Throughout the text he repeats this assertion again and again, making sure the reader does not misinterpret him. Yet this material success comprises just one aspect of America’s self-definition. Conjoined with it, Whitman asserts, must be something less palpable but ultimately more important: “the true nationality of the States, the genuine union . . . is [not] . . . common pecuniary or material objects—but the fervid and tremendous IDEA, melting everything else with resistless heat” (368). As he reiterates throughout the essay—and, in fact, throughout his career—this “tremendous IDEA” is the “democratic republican principle” that he wants to cultivate in every American. Whitman’s firm convictions about the righteousness of American democracy stem from his earliest youth in a family committed to Jeffersonian and Jacksonian ideology, and continued unabated throughout his life. Democracy is for him the unifying core at the heart of America’s identity, so much so that, as he writes in Democratic Vistas, he “use[s] the words
America and democracy as controvertible terms” (363). For Whitman, the essence of America is democracy, liberty, and freedom, not capitalism or economic opulence.

Given Whitman’s political convictions, it is not surprising that the Banner and Pennant manage to lead the Poet to a similar conclusion. In them, the Poet eventually hears “Liberty” and perceives what he calls “an idea only.” Echoing the concept of the “tremendous IDEA” in Democratic Vistas, the “idea only” is undoubtedly the same “democratic republican principle.” And for the Poet, like Whitman, this principle does hold a higher value than economic gain. As he explains, the country’s material success cannot persist if its political ideals crumble: “Not houses of peace are you, nor any nor all their prosperity, (if need be, you shall have every one of those houses to destroy them; / You thought not to destroy those valuable houses, standing fast, full of comfort, built with money; / May they stand fast, then? Not an hour, unless you, above them and all, stand fast;)” (18). The “you” of this quote is not only the Banner and Pennant, but more specifically, the democratic ideals that “stand above” the material success of the country.

The Poet, then, understands the flag and America as the symbol and the manifestation of democratic principles, not capitalistic precepts. But still unresolved is whether the war is justified given his definition of America. In his (non)interpretation of the Banner and Pennant, the Father shuns the idea of war because it threatens to disrupt his pursuit of money and to destroy his commodities. He tells the Child that to embark on a course of war “is to gain nothing, but risk and defy everything” (15). He uses the word “gain” quite specifically as a reference to material profit. Seeing no prospects for economic advancement in the war, he wants nothing more than to maintain the status quo, which, as Moon claims, was serving Northern industrialists and merchants well in
the 1850s (184). The poem makes clear, though, that the Father’s pacifism is merely complacent. Indifferent to America’s overarching political value, he pushes for peace out of self-interest.

On the contrary, Whitman supported the war as a necessary corrective to the materialistic beliefs the Father embodies. This war hawk position results from his teleological understanding of American history. An advocate of the Hegelian dialectic, which he referred to as the “last best word that has been said,” he envisioned history as “unerringly tending and flowing” through a series of conflicts and resolutions towards a purposeful end, what he called “the permanent utile and morale” (Specimen Days 259). In America’s case, he defines this end as the final actualization of the Revolutionary principles of democracy and republicanism. Whitman elucidates this vision in Democratic Vistas, claiming that America will complete “the moral political speculations of ages, long, long deferr’d” by finally putting into place “the democratic republican principle” (362). Democratic Vistas, however, also expresses his anxiety that America’s evolution was being trivialized by the seduction and pursuit of material wealth. The essay launches scathing critiques against the corruption and avarice of politicians and industrialists during the Gilded Age. Indeed, Betsy Erkkila diagnoses the rupture between America’s political ideals and its economic fixation as one of the overriding concerns of Leaves of Grass: “Whitman struggled with the central paradox in the progressive ideology of the American republic, namely, that in the entrepreneurial, self-interested economy secured by the Constitution of 1787, the progress toward the future was becoming a progress away from the revolutionary ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence” (36). As Erkkila and others illustrate, Whitman continually seeks to
overcome this paradox by arguing that Americans reinvest themselves in the
“revolutionary ideals” above and beyond “self-interested economy.” Only with this
reinvestment would America realize its historical and democratic mission.

Whitman perceived the war as the event that would mobilize this rededication.
The war could resolve the country’s conflicts and further its progression. In “Origins of
Attempted Secession,” for example, he writes, “it is certain” that “by virtue of [the Civil
War],” the United States “are now ready to enter, and must certainly enter, upon their
genuine career in history” (433). For this reason he consistently casts the war not as a
battle between North and South, but as the ascendancy of democracy. Throughout Drum-
Taps he champions the war in the name of “Libertad,” of “The idea of all,” and, in the
words of “Years of the Unperform’d,” of Liberty, Law, and Freedom. No poem is more
explicit than “Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps.” Whitman writes, “How
DEMOCRACY, with desperate vengeful port strides on, shown through the dark by those
flashes of lightning! . . / Thunder on! stride on Democracy! strike with vengeful
stroke!” (30-33). And in his eyes, democracy was victorious. It is the “Victress on the
peaks” that, having battled its enemies, now “Towrest” “dominant” and “unharm’d” “in
immortal soundness and bloom” (1-6).

Echoing these beliefs, the Banner and Pennant in “Song” suggest that war is
justified to defend American democracy from being overwhelmed by economic pursuits.
They preach “terror and carnage” in the name of the democratic Union, in defense of the
“idea only.” Because the Poet agrees with them about the value of democratic ideals, he
is persuaded that the war is worth fighting, or as he puts it, worth “risking bloody death.”
The Poet leads the war charge with “limbs” and “veins” dilated: “Demons and death then
I sing; / Put in all, aye all, will I—sword-shaped pennant for war, and banner so broad and blue” (16). Furthermore, the Poet suggests that the war settles this conflict for good, paving the way for America’s historical progress. The Banner and Pennant imply this in their final monologues, saying first, “We, even we, from this day flaunt out masterful, high up above, / Not for the present alone, for a thousand years, chanting through you,” and then claiming that the war is “for ever, for all!” (13, 17). The Banner and Pennant speak with one voice, then, because their causes are inseparable: to believe in America’s special historical mission means to support the war unquestionably.

In the poetic-drama of “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” then, Whitman appropriates the dramatic form to perform his poetic role. As he conceives it, the poet is charged with the task of articulating the terms in which the war is justifiable and understandable, which for Whitman means rhapsodically promulgating the Union cause of sustaining American democracy. To this end, the Poet’s war fervor in “Song” is utterly amplified as he sings “demons and death.” Indeed, while the most famous portrait of Whitman during the war is that of the healing “wound-dresser,” in his poems he consistently equates the poet with the Union soldiers.8 “1861,” for example, describes the war poet as “a strong man, erect, clothed in blue clothes, advancing, carrying a rifle on [his] shoulder, / With well-gristled body and sunburnt face and hands—with a knife in the belt at [his] side” (4-5). In identifying the poet with the troops, Whitman differs significantly from other poets of the Civil War, most notably Herman Melville.9 Stanton Garner’s The Civil War World of Herman Melville (1993) claims that in Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (1866) Melville, too, sought to function as a poet laureate for the war-torn nation (445). But Melville envisioned his role in starkly different terms than
Whitman. Garner is correct that Melville’s war poems are far more emotionally detached than Whitman’s. In an almost journalistic fashion they document specific incidents and battles of the war, and they objectively penetrate, from every available angle, what these events mean. Melville’s poems are rarely jingoistic, typically skeptical, only occasionally subjective, and often elegiac. In contrast, Whitman’s verse is much more insistent about the poet stomping, soldier-like, for union and democracy rather than intellectually analyzing the significance of actual events during the war.

Whitman once again plays this part in another dramatic dialogue, “The Centenarian’s Story.” Here, even more than in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” he resoundingly trumpets the need for the war poet to understand and legitimate the war within a broad historical perspective. The main speaker of the poem, the poet, initiates a dialogue with the Centenarian who then delivers an extended monologue. Unlike most of Whitman’s early poetry, the poem is grounded in a particular time and a particular place, Washington Park, Brooklyn, in 1861. The opening speaker’s lines are framed as a direct address, but again, contrary to most of Whitman’s poetry, the “you” does not refer to the general reader but instead to a specific person, the “old Revolutionary.” The poem’s dramatic framework suggests a change in approach from Whitman’s early verse. The Centenarian’s monologue recalls a battle from the Revolutionary War. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman also includes a Revolutionary battle-scene. In that poem, however, Whitman’s “I” literally becomes one of the soldiers rather than conveying the scene through the memories of a character that was there: “Our foe was no skulk in his ship, I tell you, / . . . We closed with him . . . the yards entangled . . . the cannon touched, / My captain lashed fast with his own hands” (900-904). The soldier is one of the many
identities that the “I” of “Song of Myself” integrates within his own. In a much different manner, the “I” of “The Centenarian’s Story” does not incorporate the elder’s identity into himself but maintains his alterity instead, once more indicating that Whitman is more interested in the war poems in creating individuated dramatic characters than in producing one all-inclusive authorial identity.

Similar to the Poet in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” the poetic “I” of “The Centenarian’s Story” is confronted with a task of interpretation, in this case of the Centenarian’s monologue. As he says to the Centenarian at the end of his opening prelude, “You to speak in your turn, and I to listen and tell” (5). Again Whitman suggests that before he can write he must watch, listen, and interpret, just like the audience of a play or the reader of his poems. What the “I” hears manages to completely alter his understanding of the war. In his prelude, the “I” is walking hand-in-hand with the Centenarian, a Revolutionary War veteran, through a Union army drill in the early days of the Civil War. It is midsummer, the city is peaceful, the troops are joyous, and they are surrounded by crowds of friends and family. The whole atmosphere is bucolic, and the “I” is drawn into the congenial environment: “The troops are but drilling—they are yet surrounded with smiles; / Around them at hand, the well drest friends and the women; / While splendid and warm the afternoon sun shines down” (3). The irony of the scene, of course, is that the warfare for which the soldiers are preparing is anything but idyllic, an irony that utterly eludes the “I.” He ignorantly asks the Centenarian, “Why, what comes over you now, old man? / Why do you tremble, and clutch my hand so convulsively?” (3). Instigated by the queries of the “I,” the Centenarian launches into his long monologue.
The Centenarian’s story about the Revolutionary War battle de-romanticizes the cheery atmosphere of the Civil War troops drilling. As he recounts his memories of the scene, he remarks, “But O from the hills how the cannon were thinning and thinning them! / It sickens me yet, that slaughter! / . . . / That was the going out of the brigade of the youngest men, two thousand strong; / Few return’d—nearly all remain in Brooklyn” (15-19). The image of the “thinning and thinning” lines of men is haunting given that the green Civil War soldiers are, unbeknownst to them, about to encounter the same fate. But it also raises the troubling question of how a society that is supposed to safeguard the democratic rights of each individual can sanction their mass “slaughter.” What does it mean to launch a revolution in the name of “the people,” and then send many of those people to their graves?

The poet finds the answer to this question in the Centenarian’s speech, for the Centenarian does not end it with the violent images of battle. Rather, he redeems the violence by contextualizing it within the country’s political beliefs. According to the Centenarian, as the Revolutionary War troops “in darkness, in mist, on the ground, under a chill rain” lay throughout the night, “scornfully laugh’d many an arrogant lord, off against us encamp’d, / Quite within hearing, feasting, klinking wine-glasses together over their victory” (21). By including this portrait of the British soldiers, the Centenarian reminds us that the Revolutionary War was fought between the two competing political systems of democracy and aristocracy, the latter of which Whitman usually referred to in his prose as “feudalism.” If in the poem the lords embody feudalism, then the figure of General Washington symbolizes democracy. Washington becomes the epicenter and the hero of the poem, even though he has lost the battle:
Silent as a ghost, while they thought they were sure of him, my General retreated.

I saw him at the river-side,  
Down by the ferry, lit by torches, hastening the embarkation;  
My General waited till the soldiers and wounded were all pass’d over;  
And then, (it was just ere sunrise,) these eyes rested on him for the last time.

Every one else seem’d fill’d with gloom;  
Many no doubt thought of capitulation.

But when my General pass’d me,  
As he stood in his boat, and look’d toward the coming sun,  
I saw something different from capitulation.  (22-25)

As the reader knows, General Washington would soon be victorious, and democracy would soon prevail over the “arrogance” of feudalism. The Centenarian can justify mass deaths, then, by subsuming them within the victory of American democracy, which is concisely symbolized in the transcendent figure of Washington. By the end of his monologue, the Centenarian has obscured the images of the “slaughter” by glorifying the representative democratic man. Masses of citizens may die, but only to secure the autonomy of the American nation and the American individual, both of which are conflated in the figure of Washington.

When the Centenarian’s monologue concludes and the main speaker returns to the present scene, he is equipped with insight that enables him to view his surroundings and the war afresh. Because the Centenarian’s battle occurred on the same hill where the “I” now stands, he recognizes the indelible presence of Washington and the Revolutionary War soldiers within his immediate environment. All around him he sees the “camp of the dead brigade,” and he asks himself: “And is this the ground Washington trod?” (27). As a result of the Centenarian’s reminiscences, the poet now understands the Civil War as an
extension of the Revolutionary War. He remarks, “It is well—the lesson like that, always comes good” (28). The lesson he learns allows him to discern an entirely new body of meaning in what was once a familiar hill in Brooklyn. Suddenly, as he says, the “past and present, have interchanged” (26). This interchange in effect makes the Civil War troops brothers-in-arms with their Revolutionary forefathers. Both generations are fighting for the same cause—the protection of America’s fundamental political ideals. And just as it is descended from the Revolution, the Civil War in turn leads America towards its teleological end, bringing about America’s “great future.”

“The Centenarian’s Story” is indeed another lesson, but its basic political and historical message remains unchanged from the one the Poet received in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break.” Both poems offer a depiction of the war grounded in the same set of terms: democracy, the Hegelian dialectic, sacrifice, the recommitment of America to its political ideals, and the propulsion of America into the future. Like the Civil War troops at the beginning of “The Centenarian’s Story,” the poet-characters in both poems are “drilled” in the ideological logic of the Union cause; however, their drilling denotes educational training rather than military preparation. In this respect, these poems resonate with Whitman’s thoughts regarding the didacticism inherently required of the American artist, which he articulates in Democratic Vistas. He writes in the essay that “The purpose of democracy . . . is, . . . to illustrate, at all hazards, this doctrine or theory that man, properly train’d in sanest, highest freedom, may and must become a law, and series of laws, unto himself” (374-75). Whitman discards the idea that citizens are naturally responsible and virtuous enough for a democratic society to run smoothly. Here and elsewhere within the piece he insists that they must be “properly train’d” as good
citizens. This training is partially the obligation of a democratic government: “I say the mission of government, henceforth, in civilized lands, is . . . to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves” (379-80). The larger point of the essay, though, is that governmental institutions cannot accomplish this project of education by themselves. Whitman demands that distinctively American artists and writers join the cause. Calling for a new “cluster of mighty poets, artists, teachers,” he imagines a national literature “underlying life, religious, consistent with science, handling the elements and forces with competent power, teaching and training men” (372). Whitman considers teaching and training his readers in the ideals of American democracy to be a constitutive element of his role as the national poet.

Various critics have noted the rampant didacticism of Whitman’s war poetry. James Perrin Warren posits that from 1860 onward Whitman’s style becomes increasingly “programmatic,” meaning that the poems are far more declarative, “religious and didactic” than the early work (140). Hatlen’s entire argument is that Whitman’s war poems are “perfunctory” and “totalitarian” in that they quash the potential for difference and preach their ideological rhetoric with irrevocable authority (205). As useful and important as this scholarship is, it overlooks how the drama functions in Whitman’s didactic project. Given that Whitman saw the theater as a truly democratic and nationalist art form, and given that Whitman identifies one aspect of the national poet’s role as training his fellow citizens, it becomes clear that the “lesson[s]” the poet-characters learn in the dramatic dialogues are directed at Whitman’s fellow Americans as well. In other words, Whitman intends the poet-characters’ performances as models for his readers about how to understand the war. By dramatizing the process through which
the poet-characters come to terms with the war, Whitman can train the American people in his politicized convictions about the war’s significance. As he relates in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” the poet’s task is to “speak” and spread his war message to all the “children” of America.

This didactic agenda emerges lucidly in “The Dresser.” When Whitman envisions himself in the poem as an old man “among new faces,” he imagines future generations of Americans listening to his memories of the war. Though the speaking “I” in the poem is Whitman itself, “The Dresser” possesses a loosely dramatic structure. For example, in casting himself as an old man, Whitman creates a character distanced temporally from the “actual” Whitman of 1865. Moreover, similar to “The Centenarian’s Story,” the speaker’s monologue is not directed at the reader but is performed for an audience within the poem, the children that prod and question him. What the children enact for us, however, is precisely how to misread the war. Attempting to instigate the Dresser to speak, they remark:

Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me;
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass’d heroes, (was one side so brave? The other was equally brave;)
Now be witness again—paint the mightiest armies of earth;
Of those armies so rapid, so wondrous, what saw you to tell us?
What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
Of hard-fought engagements, or sieges tremendous, what deepest remains?

(1)

The children expect to hear the Dresser relate sensational, epic stories of the “mightiest armies of earth,” “unsurpass’d heroes,” “armies so rapid,” and “sieges tremendous.” Instead, his monologue offers a portrait of the War’s sickening toll on the bodies of individual soldiers:
The crush’d head I dress, (poor crazed hand, tear not the bandage away;)
The neck of the cavalry-man, with the bullet through and through, I examine;
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard;

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood;

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me, holding the tray and pail . . .

The dichotomy between the children’s romanticizing of the war and Whitman’s first-hand, realistic account of it refuses to glorify the war even as it shows us, through the image of children lounging and listening to an old man, that the war was ultimately successful in bringing about a new peace and stability. The Dresser’s monologue is a sharp rebuke of future readers who, like the children, Whitman fears, will consider the war simply an exciting and volatile moment in history. By informing the children of the sacrifices of their elders, the Dresser tries to ensure that they fully comprehend the heroic deeds that safeguarded the country’s future. The dead and injured soldiers become, along with the Dresser, teachers of the sort Whitman calls for in Democratic Vistas. Their examples and legacies help to train future Americans in the sanctity of American democracy.

Yet “The Dresser” is problematic piece, for in it Whitman discards his soldier’s uniform for that of its seeming opposite, the nurse. As Piatt’s poem suggests, the image of Whitman caring for and kissing the “bearded lips” of wounded soldiers has endured as
the most lasting representation of Whitman’s relation to the war. We appear to have in *Drum-Taps* and its *Sequel* a profound vacillation between the poet as the soldier and the poet as the nurse, the poet as the war monger, leading the fight with “veins dilated,” and the poet as the healer, “pacify[ing]” the “hurt and wounded” “with soothing hand.” How we interpret this vacillation is crucial to our reading of the dramatic monologues, for these poems lack the poet-characters’ commentary that so insistently dictates to us how to understand the war. In general the monologues seem to be more open-ended productions than the dialogues; they perform particularly evocative moments in a soldier’s experience without the political contextualization provided by the poet-characters.

For example, “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” which immediately follows “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” is an evocative snapshot of army camp life, much like the imagistic poems “Cavalry Crossing a Ford,” “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown,” and “Bivouac on a Mountainside.” In the calm preceding battle, the soldier reflects: “While wind in procession thoughts, O tender and wond’rous thoughts, / Of life and death—of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away; / A solemn and slow procession there as I sit on the ground” (7-10). We have here a moving depiction of a soldier’s melancholic thoughts. The touching humanism the poem expresses stands in sharp contrast to the political bombast of “Song of the Banner at Day-Break.” The poem reminds us that while the Poet of “Song” chants the war cause, real young men, divorced from their families and scared of their future, are out on the fields about to die.

Drawing on similar moments in other monologues, including “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” and “The Veteran’s Vision,” many critics interpret
Whitman’s vacillation between soldier and nurse as a linear movement from wholeheartedly and naively approving the war to realizing its sickening costs and exposing its dark underside. James E. Miller, Jr. writes, for instance, that in the collection we witness a “change in attitude toward the war from one of almost hysterical jubilation to one of revulsion,” a revulsion that Miller and others commonly take to signify Whitman’s retraction of his earlier support of the war (220-21). Because the poem deeply sympathizes with the soldier’s homesickness and potential death, and because it is devoid of the ideological and historical rhetoric that operates in both “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” and “The Centenarian’s Story,” “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” might seem to be an example of this retraction.

If this interpretation is correct, it threatens to undermine the poetic performances of “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” and “The Centenarian’s Story” by demonstrating that the poet-characters’ support of the war is specious and misguided. But as “The Centenarian’s Story” and “The Dresser” show us, there is nothing inherently inconsistent with endorsing the war while still sympathizing with the soldiers; in both of these poems the speakers only respect the soldiers more for the part they played in sustaining American democracy. No matter how closely we trace Whitman’s attitude towards the war in the poems, he never effectively strays from the political and historical justification of the war he offers in the dialogues. As we have seen, even in the third last poem of Sequal to Drum-Taps, “Lo! Victress on the Peaks!,” he is still celebrating and defending the Union victory in no uncertain terms, writing that, in the end, democracy and the Union “standest” “dominant” and “unharmed.”11
Rather than representing a change of heart, Whitman’s touching poems about the soldiers make sense of their deaths by couching them in terms of heroic sacrifice. Timothy Sweet’s *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union* (1990) insightfully explores the rhetorical strategies Whitman deploys to sublimate the war’s violence and to maintain his faith in the war’s justification. Through rhetorical topoi that persistently reappear in *Drum-Taps*, Whitman, Sweet propounds, makes “the body of the soldier disappear into the ideological discourse of the state,” into an “idealized representation of the Union” (6-7). In other words, he views their deaths as a tragic but necessary byproduct of the greater cause they serve, the preservation of the American body politic. Moon, Hatlen, Larson, and other recent critics forward similar arguments, showing how Whitman’s belief in the war goes unabated even as his acknowledgement of its destruction becomes more apparent. This privileging of democratic ideology over individual pain is precisely what occurs in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break.” While the Father admonishes the son about the costs the war can exact—“Forward to stand in front of wars—and O, such wars!—what have you to do with them? / With passions of demons, slaughter, premature death?”—his exhortations go unheeded (15). The poem sanctions and celebrates the war as the savior of American democracy, willingly accepting that with the war comes “premature death” and “slaughter” for thousands of Americans.

Far from meaningless, these deaths reinforce Whitman’s belief in the heroic power and courage that exist in the common men of the American democracy. In the soldiers’ willingness to die, he discerns “a primal hard-pan of national Union will, determin’d and in the majority, refusing to be tamper’d with or argued against”
He saw his convictions about the power and strength of the average, individual American confirmed daily on the battlefield, detecting the “death of a hero” in each soldier’s death. As Daniel Aaron writes, the war “validated the message of Leaves of Grass. It justified [Whitman’s] faith in ‘the average impalpable quality’ as personified by ‘the bulk, the people’” (73). The sacrificial heroism of the soldiers is made explicit in a non-dramatic poem, “A Sight in Camp in the Day-Break, Grey and Dim.” In it, the speaker encounters the faces of three different dead soldiers. When he sees the third, he experiences a revelation: “Young man, I think I know you—I think this face of yours is the face of the Christ himself; / Dead and divine, and brother of all, and here again he lies” (14-15). By identifying the soldier with Christ, Whitman infuses him with supernatural, divine power. Just as Christ’s death was a sacrifice for humans intended to redeem their covenant with God, the soldier’s death is a sacrifice for the country meant to redeem its Constitutional compact and restore its democratic mission.

The point here is that we should not read “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” as a counterstatement to “Song of the Banner at Day-Break.” We remain closer to Drum-Taps’ overarching representation of the war by following the interpretive logic of the Poet in “Song” than by seeing “Bivouac” as a transformation. Having been “properly train’d” in how to read the war by the Poet, we prove the efficacy of our instruction by subsuming the soldier’s anguish within the struggle to save “Libertad.” Our sorrow for the soldier is legitimate, but like the speaker’s sincere sympathy in “A Sight in Camp in the Day-Break, Grey and Dim,” it should only deepen our respect for the soldier’s role in the triumph of American democracy. Because we naturally empathize with the soldier, “Bivouac” is no doubt a firm test of the interpretive skills we have learned. But by
performing his understanding of the war for us, Whitman provides a script that enables us to read the monologues in a manner wholly consistent with the dialogues.

We can apply our lessons to any of the dramatic monologues included in *Drum-Taps*. “The Veteran’s Vision,” for instance, is one of the most traditional dramatic monologues in the collection in that it clearly differentiates the speaker from Whitman’s usual speaking “I.” The first few lines of the poem concretely delineate the speaker’s identity: “While my wife at my side lies slumbering, and the wars are over long, / And my head on the pillow rests at home, and the mystic midnight passes, / And through the stillness, through the dark, I hear, just hear, the breath of my infant” (1-3). The speaker is a veteran, a husband, and a father, identities that distance the speaker from the persona of “Song of Myself,” who rarely imagines himself as a husband or father, and from Whitman himself, who remained a bachelor throughout his life. In addition, the speaker is temporally removed from Whitman, as the poem takes place in a time when “the wars are over long.”

The Veteran’s nightmarish monologue descriptively elicits the oppressive sensual atmosphere of a battle:

I hear the sounds of the different missiles—the short *t-h-t! t-h-t!* of the rifle balls;
I see the shells exploding, leaving small white clouds—I hear the great shells shrieking as they pass;
The grape, like the hum and whirr of wind through the trees, (quick, tumultuous, now the contest rages!)
All the scenes at the batteries themselves rise in detail before me again . . . (7-10)

The entire poem continues in this vein, detailing the “crashing and smoking,” the “suffocating smoke,” and the “devilish exultation” that the sententious sound of the
cannon provokes in the soldiers. Placing these hellish memories immediately after the repose of the Veteran’s wife and child creates a striking and meaningful contrast. The poem is twenty-five lines long, and twenty-one lines describe the traumatic vision of the battle while just four lines detail the domestic setting. Whitman is emphasizing the enduring and disabling trauma of the war’s violence. The poem illustrates his acknowledgment that the soldiers’ battle-wounds run deep. As in the other poems that focus on the war’s violence, however, Whitman is not attempting to subvert his endorsement of the war. Instead, because the poem is a dramatic monologue absent of the poet-characters’ interpretation, he requires that the reader apply to the poem the hermeneutic framework that “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” and “The Centenarian’s Story” enacted. Though the poem’s power comes from its evocation of the fear and chaos of battle, it makes sure to indicate that the war did in fact achieve its objective: the soldier is reinstated into the home, he sheds his identity of soldier, and he reassumes his stable and peaceful identities of husband and father. The war ushers in a new peace and propels America into the future, both of which are symbolized in the harmony of the domestic setting. We can hear echoes of the Father and Child in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break.” While their relationship was destroyed by the threat of war, the war has now healed wounds and allowed the Veteran’s family to reunite. And of course the domestic setting and the family are intended as easily recognizable metaphors for the nation itself—the house divided has become the house reunited. The memory of the war will always be a troubling undercurrent that exists just below the surface of the reconstituted nation. But this memory is only a trace, an occasional nightmare that creeps
into the new post-war stability of American life. As Whitman writes in “Reconciliation,” “Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be utterly lost” (2).

Whitman’s approach in Drum-Taps is metonymic rather than progressive. Each poem, taken by itself, stands for the whole, memorializing the soldiers’ sacrifices and monumentalizing the war’s championing of American democracy. In the poems about Lincoln, the soldiers are replaced by the fallen President. Like his troops, he is depicted as a heroic sacrificial lamb. And as Whitman asserts in his famous war elegy, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” both Lincoln’s and the soldiers’ deaths give rise to America’s “victorious song” and allow the country, like the lilacs, to bloom once more. If in “Song of the Banner at Day-Break” the Poet strikes us as overly enthusiastic about the prospect of violence and death, and if in “The Dresser,” the dramatic monologues, and the Lincoln poems this ebullience is significantly tempered, the poet’s role nonetheless remains unwavering: even as he eulogizes soldiers he continues to redeem the war as a necessary force in the historical evolution of American democracy.

Through the interweaving of several dramatic monologues and dialogues, Whitman trains his readers in his interpretation of the war. The particular dynamics of Whitman’s relationship with his audience has fueled much recent scholarship. Like the majority of Whitman criticism, this work has focused overwhelmingly on the antebellum poetry. For the most part, critics have been interested in determining the precise nature of the relationship between the “I” and the “you” of the major long poems. Throughout these poems Whitman routinely employs second-person direct address questions, prodding, cajoling, and challenging the “you” to respond. In “Song of Myself,” for instance, he writes, “Have you reckon’d a thousand acres much? have you reckon’d the
earth much? / Have you practis’ed so long to learn to read? / Have you felt so proud to get
at the meaning of poems?” (29-31). According to Donald Pease, these moments are not
simply the occasion for the poetic “I” to speak to the “you,” but are instead constituted by
the reciprocal dialogue between the “I” and the “you” (77). In responding to the prompts
and commands of the “I,” the reader amends, infuses, rectifies, and revises the printed
text, thereby recreating the poem through his reading experience. Ezra Greenspan’s Walt
Whitman and the American Reader (1990) contends that this profound level of reader
involvement approximates the “open-ended, participatory democracy” Whitman
stridently advocated (ix). By fostering an immanent relationship between writer, reader,
and text, second-person address advances Whitman’s effort to use his poems to fortify the
great “ensemble,” the democratic union between all American citizens.

Interestingly, it is with the publication of Drum-Taps and its Sequel that Whitman
noticeably begins to dispense of this second-person direct address technique. In his
painstaking taxonomical account of Whitman’s stylistic and linguistic tendencies, C.
Carroll Hollis contends that in the poems of the first two editions alone of Leaves of
Grass there appeared 311 questions directly addressed to the reader. In the four editions
from 1867 to 1881 combined, however, there were only seven (89). Likewise,
Whitman’s use of non-questioning second-person address, which was so rampant in
“Song of Myself,” is almost non-existent in the war poetry. Building off of this data,
Greenspan concludes that “By the late 1850s, . . . [Whitman] had begun to retreat from
this reader-in-the-text strategy. . . . In the last three decades of his career, making poetry
out of the idea of persona and reader as ‘two souls interchanging’ became an increasingly
uncommon practice” (221). As Greenspan correctly adduces, the precipitous decline of
the second-person addresses suggests that Whitman’s notion and construction of author-reader relations underwent a significant shift in the war poems.

Concomitant with this transformation, of course, is Whitman’s most pronounced experimentation with dramatic forms. Though on the surface these two phenomena appear disconnected, I would like to propose that in fact they are intricately interrelated. As I have been arguing, Whitman’s dramatic dialogue poems perform a specific interpretation of the war, one that provides his audience hermeneutic tools for reading the monologue poems. The dramatic poems thus become constructive sites for interrogating the development of Whitman’s conceptualization of author-reader relations. Whitman’s keen interest in the reader does not simply disappear after 1860; rather, in the war poems he channels this interest into new formal directions. As Reynolds contends, Whitman enjoyed the theater as much for its audience as its actors. The heterogeneous and active audience reaffirmed his convictions about the possibilities of creating a national and democratic body of literature. Thus in Whitman’s war poems the drama is critical not only for articulating and presenting the poet’s role in poetic production, but in gleaning what Whitman takes to be the reader’s role in the process of reception.

III. Whitman and the Postbellum Tradition

In the dramatic poems of Drum-Taps and its Sequel, Whitman provides an early example of the dramatic tradition in postbellum American poetry. As we will see in the remaining chapters, poets throughout the rest of the century shared Whitman’s overriding concern with drama and performativity. Indeed, we might speculate that part of the reason critics have either ignored or derided Whitman’s use of the drama in Drum-Taps is
that the form does not accord with Whitman’s reputation as the progenitor of an original and autochthonic poetic. As Timothy Morris’s *Becoming Canonical in American Poetry* (1995) has shown, generations of American literary scholars have trumpeted Whitman as a supreme example of literary nationalism; eschewing all foreign models, Whitman’s free-verse poetic embodies the values of authorial presence, organicism, and monologic language that Morris contends have been so vital to nationalist models of American poetic history. Whitman’s Americanist exceptionalism is born out in the utter boundlessness of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The poems of this edition—untitled, hardly separated from each other, not rhymed, relying on no traditional rhythms, and not yet divided into sections—literally pour out onto the page, creating the effect of as minimal formal regularity as possible. And again, for many critics this irregularity is decidedly nationalistic. As Erkkila explains, “The publication of *Leaves of Grass* on or about July 4, 1855, was an act of revolution, an assault on the institutions of old-world culture that was as experimental and far-reaching in the artistic sphere as the American revolt against England had been in the political sphere” (3).

As a traditional European art form possessing its own set of conventions, the drama collides with this image of the rebellious Whitman. So too does the dramatic monologue, a technique most famously developed and popularized by British poets. In co-opting these dramatic forms, Whitman is subject to the charge of forsaking his nativist originality in favor of derivative commonplaces. Yet as Kenneth M. Price’s *Whitman and Tradition* (1990) reminds us, Whitman was not removed from and immune to traditional literary influences. Price documents Whitman’s negotiation with the Anglo-American literary tradition, as well as his intersections with contemporaries like
Longfellow and Tennyson. In emphasizing Whitman’s status as a nationalist writer, Price suggests, we have tended to propagate a skewed version of Whitman as a complete romantic iconoclast. The dramatic impulse of the war poems provides a useful corrective to this portrait. By attending to Whitman’s dramatic poetry we see a poet deeply immersed in his poetic milieu, not only as he reveals the possible influence of foreign writers, but as he squarely participates in the dramatic and performative trend that was emerging among American poets. In this respect, Whitman alters his poetic performance in the war poems, moving away from being a poetic rebel and closer to being a writer amidst his contemporaries. In the end, then, the drama importantly situates Whitman within a postbellum poetic tradition, a position that will become even more legible as we continue to sketch this tradition in the following chapters.
NOTES

1 Several major studies of Whitman’s poetry concentrate almost exclusively on the first three editions of Leaves, including C. Carroll Hollis’s Language and Style in Leaves of Grass (1983), Ezra Greenspan’s Walt Whitman and the American Reader (1990), and Tenney Nathanson’s Whitman’s Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in Leaves of Grass (1992). Both Kerry C. Larson’s Whitman’s Drama of Consensus (1988) and Michael Moon’s Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass (1991) end their discussions with the war poems of the 1860s. As James Perrin Warren explains in his essay “Reading Whitman’s Postwar Poetry,” “Though Whitman is often considered America’s greatest poet, he is accorded greatness on the strength of the first ten years of his career” (45).

2 All of Whitman’s prose works referenced in this chapter are included in the two volume Prose Works 1892 cited in the Bibliography.

3 Throughout this chapter I will refer to the original versions of Drum-Taps and its Sequel rather than the “Drum-Taps” and “Memories of President Lincoln” clusters Whitman eventually integrated into Leaves of Grass. I have made this choice because I think the original versions emphasize that Whitman’s use of the drama in the war poems represents a substantive stylistic shift from the antebellum editions of Leaves.

4 For examples of Ames’s, Emerson’s, and Stedman’s calls for a national poet, see Ames’s “American Literature” (1803), Emerson’s “The Poet” (1844), and Stedman’s Poets of America (1885). For a discussion of the relationship between poetry and nationalism in the nineteenth century, see Timothy Morris’s Becoming Canonical in American Poetry (1995). Several other poets assumed the task of being the national poet during the war. Later in the chapter I will discuss the differences between Whitman’s war poetry and Herman Melville’s. Julia Ward Howe and Whittier composed poems that were, at the time, the best-known verses of the war. Both of these poets envisioned the war from a much more religious perspective than Whitman, seeing the Union victory less in terms of democratic ideology than in Christian salvation. Meanwhile, Sarah Piatt’s war poetry mostly confines itself to the home front, exposing the psychological and emotional toll the war took on women who lost husbands and brothers. As we will see in Chapter 2, Piatt, like Whitman, made extensive use of the drama in her work, including her war poems. She also concerned herself much more directly than Whitman did with the question of what the war meant for the South.

5 Waskow briefly brings up the issue of the dramatic monologue, arguing that the form is, for Whitman, almost totally overshadowed by the monodrama (139). While Waskow is justified in contending that Whitman’s monologue speakers still sound like the recognizable voice of Whitman’s lyric persona, he too easily brushes aside the implications of Whitman’s efforts to distance these speakers from his standard poetic “I.”
In this way Waskow provides further proof of how Whitman’s use of the monologue form has been little understood.

6 My citations for “Song of the Banner at Day-Break,” “The Centenarian’s Story,” and “The Dresser” refer to the section numbers Whitman includes in the poems.

7 According to Hegel, history, as well as thought and subjectivity, is composed of a series of major conflicts and contradictions, which Hegel expresses in the familiar model of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. As the tension between thesis and antithesis is overcome, or synthesized, history can move on to its next stage, which will be defined by a new set of dialectical conflicts. Explicit in this schema is an emphasis on a teleos, or an ultimate conclusion, to history itself. Rather than simply being random moments in time, then, all historical phenomena become reducible to a specific meaning—how they fit into the cumulative progression to history’s end. As Whitman’s career progressed, he increasingly advocated Hegel’s historical outlook. Whitman writes in Specimen Days:

According to Hegel the whole earth . . . with its infinite variety, the past, the surroundings of to-day, or what may happen in the future, the contrarieties of material with spiritual, and of natural with artificial, are all, to the eye of the ensemblist, but necessary sides and unfoldings, different steps or links, in the endless process of Creative thought, which, amid numberless apparent failures and contradictions, is held together by central and never-broken unity—not contradictions or failures at all, but radiations of one consistent and eternal purpose . . . (259)

This quote demonstrates Whitman’s thorough comprehension of the Hegelian system. Emboldened by this dialectical, optimistic understanding of all historical events, Whitman could interpret American history as moving uniformly and unerringly towards a teleological end. The war becomes for Whitman a dialectical struggle between union and disunion, between the American democracy and everything that threatened to undermine it.

8 I will address Whitman’s persona as the “wound-dresser” later in the chapter.

9 See Note 4, above, for a discussion of other poets’ responses to the war.

10 Melville explains in his opening note to Battle-Pieces that the poems record the “events and incidents of the conflict” and are the result of placing “a harp in the window, and [noting] the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings.” This description encapsulates the documentary and objective nature of Melville’s poetic, as opposed to the programmatic idealism of Whitman’s.

11 Critics often refer to the lines Whitman inserted into the 1881, final version of “The Dresser,” now bearing the more familiar title “The Wound-Dresser,” as their proof that his feelings about the War changed: “(Arous’d and angry, I’d thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war, / But soon my fingers fail’d me, my face droop’d and I resign’d
myself, / To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead)’’ (4-6). Whitman did not add these lines to the cluster until 1871. While they show an alteration in Whitman’s response to the war, I do not think they signal a major shift in his feelings about the war’s necessity or legitimacy. As I continue to argue in the chapter, the deaths of the soldiers only give Whitman more confidence in the heroic individualism fostered by American democracy.

12 Whitman’s own opinion of Browning mixed praise with censure. In his estimation, Browning’s verse possessed “virility” and “fiber,” but he found it arduous and taxing. Despite his hesitations, Whitman still suggested that his friends read Browning’s The Ring and The Book, and he recognized Browning’s popularity with the larger reading public: “I have friends who dose themselves with Browning to the bitter end and regard him as the most invigorating influence in the modern world of books” (With Walt Whitman in Camden 2: 93). Whitman was also keenly aware that Browning turned literary achievement into celebrity and wealth. Quoting an article from the London Magazine, Whitman writes:

Few of the distinguished poets of the present day . . . are wanting in worldly gear. All have coined their genius into substantial guineas, dollars, or francs. Tennyson and Victor Hugo are wealthy, from their writings, and Browning and Swinburne receive handsome and regular incomes. . . . Walt Whitman alone keeps up the tradition of narrow means and wide afflatus. While his fame is fast filling Europe, he is unrecognized in his own country, works daily as a clerk at three hundred pounds a year, lives on one third of that, devotes two-thirds to others, and has not yet, it is said, the first shilling of return from his poetic volumes. (Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts 3: 61)

This article reveals that Whitman wanted to be as economically viable as these other poets, and that he considered Browning an example of a poet who had been “absorbed” by his country.

13 Many critics lament the conventionalism of Whitman’s war poems, particularly “O Captain! My Captain!” and “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” Aaron opines that despite “its descriptive and psychological accuracy,” Drum-Taps represents an aesthetic “gamble” that, in the end, Whitman “lost” because it is “not so verbally daring or radical or spontaneous” as the “early Leaves” (67-68). F. DeWolfe Miller concurs, stating that “virtually all readers would prefer that the world had Leaves of Grass 1855 than Drum-Taps” (viii).

14 As Warren has shown, in the late poetry Whitman transformed from viewing America as a complete break from world history to seeing it as a natural outgrowth of all that came before it. Thus instead of trying to create an entirely new kind of poetry to complement America’s rebellious status, he begins to advocate a poetry that is distinctly American but that evolves from Old World traditions. Modifying the bold claims he made in 1855 about American cultural independence, Whitman proposes in Collect that America must
inundate itself with the literature of the past and of other nations. He posits that until “native” poetries are fully cultivated, America should be “nourished” by foreign “importations”: “Meantime, we can (perhaps) do no better than to saturate ourselves with, and continue to give imitations, yet awhile, of the aesthetic models, supplies, of that past and of those lands we spring from. Those wondrous stores, reminiscences, floods, currents! Let them flow on, flow hither freely!” (487).
CHAPTER 2

“A LESSON FROM” THE MAGAZINES: SARAH PIATT AND THE PERIODICAL POET

In 1878 Sarah Piatt published “From North and South” in the children’s magazine the Youth’s Companion. Subtitled “(A Lesson from the Newspaper),” the poem dramatizes a conversation between a mother and her daughter as they peruse two letters printed in the newspaper, one that sketches a beautiful and glamorous Northern woman as she appeared at a ball, and another that details the contrasting “Misery” and “Death” of the South. The last stanza of the poem reads:

“That’s from the North” “Now turn and read
A letter from the South, I say.”
“That’s of some people, too, you see.” (19-23)

As the poem’s subtitle indicates, “From North and South” is clearly a didactic poem, with the mother teaching the daughter, and, presumably, the poet teaching her youthful readers, that life is made up of both joy and sorrow. Yet the poem also offers another lesson, one that has more to do with how to read Piatt’s poetry than with any moralistic tutorial about the dual nature of life. “From North and South” is a kind of meta-poem, in that it portrays, within a poem printed in a magazine, the experience of reading a periodical. As such, it is a significant piece in Piatt’s oeuvre, considering that Piatt was
one of the most prolific periodical poets in the late nineteenth century. Although she eventually published seventeen book collections, she began her career in the 1850s writing for her childhood hometown newspaper, the *Louisville Journal*. From the 1860s to the 1910s Piatt placed close to three hundred poems in venues ranging from the New York Congregationalist magazine the *Independent*, to the children’s magazine *Wide-Awake*, to the respected literary monthlies like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic*. The exposure Piatt gained in these periodicals helped win her widespread acclaim, leading E. C. Stedman, the dean of postbellum poetry critics, to dub her in 1885 “our best-known Western poetess” (*Poets of America* 446). Yet despite her productivity and reputation, she became, by the early twentieth century, as little known as most of her contemporaries. Brushed aside by modernists and New Critics as simply another banal magazine versifier and sentimental poetess, she was erased from the dominant narratives of American poetic history.

Within the last ten years, however, scholars have successfully recovered Piatt’s work, resulting in her admission into the most recent editions of the *Heath* and the *Norton* anthologies of American literature (2002, 2003). Piatt is now steadily gaining attention as a nineteenth-century American woman poet second in importance only to Emily Dickinson. In light of her publication history, however, she represents a type of poetic practice far removed from Dickinson’s poetics of privacy and correspondence. By regularly placing her poems in national magazines and newspapers, including some of the more popular periodicals of the postbellum era, such as *St. Nicholas* and *Harper’s*, Piatt practiced a manifestly public type of poetic authorship. In this respect, the overarching “*Lesson*” that the meta-poem “North and South” points to is the importance of the
periodical context in shaping her poetic career. Indeed, this chapter argues that to understand the breadth and depth of Piatt’s achievement, it is imperative that we revisit the question of what it meant to write poetry for postbellum magazines. Given that significant numbers of her poems were published originally in newspapers and magazines rather than books, I suggest that we recover their periodical context and read them precisely as periodical pieces—that is, as literary works that are constituted by and respond to the particular circumstances of their periodical publication.

To be sure, American literary scholars have long recognized the powerful influence periodical culture exerted on nineteenth-century poetry. During the postbellum era, for example, prominent monthly magazines like the Overland Monthly, Harper’s, Scribner’s, and the Century typically published at least two poems per issue, with the Atlantic Monthly printing as many as four to five each month from 1875 to 1885. By the 1890s, an average of sixty to seventy poems appeared per week in major American newspapers and magazines (Perkins 98). Traditionally, critics have seen this periodical influence as detrimental to the aesthetic quality of postbellum poems. As just one of many possible examples, David Perkins acknowledges that “the Century and its fellow magazines set the standard in [postbellum] verse,” but he argues that this standard was marred by its commitment to the formulaic aesthetic principles of the genteel tradition. Concluding that magazine verse was an undifferentiated body of work and an “easy, conventional achievement,” he considers it only insofar as it “provided a negative model” against which the modernists defined themselves a generation later (88). Even recent critical anthologies such as Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America (1995) and “The Only Efficient Instrument”: American Women Writers and the Periodical.
which stress the importance of the periodical context in studying nineteenth-century literature, tacitly maintain periodical poetry’s abject status by almost totally neglecting it. And yet, the periodical context has the potential to realign our understanding of nineteenth-century poetry by grounding it within its historical environment and offering a fresh vantage point for considering its inherently public nature. Periodical studies is critical for determining how poetry functioned as a popular phenomenon in the late nineteenth century, both in terms of the cultural work it performed and the aesthetic principles it practiced.

As the following pages will argue, writing poetry for the periodicals in which Piatt published was a complicated rhetorical enterprise. Most of them were general interest magazines that printed pieces on a variety of topics, from etiquette to politics, and in a variety of genres, from editorials, to travel essays, to short stories, to serialized novels, to poetry. In addition, they marketed themselves to an audience that was expanding as the nation continued to push westward, and, decidedly family oriented, they blended entertainment with education, pleasure with edification, popularity with refinement. In short, these magazines served a range of audiences and functions. Piatt’s magazine poetry directly responds to this periodical climate. As I will discuss in detail, “The Palace-Burner,” now considered one of Piatt’s most significant poems, specifically meditates on the nature of periodical culture. It suggests that Piatt’s approach to writing periodical poems is to infuse them with a wide assortment of aesthetic modes, and to balance popular appeal with a challenging and idiosyncratic artistic vision. Just like the magazines in which they were published, that is, Piatt’s poems are multifunctional,
transgressing divisions between different generic categories and between conventionality and originality, accessibility and erudition, and popularity and elitism.

The most consistent genre in all of Piatt’s poems, however, is the drama. While some of her pieces are dramatic monologues of the Browning school, the majority are constructed as implicit or explicit dialogues. Additionally, several important poems take theatrical performances as their central motif. Piatt’s immersion in the dramatic is essential to her periodical aesthetic. As we saw in the Introduction, in the nineteenth-century theater was an incredibly popular form of public entertainment, one that proliferated in every area of the country and appealed to Americans of all sorts, cutting across both educational and socioeconomic divisions. Theatrical performances around mid-century typically included an eclectic array of genres; in the course of an evening, an audience might be treated to a Shakespearean drama interspersed with burlesque sketches, circus acts, minstrel skits, and choral presentations. Characterized by heterogeneity in both genre and audience, theater, according to Lawrence W. Levine, epitomized what was once the shared public life of art that we now typically divide hierarchically into “elite” and “popular” forms. General interest periodicals of the 1860s, 70s, and 80s also participated in this shared culture. Although it is true that, as Nancy Glazener’s *Reading for Realism* (1997) proposes, literary magazines such as the *Atlantic* and the *Century* increasingly positioned themselves as part of “high” culture in the late nineteenth century, they were still, like the theater, media that blended a variety of artistic modes and that appealed to a wide-ranging American public. Drawing on this connection, Piatt finds the inspiration and artistic model for her periodical verse in the theater, repeatedly co-opting and incorporating dramatic tropes and styles into her work.
In its borrowings from the theatrical tradition, moreover, Piatt’s dramatic poetry is fundamentally performative: like Whitman who employed dramatic techniques to perform his role as national poet, Piatt creates a deeply theatrical and dramatic aesthetic to enact her authorial identity as a periodical poet. And like an actor of the mid-century stage who needed to be able to perform Richard III as well as Jump Jim Crow, Piatt performs a type of magazine authorship that is characterized by flexibility and fluidity. By constructing her poetic on a model as public as the theater and for a genre as public as the periodical, Piatt ultimately provides an illustrative example of how nineteenth-century aesthetics were publicly motivated.3

I. The Page and the Stage: Magazines and Theater in Postbellum America

The periodical marketplace experienced unprecedented growth in the decades following the Civil War. Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith posit that the periodical dominated the literary landscape of the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, far outpacing the book in terms of readership figures and cultural impact (5). In his invaluable study, A History of American Magazines, Frank Luther Mott declares that a “mania of magazine-starting” set in during the 1860s and 70s. Mott estimates that there were 700 periodicals in America in 1865, just over 1200 in 1870, about 2500 in 1880, and approximately 3300 in 1885 (2: 5). In the period from 1860 to 1900, James Playsted Wood tells us, the number of monthly magazines increased from 280 to over 1800 (103). Changes in transportation technologies opened up markets across the country and encouraged the tremendous influx of new periodicals. The establishment of the railroad infrastructure in the 1860s and 70s meant that periodicals could be transported rapidly
from major northeastern cities—the centers of the American publishing industry—to the ever-expanding West. As minor a magazine as Boston’s Literary World, for example, which never reached a circulation figure above 3000, could boast in 1879 that it was read in “every State and Territory in the United States,” a claim that would have seemed unlikely before the railroad connected the East and West Coasts in the 1869 (312). In addition, the cost of sending books and periodicals to subscribers through the Postal Service dropped considerably in the 1870s and 80s. “Publishers and congressmen had worked together,” Kimball King explains, “to have the postal rates for second class mail reduced from three cents per pound in 1874 to two cents in 1879, and finally to one cent in 1885” (122-23). Cheaper and faster delivery methods meant that more Americans could afford and access a range of periodicals.

As Southern, Midwestern, and Western cities grew, they developed both the economic base and the consumer demand for periodical publications. Advances in printing technologies and the reproduction of illustrations, including the roller press, halftone engraving, and the linotype machine, lessened the costs of printing, giving more local entrepreneurs the incentive to enter the periodical trade (King 122-23). Conditions ripened for the development of local presses outside of the Northeast. Kathleen Diffley documents how southern refugees who flocked to Baltimore in the years immediately following the Civil War “were among the first to bolster the magazine trade outside eastern publishing centers and thus to welcome a distinctly regional literature that would challenge the cultural ascendancy of the Northeast” (184). Diffley focuses on the Southern Magazine, founded in 1871, which emerged just as Baltimore was becoming a more urbanized and industrialized city. At the same time, as Edward E. Chielens notes,
several successful magazines appeared in the West, including the *Argonaut* (1877-79), the *Wasp* (1881-86), and the *Lark* (1895-97) (xiii-xiv). Chief among these San Francisco-based magazines was the *Overland Monthly*. Founded in 1868, it saw itself in direct competition with the *Atlantic* and its northeastern counterparts, lasting in various incarnations until 1935. Though many of these magazines were short lived, their presence speaks to a periodical marketplace that was expanding in response to the demographic and geographic changes of the country.

As periodicals proliferated they found a widening and diversifying audience. By all accounts the culture of reading in America during the last half of the nineteenth century was thriving. In 1900, Stedman asserted that in the period following the Civil War “The progress of American journals, magazines, and the book trade coincided with a wider extension of readers than [the nation] had known before” (*Anthology* xxvi). Carlin T. Kindilien similarly argues that by the 1890s “the nation was reading and writing at a pace previously unparalleled in American literary history” (2). Barbara Sicherman’s analysis of women’s reading practices in the 1860s and 70s exposes some of the leading factors in this burgeoning reading culture. As public schools spread around the country, literacy rates continued to rise (201). Of particular note were the increasing educational opportunities for women and African-Americans. Carol Smith-Rosenberg has shown that more women were receiving secondary and even post-secondary education, which would lead directly in the 1880s and 90s to the phenomenon of the “New Woman” who was intelligent, professional, and independent. While the education of African-Americans lagged far behind that of white women, ex-slaves had more opportunities to learn in postbellum America than they had had prior to the War, spurred by the Freedmen’s
Bureau, vocational schools, and, ultimately, institutions of higher learning. Between 1870 and 1910 the percentage of African-Americans ten years of age or more who were illiterate dropped from 79.9 percent to 30.4 percent (Bullock 9). The post-War years witnessed the emergence of the African-American Press, including magazines like the A. M. E. Church Review (1884), Negro (1886), and Howard’s Negro-American Magazine (1889), and, of course, the appearance of black writers including Dunbar, Harper, Chesnutt, Washington, Du Bois, and Henderson. Finally, as America progressed through the “Gilded Age” and as the middle class continued its growth, more Americans possessed leisure time and expendable capital that allowed them to read for pleasure and relaxation. “It was [the middle class],” Wood writes, “made literate through public school education, that formed a new and wider audience of readers” (103).

To take advantage of these new markets and readers, many postbellum literary magazines strove to be of general interest to a wide audience. To this end, they typically developed three overlapping strategies: first, they pitched themselves as national publications; second, they avoided specialization; and third, they balanced erudition with leisurely entertainment. Wood argues that the 1870s and 80s saw the ascendancy of the national magazine, a “solid instrument for developing and reinforcing national sentiment” by “presenting simultaneously identical facts” to every region, thus mitigating the sectional divisiveness that manifested during the Civil War (99). Even the literary magazine with the most patrician reputation, the Atlantic, acknowledged the nationalization of American periodical culture by hiring the Ohio writer William Dean Howells as its editor in 1871—a bold move for the decidedly New England Brahmin periodical. Mott claims under Howells’s editorship the magazine became “a much more
truly American periodical than it had been in its earlier years” (1: 506). That same year, it continued in this diversifying direction by contracting Bret Harte to write a series of stories for its pages. Harte was a San Francisco-based author whose stories and poems about forty-niners, Western outlaws, and prostitutes caused a sensation throughout the country. Previous to signing on with the Atlantic, he had been editor of the Overland Monthly in San Francisco. Though the Overland was intended partially as a venue for Californians, it too tried to appeal to a national audience, choosing as its subtitle “Devoted to The Development of the Country.” By the end of its first year the Overland sold as many copies in the eastern U.S. as in the states of California, Nevada, and Oregon combined (Scharnhorst 12).

While it was Harte’s Western stories that made it famous, the Overland balanced them with essays and stories about science, technology, history, other areas of the country and world, manners, and literature. For example, the September, 1871 issue, in which Piatt published the poem “One from the Dead,” a poem to which I will return in detail, opens with a long account of an expedition to the Arctic, followed by a detailed description of London parks, an ornithological tour through Mexico, a short story about an itinerant fool, a review of the Royal Academy art exhibition in London, a piece on Mormonism, a travel log of the “queer sights and ways in Pekin,” a humorous commentary on the kinds of hobbies Americans pursue, and reviews of current literature. Like many postbellum periodicals, the Overland privileged general interest over specialized concentration. Harper’s Monthly, Scribner’s, and Putnam’s combined short fiction, serialized novels, and poetry with articles on a similarly dizzying array of topics, from science, art, religion, and politics, to table etiquette, child rearing, recipes, humor,
animal rights, and travel. These magazines, though participating in a drastically different historical, social, and economic environment, continued in the tradition of their early American counterparts, which Jared Gardner has analogized to dime and traveling museums due to their collocation and presentation of an eclectic and disparate array of material.

In addition to nationalizing their scope and variegating their content, postbellum magazines typically fused what we now might designate as both high and low art. Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* demonstrates that in the late nineteenth century artistic distinctions between high and low, elite and popular were in their initial stages of formulation. Postbellum magazines exemplified this fluidity, displaying, according to Price and Belasco Smith, “a healthy heterogeneity, since even the most prestigious magazines, including *Harper’s Monthly*, *Putnam’s*, and the *Atlantic*, mixed popular and elite forms” (7). One the one hand, these magazines participated in the larger phenomenon of “high culture” that was mobilizing during the postbellum era. Imported from England where Matthew Arnold defined it as “the best which has been thought and said in the world,” “culture” connoted in late-nineteenth-century America a sense of education, good manners, civility, and sophistication. Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* (1982) explains that by the word “culture” postbellum Americans had in mind activities like the arts, religion, and higher education that were intended mostly for personal growth and refinement, not profit. The literary magazines played a significant role in the machinations of culture in America. Glazener’s *Reading for Realism* insightfully exposes the way in which the *Atlantic* and other likeminded magazines identified themselves as primary instruments of culture’s dissemination. As
she demonstrates, these magazines exhibited a paternalistic ethos, projecting themselves as the stewards of culture for the wider American public. In promoting elitism and distinction, they positioned themselves in the upper stratum of the cultural hierarchy that was implemented in the postbellum years.

And yet, in conjunction with spreading knowledge and taste, magazines constituted an important part of middle-class America’s social life. Intended primarily for the parlor rather than for the professor’s office or the writer’s desk, these publications needed to remain penetrable and pleasing to the general American public. Decidedly family oriented, often read aloud during the evening for entertainment, they had to balance erudition with popular appeal and accessibility. An illustrative example of this highbrow/lowbrow mix was New York’s biweekly the Galaxy, in which Piatt placed several poems. Launched in 1866 as a rival of the Atlantic, it strove for a reputation as a distinguished literary journal, expressing its policy that “intrinsic merit is and will be the only rule for accepting and publishing articles” (Galaxy 3). Yet at the same time it feared fostering an exclusivity that would carry it “too far away from the magazine-reading public” (E. Grier 333). Its subtitle was “An Illustrated Magazine of Entertaining Reading,” connoting leisure, pleasure, and enjoyment rather than artistic rigor, literary specialization, or elitism. Eugene Benson, a writer who contributed regularly to the Galaxy, illuminated the reason for this subtitle, writing that “The function of the Galaxy plainly is to entertain first; then it is to stir ideas.”5 This combination of popularity and refinement apparently was effective. The New York Graphic remarked that “[the Galaxy] is more in accordance with the feelings of the reading public than any other magazine that is published” and Mott concludes that, indeed, “This magazine touched
popular life at more points and more directly than most other important magazines have”
(2: 375).

During Piatt’s career, then, the general interest magazines in which she published
the bulk of her poetry served an array of functions and audiences within a booming
periodical marketplace. Traditional inquiries into the relationship between late-
nineteenth-century periodicals and poetry generally have failed to account for the
dynamic conditions of periodical culture, treating the magazines as undifferentiated
venues that proffered polite genteel poetry to a stuffy bourgeois audience. But Piatt’s
periodical verse puts into motion a densely-textured aesthetic that responds to the broad-
based periodical landscape of the postbellum era. The key to delineating the precise
nature of this aesthetic can be located in Alan L. Ackerman, Jr.’s contention that
nineteenth-century writers regularly appropriated theatrical tropes to imagine and
construct their relationship with the American public. As a vital public institution, the
theater offered writers an artistic model for figuring the civic and communal overtones of
their art. Ackerman’s assessment of the public motivations behind theatrical and
dramatic literature is directly applicable to the periodical context of Piatt’s poetry.

In many ways the postbellum magazine industry and the mid-to-late nineteenth
century theater were analogous institutions. By blurring distinctions between high and
low art, privileging eclecticism over specialization, and projecting themselves nationally,
general interest magazines exhibited many of the same characteristics of the theater,
which Daniel E. Sutherland’s The Expansion of Everyday Life 1860-1876 (1989)
proclaims was “the nation’s favorite form of public amusement” (245). Sutherland
documents how theater, like periodicals, prospered in conjunction with America’s rapid
expansion during the nineteenth century. The theater was a vital public institution in every area of the country, from the great metropolises of the eastern seaboard to the farming towns of the Midwest to the mining communities of Nevada. As Levine notes, the Duke and Dauphin’s ability in *Huckleberry Finn* to draw large audiences along the Mississippi to their Shakespearean performances attests to theater’s standing as a truly national phenomenon. Far from being the provenance of the privileged urban elite, in fact, the theater was a fundamentally democratic space. As we saw in Chapter 1, throughout much of the century theater audiences typically represented a microcosm of their communities. In the course of an evening, factory workers, merchants, wealthy businessmen, prostitutes, bourgeois mothers, and children often enjoyed the same performance together. The result was what Ackerman refers to as the “illusion at least of a kind of union” among the various members of the local polity (34). This diversity was reflected in the eclectic range of performances theaters presented their patrons. Like general interest magazines, the nineteenth-century stage offered a startling hodge-podge of material. As Levine has portrayed so visibly, productions of Shakespeare usually were introduced, interrupted, and appended by other forms of entertainment, including gymnastics, popular songs, minstrel skits, burlesques, one-act plays, circus acts, and speeches. In Levine’s words, “During the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the play may have been the thing, but it was not the only thing” (21). Given these incredibly heterogeneous performances, Levine concludes that discernible distinctions between high and low art forms, between “legitimate” theater and popular shows, simply do not adhere to the nineteenth-century stage.
The parallels between general interest magazines and the theater illuminate Piatt’s magazine poetic. In writing for the public medium of the periodical, she assimilated the aesthetic techniques of the theater. With few exceptions the poems she published in periodicals reveal an unyielding dramatic impulse. Several poems, in fact, actually take place in a theater, with the performances themselves serving as the poems’ major tableaus. In “A Ghost at the Opera,” for instance, published in 1873 in the Washington, D.C. paper The Capital, the speaker is engaged in watching an opera. During the performance, one of the actor’s gestures reminds her of an old lover, and the stage transforms in her imagination into the Civil War battlefield on which he died:

He looked at me across the fading field.  
The South was in his blood, his soul, his face.  
Imperious despair, too lost to yield,  
Gave a quick glory to a desperate grace.  

I saw him fall. I saw the deadly stain  
Upon his breast—he cared not what was won.  
The ghost was in the land of ghosts again.  
The curtain fell, the phantom play was done.  (33-40)

The opera here bewitches the speaker and transports her into a deep, dreamlike reverie, a motif which, as we will see, is repeated in “Beatrice Cenci.” In “At the Play,” published in the Independent again in 1873, the speaker admits that “the charm” of the theater remains strong to her regardless of the play she is seeing or how well it is staged. “I have been to the play, my child,” the speaker states, and “Shakespeare’s Poor Player is there” wearing “all the while, / As soldier, or priest, or king, / Or peasant, the same sad smile.” Other poems, though not as explicitly metatheatrical as these two, are nonetheless constructed on dramatic principles. While poems such as “Thorns” and “Counsel—In the South” are dramatic monologues, Piatt’s more common form is the dramatic dialogue,
which poeticizes the conversation between a main speaker and another character. For example, the opening two stanzas of “Love-Stories” (1872) read:

Can I tell any? No:  
I have forgotten all I ever knew.  
I am too old. I saw the fairies go  
Forever from the moonshine and the dew  
Before I met with you.

“Rose’s grandmother knows  
Love stories?” She could tell you one or two?  
“She is not young?” You wish that you were Rose?  
“She hears love-stories? Are they ever true?”  
Some time I may ask you. (1-10)

As in this poem, the speakers in Piatt’s dialogues are often a mother and child. Other poems commonly depict exchanges between a woman and her lover or a wife and her husband. Rarely one to write a straightforward first-person lyric, Piatt’s dialogue poems, regardless of the participants, reinforce the extent to which drama is a constitutive feature of her poetic.

If drama functioned generally for Piatt as an appropriate genre for the public space of the periodical, the dramatic productions of the nineteenth-century stage served as a more specific model for the kind of aesthetic she exercised in her magazine poems. Although it is true that within the printed vehicle of the magazine Piatt’s poems are not enacted per se, their fundamentally dramatic impulse invokes and foregrounds performativity and theatricality. As a result, the magazine is transformed into a kind of metaphorical stage that presents her poetic performances to her readers. Like their theatrical counterparts, these performances are marked by a range of artistic approaches. As pieces intended for the far flung magazine audience, Piatt’s dramatic poems deploy an eclectic aesthetic that complements the variety of the both the magazines and the stage,
incorporating a wide assortment of genres and ignoring boundaries between what we might now consider high and low art. Piatt is the poetic equivalent of “Shakespeare’s Poor Player” in “At the Play.” Like the actor who, in the course of an evening, dons the different masks of the “soldier, or priest, or king, / Or peasant,” or, we might add, minstrel figure, acrobat, and singer, Piatt, in the course of one poetic performance, manipulates and experiments with an array of poetic styles.

II. The Multifunctional Performance of “The Palace-Burner”

The poem that best exemplifies this aesthetic and its direct connection to the periodical context is “The Palace-Burner.” Paula Bennett has written extensively on the poem as an illustration of Piatt’s interest in exploring the political agency of nineteenth-century American women, and, arguing that it represents Piatt’s signature piece, has chosen it as the title poem of her authoritative critical edition of Piatt’s selected poetry. In addition, “The Palace-Burner” is one of the handful of Piatt poems incorporated into both the Norton and Heath anthologies. Similarly, both William Spengemann and Janet Gray have included it in their respective anthologies of nineteenth-century American poetry and nineteenth-century American women’s poetry. And Larry R. Michaels discusses the poem at length as a premier example of Piatt’s handling of the dramatic monologue, which he sees as one of her most significant achievements (29).

It is suggestive, then, that Piatt organizes this signature piece around the speaker’s interaction with a nineteenth-century periodical. The poem is constructed around a conversation between a mother and her child, during which, presumably, the mother is watching the child browse through and cut out pictures from newspapers and magazines.
The two characters engage in a dialogue about one particular item from the periodicals, a picture of a female French Communist just prior to her execution. As Bennett notes, over seventeen thousand men, women, and children were executed in the French government’s response to the Paris Commune, an insurrectionary government that held Paris for ten days in 1871 (Palace-Burner 167). Thus “The Palace-Burner” is one of several Piatt poems, including “Playing Beggars,” “A Neighborhood Incident,” and “A Night-Scene from the Rock of Cashel, Ireland,” that complexly empathizes with the victims of class and social inequities. According to Bennett, the picture of the Communard to which “The Palace-Burner” refers was most likely the one printed in the July 1871 issue of Harper’s Weekly, “The End of the Commune—Execution of a Petroleuse,” which accompanied an article about women’s involvement in the Communist insurrection. The poem, then, is Piatt’s response to a specific clipping from a specific periodical.

More generally, however, “The Palace-Burner” provides insight into the relationship between poetry and periodicals in the late nineteenth century. Not only was much postbellum poetry written initially for periodicals rather than books, its authors were enmeshed thoroughly in periodical culture, serving as regular readers, and, in some instances, editors, of magazines and newspapers as well as contributors. The periodical possessed a particularly critical function in the nineteenth century. Whereas in the twentieth century the university English department emerged to centralize the study and the writing of poetry, no such institutional force existed in the postbellum years. At the same time American literary culture was expanding geographically, with writers surfacing in the mid-Atlantic region, the Midwest, the South, and the far West, especially San Francisco. Perkins views this dispersion as the single largest contributing factor in
the development of late-nineteenth-century American verse. Arguing that most postbellum poets lived in artistic isolation, far removed from other writers, Perkins contends that the periodical acted as a source of cultural contact and cohesion, providing them with a forum for interaction and exchange. The magazines became an artistic network that was particularly nourishing for women writers who, according to Gray, often were excluded from “the collegial networks” among publishers and critics “through which enduring reputations, and thus literary canons, are made” (xxxiv). In composing a poem about a picture from a magazine, Piatt squarely situates herself within this periodical network. Moreover, “The Palace-Burner” was originally published in 1872 in the weekly New York newspaper the Independent, a main rival of Harper’s Weekly. The Independent was a preeminent supporter of verse within the postbellum era. Founded in 1848 as a Congregationalist journal, it achieved notoriety in the 1850s as a fiercely abolitionist publication, edited from 1861 to 1863 by Henry Ward Beecher. By 1870, however, it had toned down its sectarian flavor and had become an important general interest newspaper of politics, current events, and literature. Its poetry contributors included Bryant, Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Richard Henry Stoddard, Stedman, Bayard Taylor, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Harte, Riley, Lucy Larcom, Celia Thaxter, Lanier, Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Louis Stevenson (Mott 2: 377). In the mid-1880s the Independent was publishing approximately 230 poems per year. Piatt was one of the Independent’s most regular contributors, publishing dozens of poems in its pages throughout her career. In light of the magazine’s support of both her work and of poetry in general, it is wholly appropriate that it was in the Independent that she placed “The Palace-Burner,” a poem that, by expressly referencing
items from a magazine, reaffirms how pointedly Piatt was enmeshed in her periodical milieu. And given that the poem is built on an intertextual allusion to Harper’s, a competitor of the Independent, it indicates Piatt’s self-conscious awareness of, and preoccupation with, her cultural role as a periodical poet.

Yet as much as its setting, occasion, allusions, and publication in the Independent suggest a keen interest in periodicals, “The Palace-Burner” seems to head into different thematic territory altogether. As Bennett has argued so persuasively, the poem meditates on and deconstructs the (a)political nature of the nineteenth-century domestic woman. The poem turns on the child’s prescient ability to point out the dichotomy between the mother and the Communard. When the child asks the mother whether she would have burned palaces like the Communard did, the Christian, law-abiding speaker realizes that the question is more complicated than she had thought. In its entirety, the poem reads:

She has been burning palaces. “To see
   The sparks look pretty in the wind?” Well, yes—
And something more. But women brave as she
   Leave much for cowards such as I to guess.

But this is old, so old that everything
   Is ashes here—the woman and the rest.
Two years are oh! so long. Now you may bring
   Some newer pictures. You like this one best?

You wish that you had lived in Paris then?
   You would have loved to burn a palace, too?
But they had guns in France, and Christian men
   Shot wicked little Communists, like you.

You would have burned the palace? Just because
   You did not live in it yourself! Oh! why?
Have I not taught you to respect the laws?
   You would have burned the palace. Would not I?

Would I? Go to your play. Would I, indeed?

98
Does the boy not know my soul to be
Languid and worldly, with a dainty need
For light and music? Yet he questions me.

Can he have seen my soul more near than I?
Ah! in the dusk and distance sweet she seems,
With lips to kiss away a baby’s cry,
Hands fit for flowers, and eyes for tears and dreams.

Can he have seen my soul? And could she wear
Such utter life upon a dying face,
Such unappealing, beautiful despair,
Such garments—soon to be a shroud—with grace?

Has she a charm so calm that it could breathe
In damp, low places till some frightened hour;
Then start, like a fair, subtle snake, and wreathe
A stinging poison with a shadowy power?

Would I burn palaces? The child has seen
In this fierce creature of the Commune here,
So bright with bitterness and so serene,
A being finer than my soul, I fear.

At the beginning of the poem the mother responded to the child’s naïve desire to be a palace-burner by saying that “Christian men / Shot wicked little Communists, like you.” But by the end of the poem the speaker’s moral indignation is muted by self doubt. Instead of critiquing Communism as she did earlier in the poem by calling the boy a “wicked little Communist,” she now sees in the picture of the Communard a “being finer” than herself. We witness here the mother’s first awareness that the Communard’s political action might indeed have been justified. Rather than confining herself to the domestic sphere, like the speaker, the Communard aggressively practices her political beliefs. As Bennett writes, “Turning her thoughts back on herself, the speaker explores her own complicity and, by inference, that of other women, whose ‘dainty need for light and music’ has left their souls too ‘languid and worldly’ to risk the righting of a wrong.
Surrounded by material comforts, women like the speaker are also part of the problem, infecting the domestic interior, even the nursery, with their passive acquiescence in evil” (Public Sphere 136-37). Like much of Piatt’s work, the poem questions the fundamental tenets of domestic ideology and particularly the political apathy of the stereotypical domestic woman.

In conjunction with its political message, however, “The Palace-Burner” illustrates the powerful and complicated impact periodicals exerted on nineteenth-century middle-class American life. All of the speaker’s personal and political musing is made possible by her interaction with the Harper’s illustration. The picture and the accompanying article not only report the news of the day, they transgress the barriers of nation and domestic space to introduce the speaker to a new way of thinking about herself, her gender, and her world. At the same time, the picture serves as a source of amusement for the child. It is a picture worth looking at and cutting out, a picture that sparks the imagination and fancy. In “The Palace-Burner,” then, Piatt depicts the periodical as serving multifunctional purposes. In different ways the picture and the article are equally accessible to the adult and the child alike. They are at once sources of profound intellectual, political, and emotional content, ephemeral material artifacts that can be cut up, played with, and tossed away, and objects of amusing and pleasurable browsing. They find a place in both the child’s scrapbook and in the professional poet’s archive of usable material.

This characterization of periodicals coalesces with the actual conditions of postbellum magazine culture. Indeed, Piatt’s representation of periodicals is reminiscent of Benson’s description of the Galaxy as a magazine that attempted simultaneously to
“entertain” and “stir ideas,” to amuse and edify. This multifunctionality was especially evident in the capacity of magazines to act as sources of entertainment and education for the entire family. As we saw in the Introduction, in the mid-to-late nineteenth century the parlor was a kind of “domestic theater” for bourgeois Americans. Family, friends, and neighbors routinely gathered in the parlor to perform oratorical recitations, musical numbers, magical acts, and, like the March girls in Little Women, impromptu theatrical pieces for one another (52-55). Price and Belasco Smith contend that magazines often provided the material for these domestic performances, as participants read aloud the eclectic array of articles, stories, and poems that magazines printed (7). Buttressing the inherent link between the theater and magazines, the parlor evening demonstrates how periodicals, like the theater, served as a public form of popular culture, one that, as in “The Palace-Burner,” engaged an expansive and multidimensional American audience.

As a successful and prolific magazine writer, Piatt developed a poetic style appropriate for this diverse audience. Because almost all nineteenth-century poets have been dismissed and ignored as conventional and uninteresting, we have a very limited and underdeveloped critical terminology for evaluating their aesthetic achievements and tendencies. For the most part, American literary scholars have perpetuated a dichotomy that has been difficult to dislodge, between the ingenuous artistic rebelliousness of Whitman and Dickinson, which has been analyzed and defined in quite specific terms, and the conventional practices of every other nineteenth-century poet, which have, for the most part, received only cursory treatments. Piatt troubles and forces us to revise this framework by traversing both sides of the dichotomy; she is a veritable third term that disrupts this standard formulation because she seems at once to be well-versed in the
conventions of her day while also revealing an ironic and experimental sensibility that seems more in line with Whitman and Dickinson.\(^{10}\) As William Spengemann argues, Piatt is “very much a poet of her time both in matter and manner,” one who makes use of “commonplace themes” and “conventional sentiments,” but with an artistry that renders them “fresh,” “her own,” original (xxiii). Because Piatt does not fit squarely into dominant critical paradigms, the specific contours of her verse are hard to pin down. But this slipperiness, it seems to me, is precisely the effect she was aiming for as a periodical writer. Disseminating her work to the broad audience of general-interest magazines, Piatt creates a far-ranging poetic, one that, like the magazines and the theater, is marked by artistic heterogeneity, and that both “entertains” and “stir[s] ideas” by invoking popular poetic discourses of the nineteenth century while also manipulating and redirecting them in idiosyncratic and often complex ways. The aesthetic hallmark of Piatt’s magazine poems is that, like their audience, they are varied and expansive, stylistically familiar yet intricately mixed and constructed.\(^{11}\)

“The Palace-Burner,” for example, negotiates between several poetic discourses and styles, some almost wholly at odds with one another. While it eventually turns into a political meditation, it begins as a relatively formulaic and, seemingly, anything but political, piece of work. Broadly speaking, with its depiction of a bourgeois family in a domestic setting, “The Palace-Burner” fits squarely within the genteel mode. George Santayana has contended that the vast majority of nineteenth-century American poetry participated in the genteel tradition, which he characterizes as mundane and conservative, “simple, sweet, humane,” “grandmotherly,” and “sedate” verse (73). According to F. Brett Cox, genteel poetry was concerned with the “Good” and the “Beautiful” aspects of
bourgeois life, never turning its eye to social or political realities (214). In its setting and occasion, “The Palace-Burner” is reminiscent of classic genteel poems like Longfellow’s “The Day is Done” and Whittier’s “Snow-Bound,” both of which sanctify the home by portraying the interactions of family members by the hearthside. Indeed, “The Palace-Burner” is one of the dozens of domestic poems that, like “From North and South,” Piatt published for or about children. The mother-child poem has been a specific part of the women’s literary tradition in America since Bradstreet. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Lydia Sigourney became one of America’s most beloved poets by writing scores of eulogies to dead children as well as lighter verses about the bliss of motherhood. These poems endure as some of the foremost incarnations of the sentimental tradition, gaining their power through their emotional language and appeals to sympathetic bonding. Emily Stipes Watts argues that by mid-century the sentimental child poem was a significant component of most women poets’ oeuvre, one that “nearly every woman poet tried” (94). Piatt was no exception, as the mother-child poem remained an important part of her artistic portfolio throughout her entire career. In “The Palace-Burner,” then, Piatt grafts an incisive political commentary onto a poem in which, presumably, we might be least likely to expect it, one that is situated in the genteel and domestic conventions of nineteenth-century poetry.

Yet “The Palace-Burner” is a subtle piece of political poetry, much more understated and suggestive in its rhetoric than the programmatic political bombast of Whitman’s war verse. As epitomized by Whittier’s abolitionist work and Sigourney’s protests about the country’s Native-American policies, the political poem proliferated in nineteenth-century American literature. Robert H. Walker’s *The Poet and the Gilded*
Age (1963), for example, documents the expressly political purpose of the large body of populist and reformist poetry produced in the late nineteenth century. More recently, Bennett, Joseph Harrington, and Mary Loeffelholz have all demonstrated that despite frequent associations of nineteenth-century poetry solely with the romantic idealism of the genteel tradition, the political poem was a regular feature in poetic culture. While Bennett explores the political impetus of nineteenth-century women’s verse, Harrington underscores the political and popular dimensions of poetry at the turn of the century, and Loeffelholz reveals the political overtones of aesthetic practice in the civic poetry of Boston during the Civil War. In “The Palace-Burner,” Piatt draws on this tradition of political poetry but handles it with aplomb and reserve; she balances the genteel mode with the political poem, remaining grounded in the genteel setting but clearing a space for political interrogation.

In its complex negotiation of these poetic discourses, “The Palace-Burner” also draws on a range of other aesthetic modes. Based on an illustration, it is part of the ekphrastic tradition of Anglo-American poetry, as are a number of other Piatt poems including “Beatrice Cenci” and “A Lesson in a Picture.” With its explorations into consciousness and self doubt, moreover, it is an example of what both Bennett and Dorothea Steiner have identified as the “proto-” or “pre-” modernist strain of late-nineteenth-century women’s verse. These critics argue that postbellum women poets broke the mold of the sentimental “poetess” and became more daring in both theme and technique, paving the way for modernist female poets like Amy Lowell, H.D., and Marianne Moore, while also pioneering several of the practices later associated with modernism: imagism, fragmentation, psychological perspicuity, obliqueness, and a
cutting sense of irony. “The Palace-Burner” fits these criteria; psychological and deeply ironic, the poem is also formally experimental. Like Frost’s dramatic monologues decades later, the poem opens in the middle of a conversation with no accompanying framework that details the setting, characters, or subject matter: “She has been burning palaces. ‘To see / The sparks look pretty in the wind?’ Well, yes— / And something more” (1-3). To add to the confusion, the first unidentified speaker refers to a third character with a third person singular pronoun. The lack of concrete particulars in the first stanza makes for a disorienting reading experience. Piatt complements this obliqueness with fragmentation created by her rampant use of punctuation. Dashes, question marks, quotation marks, commas, exclamation points, and periods load her lines with caesuras that undercut their regularized rhythms. For example, the second stanza reads, “But this is old, so old that everything / Is ashes here—the woman and the rest. / Two years are oh! so long. Now you may bring / Some newer pictures. You like this one best?” (4-8). These lines, jilted and fragmented, demonstrate Piatt’s skill in modifying conventional poetic rhythms to accommodate disjointed speech and abrupt turns of thought. As we will see, this type of formal and rhythmic innovation abounds in the majority of her poems.

And yet in spite of its experimentation, “The Palace-Burner” is ultimately traditional in form, composed of regular quatrains of iambic pentameter, perfect end rhymes, monosyllabic words, and everyday Anglo-Saxon diction. Rather than exploding formal conventions like a Whitman and Dickinson, Piatt’s verse traverses the boundaries between formal ingenuity and convention. This kind of flexibility is the defining feature of the overarching aesthetic at work in “The Palace-Burner.” The poem hinges on the
tensions between domestic and political, genteel and ironic, and traditional and experimental poetry. It is a hybrid poem that draws on several poetic traditions and artistic techniques, and that, like the Harper’s illustration and article, is simultaneously identifiable and convoluted, accessible and abstruse. It is a mother-child poem that takes place in a familiar and commonplace domestic setting, written in iambic pentameter rhyming quatrains, and a complicated political commentary, a psychological portrait of interiority, a disjointed oral performance. And all of its hybridity is enfolded within a poem that is constructed fundamentally on dramatic models, beginning as a dialogue but then turning into a kind of internal monologue.

In sum, “The Palace-Burner” presents an eclectic aesthetic. Some readers, like Perkins and other twentieth-century critics who have denigrated postbellum magazine verse, might view this aesthetic as a sign of sloppiness and immaturity, and others, like Bennett and Steiner, as evidence of transition and change in postbellum women’s poetry. Yet in light of its representation of periodical culture, “The Palace-Burner” suggests that in fact this aesthetic is Piatt’s response to the conditions of writing periodical poetry. In its range of different poetic approaches and styles, the poem has the potential to serve the purposes and engage the expectations of a broad readership, in much the same way that the assorted fare of theaters enabled them to appeal to and reach a diverse national audience. In this respect, the poem is indicative of much of Piatt’s corpus. Her work typically remains entrenched in conventional poetic discourses, but blends, complicates, and troubles them to create a multifunctional poetic. Resisting classification, her poems put into action a poetic project much different from the ones that have dominated discussions of American poetry. Neither an egocentric American Adam founding a
national poetic language, nor an elite and erudite “individual talent” of the modernist age, she is a skilled and versatile artist who negotiates the rhetorical complexities of writing for popular postbellum magazines by performing several scripts of poetic discourse at once.17

III. Multifunctionality and the Poetics of Ambivalence

Piatt’s multifunctional approach in “The Palace-Burner” is repeated and revised in poems encompassing an entire range of subjects, from the construction of gender identities in nineteenth-century domestic ideology (“Shapes of a Soul” and “The Fancy Ball”), to romantic love (“After the Quarrel” and “A Lesson in a Picture”), religious faith (“We Two” and “A Word of Reproach”), and the faded chivalry of the antebellum South (“Mock Diamonds” and “From North and South”). Just as “The Palace-Burner” combines meditations on gender and politics in the context of a domestic poem, many of Piatt’s pieces individually navigate several of her recurring themes. In this respect, her periodical aesthetic complements the thematic circumlocutions of her poems. More often than not, the combination of formal and thematic heterogeneity results in manifestly difficult, and ultimately ambivalent, verse.

For example, having been born in the South and having moved in 1861 to the North, Piatt was deeply affected by the Civil War, writing approximately two dozen Civil War poems throughout her career. But Piatt’s war poems are of a much different sort than either Whitman’s or Melville’s, which were confined to the war theater and the political issues surrounding the conflict. Instead, Piatt tended to enfold her thoughts about the war into poems that could just as easily fall under several different headings.
Written from a woman’s perspective either on the home front or after the fighting had ended, Piatt’s poems usually treat the war as an occasion for exploring a host of other topics, including love, politics, and religion. “One from the Dead,” published in the Overland Monthly in 1871, for example, begins as an implied dramatic dialogue that seems to monumentalize a grandmother’s grief over the loss of her grandson:

“Yes, yes! It is nine years, you say?
There is his portrait. He was handsome. Yes!”
His mother’s mother kept her eyes away,
But pointed up, and I could guess.

He was remembered in his room:
Of him pet window-flowers, in odors, dreamed;
His shut piano, under their sad bloom,
The coffin of dead music seemed. (1-8)

We appear to have here a version of Sigourney’s child elegies, which were so popular and well-known that Twain famously farced them with the poems of Huckleberry Finn’s Emily Grangerford. Yet what starts as a dialogue about maternal mourning and grief quickly turns into an interior monologue. The speaker sees the grandson’s “sword, whose bitter cause was never gained,” and his “coat, with glimmering shoulder-leaves, shot through / The breast, I think, and fiercely stained” (10-12). The grandson is identified as a Confederate soldier. The speaker reacts to these artifacts first by voicing her disapproval of the Southern cause, labeling it “bitter,” and then by articulating her frustration with the glorification of war itself: “Oh, coward-praise men give to dust, / Only when it lies motionless and mute” (17-18). But just as it seems that the poem is prepared to launch into a polemic about the war, it makes another abrupt and jarring turn. The next stanza commences with the vague proposition of “What more?,” and the poem suddenly progresses from documenting the speaker’s feelings while looking at the
remembrances of the soldier to describing a mystical religious experience. Alone at the soldier’s gravestone, the speaker states, “I would believe; help Thou mine unbelief / With One that was—One from the Dead” (27-28). The belief to which she refers is unclear at this point, but soon after making this invocation, she miraculously feels a “luminous Face,” crowned with “Thorns,” and hands that had been torn by “Nails.” It is now apparent that her belief is a matter of religious and spiritual faith, “answered,” to her, “by One from the Dead”—namely, by a divination of Christ. The poem, that is, becomes a meditation on religious conversion and affirmation. But it does not end here. Instead, Piatt provides a final turn of the screw with the last stanza, which reads:

If this had been ------- You smile, and say to me, “It were Illusion, shaped of wandering sleep!”
Well, if it were illusion, let it be: I have a tender Faith to keep. (37-40)

In a wonderfully complex gesture, the poem concludes by returning to the dialogue form. But given the second speaker’s condescending smile and authoritative dismissal of the primary speaker’s miraculous experience, he or she seems to be somebody quite different from the grandmother at the beginning of the poem who could hardly bear to look at her grandson’s artifacts. In fact, the setting of the poem apparently has shifted, with the primary speaker now recounting to another character the revelation she experienced at the soldier’s grave. In light of the second speaker’s offhanded dismissal of this account, the poem ends both by gesturing towards the conflict between religious faith and skepticism, and by portraying the communicative impasses that often exist when trying to convey experiences so intensely personal.
Far from a straightforward war piece, “One from the Dead” is, like “The Palace-Burner,” an artistic mélange. It, too, offers an array of poetic approaches and styles. Generically, it is an elegy, a domestic poem of mourning, a war poem, and a poem of religious introspection. In addition, it participates in both the love poem and the gothic traditions. At one point the speaker declares, “If one, with voice and breath, / Had given to one a rose-geranium bud, / And changed with moons, and vanished into death / In far-back feuds of hate and blood” (21-24). As Bennett has shown, a number of Piatt poems, including “Giving Back the Flower” and “There Was a Rose,” discuss a former lover who at one time gave Piatt’s speaker a rose before he went off to fight, and eventually die, as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War. Like “A Ghost at the Opera” and “One from the Dead,” these love poems usually have the lover appear either as a ghost or as an almost palpable image from the speaker’s memory. Blending psychological interiority with supernatural apparitions, they underscore and interrogate the gothic dimensions of romantic love in a way similar to the work of fellow Southerner Edgar Allan Poe.

This mixture of genres is complemented by the poem’s stylistic variety, as it vacillates between monologue and dialogue forms as well as between formal regularity and experimentation. Like many of Piatt’s poems, “One from the Dead” begins by placing the reader in the middle of a conversation without identifying its participants, which makes for a troubling reading experience. But by the second stanza this problem is alleviated as the poem becomes dominated by one lyric voice, and it quickly invokes conventions that clarify that it is an elegy: in the soldier’s room are “pet window-flowers” with their “sad bloom.” When in stanza five the speaker arrives at her commentary about the war, the diction is simple, the sentiments declarative and straightforward, and the
rhythm regular: a quatrain of alternately rhyming lines, with the first and fourth lines in iambic tetrameter and the second and third lines in iambic pentameter:

Oh, coward-praise men give to dust,
Only when it lies motionless and mute,
Beneath the shining slander, which it must
Not, till the Judgment-light, refute! (17-20)

Yet immediately after providing this emphatic and lucid critique of the war, the speaker completely changes her rhetorical stance, asking the question “What more?” and then launching into a tortuous conditional clause that lasts over four stanzas, beginning with the “If one, with voice and breath” statement. The rhetorical simplicity of stanza five has disappeared, replaced by hedges and twists and turns in the speaker’s thoughts. Fittingly, the lines in these stanzas are full of caesuras, dashes, and abrupt stops and starts. And when we finally arrive at the last stanza, as we saw, the poem suddenly turns into a dialogue again with a new second speaker. Here Piatt substitutes a pentameter line for the first line of tetrameter, breaks up the first line with a dash that is longer than any other in the poem, and includes several caesuras in its first three lines. These formal disruptions result in a final stanza that is far less mellifluous than the others, which complements the disagreement and miscommunication that it describes between the speaker and the other character.

“One from the Dead,” then, serves as another example of how Piatt takes a range of artistic approaches in her periodical poetry. In this sense, the poem reflects a strategic ambivalence in Piatt’s mode of authorial production. Throughout the piece, Piatt never settles on one voice, one style, one image, or even one theme. Though many of the poem’s various formal, generic, and thematic strands seem simple and conventional
enough, Piatt fuses and complicates them in a way that renders the poem, on the whole, slippery and elusive. This fundamental artistic ambivalence, I would argue, is a fitting complement to the themes she routinely addresses. “One from the Dead,” for example, engages issues that are inherently ambiguous metaphysical topics, including love, death, the afterlife, religious faith, and war. Rather than come to definitive conclusions about these issues, “One from the Dead” maintains their abstract character. The entire second half of the poem, for instance, is written in the conditional voice, qualifying and hedging the religious conversion the speaker is trying to describe. Even if at last the poem seems to end concretely with an affirmation of Christian “Faith,” the conditional voice, combined with the capitalization of the word “Faith,” underscores the extent to which faith is a concept that transcends the bounds of concrete certainty. In performing her role as a periodical poet, Piatt opts not only for eclecticism but for ambivalence, offering her wide readership an uncertain and enigmatic rendering of familiar poetic themes.

Whereas “One from the Dead” puts into relief the indeterminacy of religious faith, other poems, such as “Shapes of a Soul” and “The Witch in the Glass,” deploy Piatt’s aesthetic to address the ambivalence of female sexuality. Among the most interesting and complex is “Beatrice Cenci.” As Bennett has explained, this dramatic poem, originally published in the July 1871 issue of the Overland Monthly, simultaneously poeticizes the conversation between a mother and her child as they look at a reproduction of Guido Reni’s famous painting of the sixteenth-century figure Beatrice Cenci and, presumably through the mother’s memory, as they watch a theatrical performance of Shelley’s play The Cenci. According to John Carlos Rowe, Beatrice Cenci was a figure who “haunted the writings of the Anglo-American romantics” (37).
Reni’s painting appears during climactic scenes in several enduring nineteenth-century literary texts, including Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun* and *Italian Notebooks*, Melville’s *Pierre*, and James’ *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*. On a less enduring level, Francesco Domenico Guerrazzi’s sentimentalized romance *Beatrice Cenci* (1854) was well-known and popular among nineteenth-century Americans. Rowe attributes Cenci’s pervasiveness with Victorian Americans to her ambivalent mix of sexual purity and transgression, victimization and aggression. In sixteenth-century Rome, Beatrice, the supposed personification of feminine purity and morality, was incestuously violated by her father, one of the city’s richest and most powerful men. After plotting with other members of her family, she was eventually executed for committing his murder. Cenci’s story resonated with nineteenth-century Americans because it taps into and troubles one of the core principles of mid-century domestic ideology, the angelic chastity of the young American woman. Cenci’s transformation from an innocent to a victim to a murderer raises ethical dilemmas about her sexual status and guilt: is she spoiled or is she still pure? should she be exonerated or condemned? Like Isabel in *Pierre*, with whom she is connected throughout the novel, Cenci is the very embodiment of enigma and ambiguity.

Once again, Piatt reinforces the poem’s thematic ambivalences by creating a hybridized poetic performance. Like “The Palace-Burner,” “Beatrice Cenci” is a mother-child poem that also works off of the ekphrastic tradition. Further, it is another example of Piatt’s “protomodern” poetry, even more oblique, fragmented, and disorienting than “The Palace-Burner.” For instance, Piatt reveals the setting and time of the poem, as well as the character of the speaker, only gradually and by hints as the poem unfolds. Although the subtitle seems to concretize the poem’s setting by explaining that it takes
place on a street as the characters peer “In a City Shop-Window,” the first stanza is enigmatic:

Out of low light an exquisite, faint face  
Suddenly started. Goldenness of hair,  
A South-look of sweet, sorrowful eyes, a trace  
Of prison paleness . . . (1-4)

The difficulties here are concentrated in issues of voice and detail. We do not know who is speaking nor whose “faint face” is being described. Even if we do have the painting in mind the description is confusing because the active verb “started” is attributed to an inanimate object, the painting. This confusion is only augmented by the poem’s next few lines: “—what if these were there / When Guido’s hand could never reach the grace / That glimmered on me from the Italian air— / Fairness so fierce, or fierceness half so fair?” (4-7). In Dickinsonian manner, Piatt uses a pronoun without clarifying its referent: does the “these” refer to the “low light” and “faint face” or to the physical attributes she lists? Another difficulty arises with the introduction of the personal pronoun “me.” Piatt employs this pronoun without making it clear who the “me” is: is it an observer of the painting, is it the painting itself suddenly come to life, or is it the disembodied voice of Beatrice Cenci? Like “One from the Dead,” the poem also includes abrupt temporal shifts. We begin in an unspecified present, move to the past, then seem to jump back to the present when the child says “‘Is it some Actress?,’” and then go back to a different past scene, a memory of seeing the play performed. By integrating these protomodernist formal features into a mother-child poem, while also blending in the ekphrastic mode, “Beatrice Cenci,” like “The Palace-Burner,” reveals an amalgamation of poetic approaches and styles. And all of this eclecticism occurs in a poem that takes place at
least partially in the theater and that incorporates dialogue and interior monologue. In addition to imbuing the poem with another artistic dimension, these dramatic techniques reify the connections between Piatt’s multifunctional poetic and the aesthetics of nineteenth-century theatrical productions.

Within the poem, it is again possible to link Piatt’s poetic variety and her use of the drama directly to the periodical context. At the heart of “Beatrice Cenci” is a question of reception. Midway through the poem, Piatt writes:

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The curtain rolled away,
Dusty and dim. The scene—among the dead—
In some weird, gloomy pillared palace lay;
The Tragedy, which we have brokenly read,
With its two hundred ghastly years was gray: (10-14)
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By claiming that we have “brokenly read” the “Tragedy”—which refers both to Cenci’s life and to Shelley’s play—the poem foregrounds the act of interpretation. How, it asks, are we to read and understand Beatrice Cenci, the historical personage, the subject of the famous painting, and the tragic heroine of the play? In posing this question, Piatt explores at least two different sets of reading practices through the respective responses of the mother and child. At first the mother seems drawn to pity by Cenci’s “sweet, sorrowful eyes” and “trace / Of prison paleness,” but soon she discerns in Cenci’s face an oxymoronic mixture of “Fierceness” and “fairness.” By the end of the theatrical performance she is overcome by fear: “Hush!” she states, “for a child’s quick murmur breaks the charm / Of terror that was winding round me so” (17-18). In progressing from pity to “terror,” the mother recognizes in Cenci all of her enigmatic complexity. In contrast, the child understands Cenci simplistically. The poem ends with him imploring his mother to explain to him “why the beautiful ladies all, you know, / Live so far-off,
and die so long ago” (24-25). Seeing Cenci only as another of the “beautiful ladies” that exist in the “old-time” legends, the child is immune from the kind of volatile emotional response the mother experiences.

Similar to “The Palace-Burner,” then, Piatt acknowledges the discrepancies among individualized reading practices, a subject that she plainly confronts in the 1871 poem “An After-Poem,” published in the Capital. The first stanza of this poem reads:

You will read, or you will not read,
That the lilies are whitest after they wither;
That the fairest buds stay shut in the seed,
Though the bee in the dew say “Come you up hither.” (1-4)

While the issue of reception, of how and whether audiences “read” or do “not read,” is essential to any literary production, it was particularly pressing for poets who contributed to nineteenth-century literary magazines. The national boom in periodical production, the expansion of magazine distribution, the growth and diversity of the American reading public, and the broad range of the general interest magazines, all made writing for postbellum magazines a complicated rhetorical exercise. This situation was further compounded by the fact that poetry was just one feature in the contents of most magazines. While Piatt’s book audience presumably had some familiarity with, or at least interest in, reading her poems, her periodical audience may have had no interest in her work whatsoever. Having bought or subscribed to the magazine for any number of reasons, they may have reacted to her poem with zeal, dislike, indifference, or complete inattention. In this respect, they were much like members of theater audiences who might have attended a nineteenth-century Shakespeare production less for the Shakespeare than for some other element in the production’s assorted fare. In response to the array of
reading practices represented by the periodical audience, then, Piatt creates in “Beatrice Cenci” yet another dramatic poem that performs a multifunctional aesthetic, offering her readers an assortment of poetic approaches in one package. This hybridization matches the ambiguous nature of Beatrice Cenci herself. Rather than arrive at any certainty about Cenci’s sexuality and guilt, Piatt keeps the divergent reactions of the mother and child in flux, leaving the poem’s representation of Cenci, like its aesthetic composition, ultimately indeterminate.

The diverse reading practices Piatt explores in “Beatrice Cenci” and invites in her poems are reflected in the nineteenth-century reviews of her work. A prolific writer, Piatt was reviewed dozens of times within the pages of the magazines in which she routinely published. In sum, these reviews portray her as a writer who is simple, enjoyable, and conventional, yet challenging, learned, and thought-provoking at the same time. For example, William Dean Howells, a close friend and supporter of the Piatt family, wrote that Piatt’s collection *A Voyage to the Fortunate Isles* is “as delicate and purely poetic as ever was given to the world. . . . The range [is] not great, [but] from chords few and simple [Piatt gave voice to] a pathetic muse that is never monotonous, never cloys or wearies” (104). Howells was always among Piatt’s most ardent admirers, but while his reviews are commendatory they emphasize her limitations: she is “pure” and “delicate” but not “great.” Other reviewers invoked similar terms. According to Michaels, for instance, *The St. James Gazette* deemed her poems “playful,” while others described them as having a “‘solid kernel of fresh, original thought in each of them,’ ‘careful and conscientious artistry,’ ‘peculiar charm,’ and even ‘deep-hearted suggestiveness’” (32). The adjectives used here—“playful,” “fresh,” “careful,” “charm[ing],” “delicate,” and
“simple”—are complimentary but not lavish. They fall short of descriptive terms like “genius,” “mastery,” and “ideality” that often surfaced in reviews of Longfellow, Emerson, and Whittier. A reviewer in the September, 1874 issue of the *Overland Monthly*, for instance, succinctly writes, “Mrs. Piatt has a charm and a womanliness in her manner that is most refreshing, but true poetic genius Mrs. Piatt has not” (295-96).

Some reviews could not brush Piatt aside quite so easily, however. Rather than considering her a simple, unremarkable poet, they note the “difficulty” and “obscurity” of her “mannerisms” and “innuendoes.” Often they chastise her for these qualities and recommend that she fall in line with a more conventional poetic. Bennett cites a number of reviewers that were so put off by Piatt’s eccentricity that they ended up doubting whether she even understood or knew what she was doing (*Palace-Burner* xxviii-xxix).

The most prescient is an 1880 review from *Scribner’s*, which states:

> [Piatt] is nothing if not dramatic, and nothing if not subtle. Her method is a profound one, in that it works from within outward, and a faulty one, in that it implies more sympathy than she is likely to obtain, and more intelligence than is possessed by one reader in a hundred. Her conceptions are no doubt clear to her, but they are frequently obscure to others. Her situations may be striking from a psychological point of view, but they are not such as to commend themselves to the eyes of common men; the stage upon which her tragedies are played is of the soul, not of the senses. She not only demands an apprehension which is denied to the many, but she demands also that they forget the language which is natural to them, and learn the language which is natural to her . . . (635)

This reviewer eloquently identifies the strain of Piatt’s poetry that is enigmatic and complex and that eschews the expectations of what Melville referred to as the “superficial skimmer of pages.” Piatt writes only for an elite audience, the reviewer complains, one that has the rare ability and intelligence to enter into the psychic world of her poems and grasp their “conceptions” and “language.”
Piatt’s description as charming and obscure, playful and profound, simple and convoluted is a testament to the multifunctional poetic at work in virtually every poem she wrote. Her 1876 poem “If I Had Made the World,” published in the Capital in 1876, subtly meditates on the status of her poetic performances and on her legacy as a periodical poet. Another mother-child dramatic dialogue, “If I Had Made the World” consists of the mother’s response to her child’s question about what she would have made if she were God. Though fun-loving and humorous throughout, the poem ends on the rather grim note, “I’d not have made the world at all!” At a critical moment in the poem’s trajectory, the mother and child broach the subject of poetry. The speaker states:

I would have made one poet too—
   Has God made more?—Yes, I forgot,
There is no need of asking you;
You know as little as I do.
   A poet is—well, who knows what?

   And yet a poet is, my dear,
   A man who writes a book like this,
(There never was but one, I hear;)
----- Yes, it is hard to spell S-h-a-k-e-s-p-e-a-r-e.
   So, now, Good-night,—and here’s a kiss. (13-20)

In this exchange we have a playful rendering of trying to explain complex ideas to a child. The speaker is confronted with the imposing problem of defining a poet, and can only give the rather unsatisfactory answer that it is someone who writes a book like Shakespeare’s. The child is more interested in trying to spell Shakespeare’s name than in the repercussions of the mother’s answer. And so Piatt spells out the name for the child and for us, ending this part of the conversation with a maternal goodnight kiss.

Yet clearly on another level, these stanzas represent a moment of self-definition. Through the voice of the speaker, Piatt is asking what a poet is—a profoundly difficult
question to which she can only reply “A poet is—well, who knows what?” Her default answer, “A man who writes a book like this,” which refers to Shakespeare, raises even more questions. Since “If I Had Made the World” was originally printed in a periodical, not a book, when she defines the poet as a “man who writes a book like this [one],” Piatt is labeling herself as something different from a poet: she is a woman who writes in periodicals, not Shakespeare of the first folio.\textsuperscript{21} The poem furtively broaches the issue of how to define periodical poetry. In contrast to the monumentalized poetry of Shakespeare, periodical poems are ephemeral and minor. What, then, does that make Piatt? Is she a poet or a mere mass-producer of verses? Is she a bard or a hack?

Up until very recently American literary history has identified her, along with almost all of her postbellum periodical peers, as the latter, as nothing more than another in a homogenous and lamentable group of derivative genteel magazine poets. Yet as Ingrid Satelmajer recently has argued, “if we ever hope to understand why nineteenth-century readers cared about—read, clipped, memorized” poetry that “we now so readily ignore, we will need to consider all the forms for which it was created, in which it was distributed, and in which it was received—especially when that form so often offered initial publication and proved so central to the act of ‘reading’” (43). Thus, she continues, “the ‘ephemeral’ genre of periodicals may prove to be central to our understanding” of nineteenth-century poetry (43). To date, however, scholarship has tended to view this relationship between the poet and the periodical with skepticism. In contrast, the case of Piatt demonstrates that the exploding periodical marketplace of the late nineteenth century created the conditions for a complex and nuanced public aesthetic.
Indeed, her work indicates that periodical culture proved to be productive rather than detrimental to the development of postbellum verse.
NOTES

1 Of course the fact that Piatt published seventeen book collections denotes that the book form was integral to her career. However, I think it is justifiable and necessary to privilege the periodical over the book in her case for several reasons. First, Piatt’s formative years as a poet were devoted exclusively to periodical publication. Her first book did not come out until 1864, ten years after her first poem appeared in the Galveston News. Second, the periodical was the original site of publication for virtually every poem she wrote. Indeed, her books were essentially a kind of greatest hits of her periodical poems. And finally, as I discuss at various points throughout the essay, the periodical was a central shaping force in nineteenth-century poetic culture.

2 Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century America contains two essays on poetry, Paula Bennett’s “Not Just Filler and Not Just Sentimental: Women’s Poetry in American Victorian Periodicals, 1860-1900,” and David S. Reynolds’s “From Periodical Writer to Poet: Whitman’s Journey through Popular Culture.” The latter concentrates more on Whitman’s experiences as a periodical writer during his formative years and less on the connection between periodicals and poetry more broadly. The former is a valuable effort to counter the notion that late-nineteenth-century poetry is merely “filler,” and, as will become eminently clear, Bennett’s work and thinking has been influential on my own. “The Only Efficient Instrument” contains one essay on poetry, Susan Alves’s “Lowell’s Female Factory Workers, Poetic Voice, and the Periodical,” which amply demonstrates the kinds of social and political work poetry performed in the pages of nineteenth-century periodicals.

3 In this sense, Piatt’s periodical work provides a much-needed intervention into critical discussions about the relationship between the generic characteristics of poetry and current formulations of American literary history. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Sacvan Bercovitch recently has claimed that, as the general editor of the Cambridge History of American Literature, one of the two most challenging problems he faced was integrating poetry into literary history. “Specifically,” he writes, “the difficulties involved dealing with traditions of poetry in what was basically a historical-cultural undertaking—that is, conveying formalist lines of continuity and change within a context appropriate to broad historical developments” (2). Grounded as it is in the specific conditions of both the late-nineteenth-century periodical marketplace and the nineteenth-century theater, Piatt’s magazine aesthetic offers an example of how the formalist components of poetry are in fact continuous with and related to “broad historical developments.” Hence Piatt’s career offers one possible answer to Bercovitch’s challenge.

5 Letter, Eugene Benson, to W.C. and F.P. Church, 6 Jan. 1867, Church Collection, New York Public Library.

6 For Bennett’s most thorough discussion of “The Palace-Burner,” see Chapter 6, “Irony’s Edge: Sarah Piatt and the Postbellum Speaker,” in her book Poets in the Public Sphere, 135-58. See also her Introduction to Palace-Burner, xxiii-lviii.

7 A brief list of postbellum poets who held positions with magazines includes Bayard Taylor, who was literary editor of the New York Tribune, Richard Henry Stoddard, who edited the Aldine, Stedman, who worked on the Tribune and the World, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who edited the Atlantic Monthly from 1881 to 1890, and Richard Watson Gilder, who edited the Century.

8 Alan Golding’s From Outlaw to Classic (1995) provides a particularly useful and thorough investigation of how poetry was institutionalized within the academy during the 1930s and 40s. See Chapter 3, “The New Criticism and American Poetry in the Academy.”

9 While Perkins sees this periodical network as highly influential, he does not regard it as beneficial to the development of American poetry. He writes, for example, that the “stronger” “poetry of Crane and Robinson . . . is much influenced by a wish not to resemble the magazine poets” (87).

10 As Chapter 1 demonstrates, of course, I ultimately think that critics have overstated Whitman’s rebellion against nineteenth-century poetic conventions and trends. I also admire much of the recent work that has been done to explore the more conventional aspects of Whitman’s and Dickinson’s aesthetics, particularly Elizabeth Petrino’s Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women’s Verse in America, 1820-1885 (1998) and David S. Reynolds’ Walt Whitman’s America (1995). Piatt’s example, I think, will help shed further light on the conventional dimensions of these poets, as well as blur the lines between conventionality and originality altogether, helping us get beyond the dichotomy that pits Whitman and Dickinson against all of their contemporaries. However, I do think it still must be admitted that Whitman and Dickinson pushed against poetic conventions more vehemently than most any other nineteenth-century poets.

11 In this respect my model of Piatt’s poetic project differs significantly from the model proposed by Bennett. Bennett divides Piatt’s work generically into conventional genteel poems and ironic political poems, arguing that the former are of little interest while the latter are Piatt’s true achievement. For instance, in an almost apologetic gesture Bennett writes in Poets in the Public Sphere, “Like almost all nineteenth-century U.S. poets who came of age after 1830, Piatt wrote a great deal of genteel poetry. . . . Nevertheless, a surprising amount of this output does not, in fact, conform to the period’s idealizing genteel aesthetic. In these latter poems, Piatt deploys a set of rhetorical strategies—direct and indirect dialogue, parody, fragmented speakers, ambiguity of perspective—in ways
that rank her among the century’s most distinctive U.S. poets” (139). Rather than sifting
the “distinctive” poems from the genteel, I argue that the overwhelming bulk of Piatt’s
work is imbued with both poetic styles at once, as well as with the other styles that I
name in the essay.

12 See Bennett’s Poets and the Public Sphere, Loeffelholz’s “The Religion of Art in the
City at War,” and Harrington’s “Why American Poetry is Not American Literature.”

13 Ultimately I find the terms “premodernist” and “protomodernist” unsatisfactory for
describing the ironic sensibility and formal experimentation exemplified by Piatt and
other postbellum poets. These terms are anachronistic, identifying these poets
retroactively with a literary movement that, at the time of their writing, had not yet come
into being. By using these formulations to describe postbellum poetry, we threaten to
reinscribe the postbellum era’s status as a twilight interval that is only noteworthy insofar
as it eventually led up to the poetic renaissance of modernism. However, I have chosen
to use these terms on occasion for two reasons. First, since the aesthetic principles of
modernism are well-known to the American literary scholar, “protomodernism” and
“premodernism” are useful when introducing readers to the techniques of poets who are
generally far less recognizable. Second, since postbellum poetry is such an unexplored
field, an adequate lexicon for talking about it does not yet exist. While I am trying to
recover the “drama” and the “periodical” as key critical concepts and terms, I have been
unable to create a more effective term than either “protomodernism” or “premodernism”
for articulating the techniques and practices that these terms imply.

14 See Bennett’s “Not Just Filler and Not Just Sentimental” and Steiner’s “Women Poets
in the Twilight Period.”

15 These techniques are evident, to varying degrees, in most of Piatt’s work. For
example, 1879’s “A Pique at Parting” begins cryptically, “Why, sir, as to that ----,” not
explaining who is the speaker, who is the “sir,” and to what “that” refers. This opening
line evokes the same obliquity and fragmentation of “The Palace-Burner.”

16 A quick glance at Piatt’s book collections reaffirms that she was expertly adept at
composing in several different poetic modes. For example, she published a book of
dramatic monologues and dialogues, 1880’s Dramatic Persons and Moods, with Other
New Poems, several books of poems for and about children, including 1882’s A Book
about Baby and Other Poems in Company with Children, and a number of books of
poems based on her experiences as an American living in Ireland, such as 1891’s An Irish
Wildflower, etc. But book titles only hint at her dynamic range. What becomes quickly
apparent when reading Piatt extensively is that it is often difficult to categorize individual
poems. As I argue, her pieces typically compact different poetic styles that were
pervasive during the postbellum years—the genteel, the dramatic, the sentimental, the
political, the ironic, the (pre)modernist, the children’s poem. Each poem, that is, stands
as a synecdoche for her overarching poetic, a conflation of the various artistic modes that manifested themselves throughout her career.

17 The “egocentric American Adam” is the term Roy Harvey Pearce uses to describe the American poet in his highly influential study The Continuity of American Poetry. Pearce argues that the tradition of American poetry is characterized by romantic iconoclasm. The true American poet, he contends, blanches at American culture and attempts to remake it in his own individualized language. The “individual talent” refers to T.S. Eliot’s famous essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Eliot proposes that the poet must write with the whole tradition of European art in mind, expunging originality in favor of an erudite conception of the greatest literature of the past. Writing that “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality,” he judges the poet to be a mouthpiece through which the universal themes and forms of the past receive new articulation. Piatt’s poetic is too squarely situated within her own historical moment and culture to fit into either of these two prominent formulations.

18 See Bennett’s Introduction to Palace-Burner as well as her chapter on Piatt in Poets in the Public Sphere.

19 Stanzas five through ten read:
What more? If one, with voice and breath,
      Had given to one a rose-geranium bud,
      And changed with moons, and vanished into death
      In far-back feuds of hate and blood;

      If that one, from great after-grief—
      In some long, empty, lonesome cry—had said,
      “I would believe; help Thou mine unbelief
      With One that was—One from the Dead;”

      And felt a sudden, luminous Face—
      Sweet terror, yet divinest quiet, there;
      And reached—to find that Thorns were in the place
      Of lovely, worldly-fancied hair;

      That Hands, not such as gave old flowers,
      But torn with Nails, had blessed a piteous head:
      That Doubt’s slow question, from the unlighted hours,
      Was answered by One from the Dead;

      If this had been------You smile, and say to me,
      “It were Illusion, shaped of wandering sleep!”
      Well, if it were illusion, let it be:
      I have a tender Faith to keep. (21-50)
Some uncertainty exists over who actually created the painting, though traditionally it has been attributed to Reni. I am also inclined to accept Bennett’s argument that one of the scenes of action in the poem is a theatrical performance of The Cenci, given its references to the “curtain,” the “Tragedy,” and the “Actress.”

This poem is an example of why a history of the book or textual studies approach is so crucial for understanding Piatt’s career. On the one hand, as I argue in the essay, if we read the poem within the periodical context, then Piatt seems to be pointing out her professional shortcomings: as a magazine writer, she is less a poet than a versifier or a poetaster. On the other hand, if we read the poem within the book format, then Piatt appears to be claiming her status as a poet. As it stands, the speaker’s ambivalence about defining a poet in relation to the book reifies Piatt’s self-consciousness about specific textual forms and their centrality to her work and career.
CHAPTER 3

MELVILLE’S PUBLIC PRIVACY

After decades of neglect, Herman Melville’s poetry is currently experiencing a surge of critical interest. Once mere side notes to the fiction, the poems are now increasingly studied as significant components of Melville’s career. Recent evidence of this phenomenon includes articles by Lawrence Buell and William Spengemann assessing the range of Melville’s poetic achievement, Douglas Robillard’s collected edition, The Poems of Herman Melville (2000), and Edgar A. Dryden’s major study of the poems, Monumental Melville (2004).¹ Despite the many merits of this work, however, it also reveals a glaring gap: like the small body of commentary on Melville’s verse that appeared throughout the twentieth century, it very rarely makes any sustained effort to situate the poems within their immediate literary and cultural climate. For the most part, scholars tend to approach the poetry within either the terms of Melville’s life or the terms established in the fiction. This is especially true of the last two poetry collections Melville published, 1888’s John Marr and Other Sailors and 1891’s Timoleon, Etc. Both of these texts were self-published in limited editions of twenty-five copies, the majority of which Melville appears to have distributed among family and friends. Given the small scale of these productions, most criticism has seen them as
private works of art, as manifestations and expressions of Melville’s profound withdrawal from his literary surroundings.  

This chapter, in contrast, aims to reread Melville’s late poetry from a broad literary and historical perspective. In short, it argues that this verse does in fact engage with postbellum literary culture and thus is not a fundamentally private iteration. I contend that in these two collections Melville practices a form of authorship entailing public dimensions that we have not yet fully understood. Offering a new critical term for the study of Melville’s poetry, I propose that the late poems put into motion a coterie model of authorship; by this term, I mean that Melville circulated his work to a small group of readers rather than to a commercial audience. Melville’s coterie authorship underscores the public motivations of his late poetry in two ways: first, it demonstrates his determined will to bring his poems before a public in printed form even without the backing of the publishing industry; and second, it reflects a type of poetic authorship common in the late nineteenth century, which indicates that Melville did not patently reject his literary culture.

Melville performs the terms of his coterie authorship in the dramatic monologues of John Marr. His choice of the dramatic form is critical, for drama, as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, highlights the public function of late-nineteenth-century poetry. As many critics have noted, these monologues figure moments of profound isolation; their speakers are primarily aged mariners long disassociated from the sailing community to which they once belonged. At the same time, however, the monologues also portray intense moments of emotional communion; the world of the sailors is a small, intimately connected cadre. The relationship these sailors experience, I
argue, is the very kind of relationship Melville pursued with his readers as a coterie poet. As depicted in the *John Marr* monologues, coterie authorship offered Melville the balance between the private and public elements of writing that he had sought throughout his career. Central to Melville’s rendering of the bond between the sailors is his investment in the rhetoric of nostalgia and the conventions of sentimentalism. Indeed, sentimental affection emerges as the congealing force that unifies the sailing community the poems portray, as well as, I suggest, Melville and his coterie audience. In his motivated use of sentimentalism to forge his connection with his readers, Melville intersects with the most public and popular poet of the era, James Whitcomb Riley, who also wrote colloquial monologues that deploy sentimentality to retrieve past moments of camaraderie. Exposing Melville’s connections with Riley demonstrates yet another way that his poetry can be read as part of, instead of separate from, the postbellum literary world. And similar to Chapter 1’s recontextualization of Whitman, this chapter further alters our understanding of Melville’s career by locating him within the postbellum tradition of dramatic poetry rather than continuing to align him with antebellum American Renaissance writers.

I. Melville the Coterie Poet and Postbellum Poetic Culture

Twelve years passed between the publication of *Clarel: A Poem and a Pilgrimmage* (1876), Melville’s massive philosophical and religious epic, and the printing of *John Marr*. *Clarel* had been a monumental disappointment. Melville’s wife Elizabeth famously referred to it as an “incubus of a book” for the strain its production placed on the entire family, critics dismissed it, and readers ignored it (Metcalf 237). Though
brought out by the large house of G. P. Putnam & Sons, its publishing costs were
defrayed by Melville’s uncle Peter Gansevoort, and it sold fewer than five hundred copies
(Robillard 14). From a commercial and financial perspective, Melville’s career as a poet
was a failure. If not for family bequests that allowed him to retire from his job for New
York Customs and provided him with the resources to pay for the self-publication of *John
Marr and Timoleon*, it is questionable whether he would ever have been able to publish
verse again. Unburdened from the responsibility of having to support his family and
equipped with leisure time afforded by his retirement, however, Melville appears to have
embarked on a period of substantial productivity from 1885 to his death. In addition to
publishing the two collections of poems, he worked on another collection, *Weeds and
Wildings, With a Rose or Two* and on the novella *Billy Budd, Sailor*. But in none of
these cases does he seem to have been writing for a mass reading public, leaving no
indication that he would have sought a commercial publisher for *Weeds and Wildings* or
*Billy Budd* any more than he had for *John Marr and Timoleon*.3

Given the limited self-publication of *John Marr and Timoleon*, most critics have
labeled them “private” works of art. Not only do they signal Melville’s retreat from the
marketplace, they continue for the most part his renunciation of prose fiction in favor of
verse. To generations of Melvillians and literary critics invested in monumentalizing
Melville as the greatest American novelist, this generic shift constitutes a “long silence”
that is only reversed with the manuscript of *Billy Budd*. For these critics the poetry is
primarily a curiosity, the private musings of a diminished and isolated recluse.4 As
William Spengemann aptly puts it, “What little attention the poems have received comes
largely from Melvillians, who, being devoted to the novelist, tend to value them less as
poetry than as a source of information about that figure during his long vacation from fiction between 1857 and 1891” (570). Yet as Clark Davis’s *After the Whale: Melville in the Wake of *Moby-Dick* (1995) argues, this approach to Melville’s career after *Pierre* is the result of “a willful dissociation, a frequent refusal to envision this long period of generic uncertainty as a whole, to see Melville not simply as the author of a few famous prose fictions but as a writer whose lifelong engagement with language pushed him through generic boundaries in search of new ways of shaping and questioning his world” (ix). To critics like Davis and others, Melville’s late poetry is still private, but it serves as more than just a footnote to the fiction; more specifically, it exemplifies Melville’s unwavering devotion to his art, his hermetic dedication to wrestling with the Truth regardless of whether anybody else is paying attention. Thus Dryden contends that *John Marr* is “poetry as private utterance,” a collection of poems directed at “the poet himself” rather than a broad audience and motivated by his personal need to explore and resolve his sense of isolation in his world (331-32). Similarly, Robert Milder suggests that after 1876 “Melville’s life had been collapsing inward toward a center of private musing, and in the leisure of his retirement Melville gave himself austerely to the art he depended upon for his vindication, privately publishing two books” that, long after *Moby-Dick*, still fight the metaphysical “battle of the spirit and the clay” (212, 216). And Vernon Lionel Shetley’s insightful dissertation, *A Private Art: Melville’s Poetry of Negation* (1986) suggests that in *Timoleon* and *Weeds and Wildings* Melville pursues a form of private poetry that utterly rejects the sentimental, didactic, and formal conventions of his day (2-3).
As Spengemann intimates, however, this portrait of Melville as a private poet is problematized by the fact that he saw these late poems to print. Melville, Spengemann writes, “seems never to have entirely abandoned hope of reaching a public with his poems . . . his unwavering determination to publish what he wrote suggests that he did not relish obscurity or cease to imagine a receptive audience for his most private imaginings” (583). 5 Elizabeth Renker’s Strike Through the Mask (1996) chronicles Melville’s tortured writing process, showing how his chronic and violent battle with his written pages and his habitual and aggressive pattern of textual revision persisted from his early novels through John Marr and Timoleon. Similarly, Douglas Robillard suggests that even though Melville was no longer writing for a wide audience, his laborious mode of composition continued in the poetry. After detailing several stages in the composition of the poem eventually published as “The Haglets” in John Marr, Robillard reflects:

Why is some knowledge of these labors necessary when we do possess final versions of the poem? It gives some impression of the work that Melville was willing to impose upon himself to get his poems right. In the poet’s workshop, everything is tried—and then kept or rejected in favor of better words. Concision is sought, and anything that seems less than a final line is canceled. A stubborn integrity informs all of this writing down, this rethinking, this canceling and reviewing, this craftsmanship. (47)

In John Marr and Timoleon Melville had ceased to be a professional writer, as that term is most famously and fully defined by William Charvat. According to Charvat’s The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800-1870 (1968), the professional author is one whose writing provides a prolonged and sustained living and is produced for sale on the open market and with regard to buyers’ tastes (3). In no longer writing for profit or for a commercial reading public, Melville was most decidedy an amateur poet. But as
Robillard demonstrates, Melville’s amateurishness in no way mitigates the intense and strenuous labor he performed on his verse. This constant reworking, this “canceling and reviewing, this craftsmanship,” indicates that Melville was quite self-conscious about the final form his poems would take. And in expending the time and resources to prepare his poems for publication, Melville ensures that his poems reached the public. Given this commitment to publication and artistic excellence, it is misleading to label the late Melville a hermetic “private poet.” He is not an Emily Dickinson, the stereotypical private poet whose vast majority of poems remained hidden and unread by others until her death. Rather, he is a writer who, with no financial incentive, toiled over his poems, prepared manuscripts, and printed his collections.

Melville’s status as neither a commercial artist nor a total recluse suggests that we need a new vocabulary in which to conceptualize and understand his late career. Essential to this vocabulary is the palpable tension the poetry evinces between the private and the public, a tension that operates in almost all of Melville’s writing and, in fact, is central to how he formulated his artistic project throughout his life. Scholars have long noted Melville’s antipathy towards the general reading public and, concomitantly, his expressed desire for an intimate relationship with a small group of privileged and discerning readers. Most famously, in “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850) Melville contrasts the mass reader, the “superficial skimmer of pages,” with a rarer and more discriminating audience. The narrator of the piece maintains that Hawthorne cares little for “plaudits of the public” and “the public pastures,” preferring instead to be understood at his most profound level by an “eagle-eyed reader” like the narrator himself (251). In the famous 1851 letter to Hawthorne in which he characterizes his books as “botches,”
Melville articulates his theory of the “aristocracy of the brain” and the “aristocracy of feeling” that he shares with Hawthorne, a kind of intimate intellectual companionship that he later implicitly and condescendingly differentiates from the “tribe of ‘general readers’” (127-29). Drawing on these kinds of formulations, Charvat proposes that Melville’s fiction, particularly Moby-Dick and Pierre, attempts simultaneously to sustain the pleasurable reading of the general public and a private dialogue with the aristocracy of “eagle-eyed reader[s]” (267, 275). More recently, Gillian Silverman interrogates how Melville deploys the language of sentimentality in his novels to cultivate his textual communion with his privileged audience. For Melville, Silverman argues, writing was a “profundely solitary” and private activity, “offset only by the discovery of a sympathetic reader”: “Although he scorned the conventional audience . . . he claimed a true devotion to a small group of followers who both appreciated his work and articulated similar sentiments in return” (346). Elizabeth Hewitt shifts the terms of this debate from sentimentality to the textual dimensions of democratic politics. According to Hewitt, Melville’s ideal relationship with his readers is one that allows for both individual sovereignty and communal solidarity, maintaining the private integrity of the individual but enabling possible union with others (315).

By all accounts writing as a professional novelist had failed to strike this ideal balance for Melville. Pierre puts into sharp relief Melville’s feeling that writing was an act of intense isolation that resulted in presenting his work before a wide public simply unable to understand or appreciate his genius. Yet the coterie model of authorship that he practiced in his late poetry had the potential to fulfill his authorial demands perfectly. The concept of the coterie author has been elaborated most fully in discussions of British
Renaissance writers and the Anglo-American modernists. Arthur F. Marotti, for example, has argued that John Donne must be understood as a coterie poet, one who wrote for a narrow group of patrons and friends rather than for a popular readership or for literary posterity (5). Jennifer Wicke suggests that Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* is a coterie production, intended primarily for consumption by the members of England’s Bloomsbury circle (110). Similarly, Frank Lentricchia contends that the early-twentieth-century critic Louis Untermeyer disapproved of high literary modernism because it was meant for an “elitist” “coterie audience,” the “culturally privileged” who could understand it (270). Though Marotti’s analysis entails a pre-capitalist system of patronage and manuscript circulation, in each of these cases the basic concept of coterie authorship is roughly the same: it signifies a writer who self-consciously produces work for a small and selective audience.6 In assuming the role of the coterie poet, Melville carried out a type of authorship that facilitated his desires to harness control over his reading audience and thus to balance his private aspirations and introspection with the public dimensions of art. With the coterie model Melville could create his own reading aristocracy, bringing forth his poems in a public format but circumscribing his audience according to his own personal dictates. In this sense, Melville’s late poetry collections represent important moments in his writing life. Far from signaling the depths of his tragic decline, they constitute a kind of high point in his career: here he practiced the type of authorship most amicable to his relentless pursuit of Truth and his need for an elite audience that consisted of readers like Pierre, whom he describes as a “profound emotional sympathizer” with the metaphysical wanderings of the poets (244).
Moreover, the notion that with John Marr and Timoleon Melville rejected his contemporary literary culture is incorrect, based on a misunderstanding of both his public intentions and the prevalence of amateur coterie verse in the late nineteenth century. As opposed to Whitman and Piatt, both of whom wrote verse as a profession and sought a diffused national audience, many late-nineteenth-century American poets composed and published poems as avocation, distributing them to a confined readership. According to both David Perkins and Carlin T. Kindilien, by the 1890s scores of everyday Americans, ranging in profession from farmers to mechanics to bankers to factory workers to teachers, took up poetry writing as an enjoyable and occasional occupation. Kindilien explains, for instance, that “Verse writing was a part time job, a hobby, a recreation which promised many rewards. . . . The least of [these poets] won the admiration of his immediate circle” (7). Perkins deems this kind of poet the “handyman,” “do-it-yourselfer,” and “true primitive”; while “most of this poetry was not published, not even in local newspapers,” nonetheless significant amounts of it were “published in books, of which there are hundreds” (90). Neither Perkins nor Kindilien explicitly uses the term “coterie poet,” but their description of “do-it-yourself” writers who “won the admiration of [their] immediate circle” approximates my earlier articulation of the term. Similarly, neither critic broaches the matter of self-publication, but Perkins’ acknowledgement that “most of this poetry was not published” in any form suggests that commercial publication was not necessarily the expectation or norm of all poets. For example, as we will see in Chapter 4, Elliott Blaine Henderson arranged for the self-publication of eight of his ten volumes of verse, presumably distributing them to a local readership made up of friends, mentors, and fellow townspeople. It is also important to remember, as I explained in the
Introduction, that the 1880s and 90s were the heyday of the literary clubs and societies. As Stedman remarks, these circles helped create the environment he observes at the end of the nineteenth century in which “poetry is both read and written, whether well or ill, more generally than ever before” (*Nature* 41-42).

The prevalence of the coterie poet in postbellum America reconfigures our sense of how the late poetry functions in Melville’s career. Certainly Melville was no poetic “primitive,” and his careful attention to his art indicates that verse was much more than his occasional hobby. Nonetheless, by writing as a coterie poet Melville participated in a trend of his day. Rather than signaling his retreat from postbellum literary culture, the late collections show him entering this culture from a different avenue. The coterie model even offered a way to keep Melville in the public eye when publishing houses were no longer willing to do so. Melville provided a copy of *John Marr* to the respected poet and editor Richard Henry Stoddard, who published an uneven review of it in a magazine (Leyda 811).7 That a magazine would be willing to review a collection that was not available to the public intimates that we have mischaracterized the extent to which a self-published book functioned as a *private* work of art in the nineteenth century. Though no longer the well-known novelist of *Typee* and *Omoo* fame, Melville continued in his late poetry to be a serious public artist who engaged in a form of authorship well suited to his needs.

Within the pages of *John Marr*, Melville explores his role as a coterie poet. In particular, the four dramatic monologues that open *John Marr* are authorial performances that make legible the terms of Melville’s poetic project. Various critics have interpreted these monologues as revealing Melville’s keen sense of isolation, thus accentuating his
poetry’s status as “private utterance.” But equally important is how these poems recall and figure moments of fellowship and congeniality. Within the monologues Melville stages a drama between the private and the public, invoking the past through the voices of reclusive characters to imagine scenes of intense union. In this sense, Melville shares much in common with James Whitcomb Riley. Like Riley, Melville cloaks his colloquial monologues in the language of sentimental nostalgia, celebrating both youth and the American past prior to the mechanized and industrialized Gilded Age. In Riley’s case, however, scholars have understood these themes and techniques as components of his poetry’s decidedly public posture. The similarities in Melville’s and Riley’s poetics thus help to crystallize the public dimensions of Melville’s seemingly private art. Though very different from Riley in his settings, characterization, levels of irony, and versification, Melville, like Riley, focuses on speaking characters who overcome their sense of seclusion by remembering the past, and he relies on conventions similar to Riley’s to create an intimate connection with his coterie audience.

II. Melville’s Backward Look

In “Bridegroom Dick,” the second poem of *John Marr and Other Sailors*, the title character reminisces about his experiences during the Civil War. Now an old man speaking to his wife, Dick remarks, “Lost in the smother o’ that wide public stress, / In hearts, private hearts, what ties there were snapped!” (99-100). These two lines succinctly and explicitly identify the public/private tension central to Melville’s late poetry. Obscured by the cataclysmic events that were playing out and determining the nation’s fate, Dick suggests, were countless individual stories of personal suffering and
loss. Though its range of subjects is not limited to the Civil War, “Bridegroom Dick” is a poem about such loss, particularly the severing of friendships and personal relationships. Throughout his extended monologue Dick recalls an assortment of characters he knew, consorted with, and worked under during his time as a seaman. But now aged and retired, settled on land with his wife, he wonders where all of his old acquaintances have gone:

Where’s Commander All-a-Tanto?
Where’s Orlop Bob singing up from below?
Where’s Rhyming Ned? has he spun his last canto?
Where’s Jewsharp Jim? Where’s Rigadoon Joe?
Ah, for the music over and done,
The band all dismissed save the drone trombone!
Where’s Glen o’ the gun-room, who loved Hot-Scotch—
Glen, prompt and cool in a perilous watch?
Where’s flaxen-haired Phil? a gray lieutenant?
Or rubicund, flying like a dignified pennant? (345-54)

In highlighting the considerable chasm between himself and his peers, between his present and his past, Dick echoes the title character of the book, John Marr. Whereas Dick at least enjoys the companionship of his wife, John Marr is an utterly reclusive character. The prose headnote to the poem informs us that after spending the first part of his life almost entirely on the sea, John married and moved permanently with his wife to the western “frontier-prairie, sparsely sprinkled with small oak groves and yet fewer log-houses” (263). Soon after, however, his wife and infant child died, leaving John alone in a place and among a people that were foreign to him. Try as he might to cultivate “social relations” with his fellow-farmers, whom Melville describes as a “staid people,” he is thwarted by his profoundly different set of life experiences. On one occasion when he attempted to tell these pioneers about himself and his seafaring past, “a blacksmith . . .
honestly said to him, ‘Friend, we know nothing of that here’” (264-65). Thus John feels detached and alone, and his monologue, like Dick’s, is an invocation of and a lament for his old compatriots:

Twined we were, entwined, then riven,
Ever to new embraces driven,

Whither, whither, merchant-sailors,
Whitherward now in roaring gales?
Competing still, ye huntsmen-whalers
In leviathan’s wake what boat prevails?
And man-of-war’s men, whereaway? (27-44)

The other two monologues in this first section of John Marr, “Tom Deadlight” and “Jack Roy,” are much more truncated than either “John Marr” or “Bridegroom Dick.” However, both continue to meditate on the themes of loss and isolation. “Tom Deadlight” is spoken from the title character’s point of view as he is dying on a ship, and “Jack Roy,” the least character-driven of the monologues, recalls an impish messmate from the speaker’s past.8

In light of the air of separation that permeates these first four poems, many critics have read them as renderings of Melville’s own sense of artistic isolation during his last few years. In a way analogous to John Marr, they maintain, Melville was an outcast of the late-nineteenth-century literary world, cut off from both the reading public and the publishing industry: like John Marr, he had no audience for the stories that he wanted to tell. Dryden argues, for example, that “‘John Marr’ is an extended metaphor for the situation of the writer during the act of creation in terms of both his circumstances—that is, his history, personal and social—and the operation of his imagination. As an aging writer alienated from his social and political milieu, Melville, like John Marr, is out of
place” (331-32). Similarly, Robert Milder suggests that by the “mid ’eighties Melville’s
geniality had grown rusty from disuse,” and so John Marr signals his attempt to retrieve
the imaginative camaraderie foreign to him in his final state of loneliness (214). Like
Milder, William Shurr essentially views these poems as the aged Melville’s self-
exploration of his memories, as “ghosts from Melville’s actual or imagined past” that
depend “on him alone” and that only achieve “permanence” in their “existence in his
lines” (130). In the four opening poems Melville realizes, according to Shurr, that “one is
left, finally, with nothing but the resources that have developed within himself” (130).
Summarily, in these types of analyses the John Marr monologues serve as thinly-veiled
autobiographical statements about Melville’s own seclusion.

Yet the very genre in which these poems are constructed problematizes this type
of reading. As dramatic monologues rather than first-person lyrics, the poems are
correlation-driven performance pieces written in the voices of fictional personae. As a
result, they trouble and complicate the notion that they provide access into Melville’s
own life. According to Spengemann, Melville scholars compulsively misread the
dramatic and fictive postures of the monologues, as well as of the poetry more generally,
in their efforts to unearth the voice of the “true Melville”:

Unfortunately, if unavoidably, the job of making the poems available must
fall to those least apt to appreciate what is perhaps their most interesting
and distinctive feature: their habit of speaking in voices other than that of
the poet. Searching the poems for the person who wrote—or, rather, is
written by—the fiction, Melvillians have tended to disparage the verse for
withholding that subject instead of chastising themselves for seeking the
very thing that the poems were written to escape, the illusory self whose
disappearance the poems acknowledge and struggle to overcome. To ask
of Melville’s poems what those of Whitman and Dickinson display in
every line, a consistent poetic personality, is to miss precisely what his are
at most pains to express: the necessary fictiveness of the speaking subject. (605)

The monologues of John Marr position this fictiveness at the head of the collection, indicating that these poems are self-conscious literary performances rather than, as Whitman claimed of Leaves of Grass, an attempt “to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, [the author’s] own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality” (Leaves 563).

As performances, these poems naturally inflect the public, rather than the private, dimensions of Melville’s poetic project. Indeed, as dramatic monologues they conform to the performative aesthetic that saturated postbellum literary culture. Bearing the influence of the era’s most popular and public artistic institution, the theater, as well as one of its most reputable poets, Robert Browning, they strain against the “poetry as private utterance” theories that have held such currency in discussions of Melville’s verse. Melville’s interest in the drama was nothing new with the publication of John Marr. Shakespeare was one of his literary models, Moby-Dick contains several famous dramatic interludes, and The Confidence-Man is a narrative expressly concerned with role-playing and performativity. Ackerman’s The Portable Theater argues that Melville’s attraction to dramatic techniques is at least partially attributable to nineteenth-century theater’s standing as an art form of “the people,” especially the lower classes (93). In particular, in Moby-Dick the theater provides Melville a device for representing the common sailors on the Pequod. In this respect, Melville is similar to Whitman and Piatt, both of whom draw on the theater’s inherently public nature to imagine and construct the public aspirations of their art. Thus the public impulse of late-nineteenth-century
dramatic poetry suggests that Melville wrote the monologues not to figure isolation but to overcome it. More specifically, in a very revealing gesture, Melville’s monologues perform for his coterie audience the terms and conditions of his coterie authorship.

It may seem strange for a writer who purportedly turned to verse in his privacy and seclusion to present such a public and performative brand of poetry. Yet as William B. Dillingham’s *Melville and His Circle: The Last Years* (1996) proposes, even if Melville spurned, and was spurned by, the mainstream publishing industry, he pursued and preferred a type of imaginative intellectual brotherhood with an array of writers and texts through his reading (xi). According to Dillingham, this circle consisted primarily of elite philosophers and literati: Arthur Schopenhauer, Matthew Arnold, Honore de Balzac, Sir Walter Scott, William Dean Howells, and Omar Khayyam. I would like to suggest the possibility that Melville allowed another writer into his presumptive circle, one who at the time was highly esteemed but who since has fallen out of this pantheon—James Whitcomb Riley. Riley is the preeminent example of what Paul H. Gray terms the “poet-performer,” a poet who does not read his work merely as a supplement to his writing but who makes performance central to his aesthetic and his career (1). Riley composed and performed hundreds of monologues in the voices and colloquialisms of Hoosier characters, recalling the innocuous pleasures of rural childhood and the sentimental fellowship of youthful companions. Though I cannot prove that Riley directly influenced Melville, it seems more than feasible that as voracious a reader as Melville would have been at least familiar with Riley, the most renowned and successful poet of the era. Between the two poets, there is a suggestive and striking overlap that helps to explain how the dramatic monologues function in *John Marr*.9 Both poets turned to nostalgic
monologues to construct their relationship with their reading audience, and both imagined this relationship in similar terms. Yet if Riley popularizes this genre to don the role of the mass poet, Melville alters and revises it to assume the role of the coterie poet.

Like both “John Marr” and “Bridegroom Dick,” many of Riley’s monologues center on an aged, lonely character reflecting on his past, and particularly his old friendships. The very first poem in Riley’s Complete Poetical Works, for instance, is entitled “A Backward Look” and begins:

As I sat smoking, alone, yesterday,
And lazily leaning back in my chair,
Enjoying myself in a general way—
Allowing my thoughts a holiday
From weariness, toil, and care,—
My fancies—doubtless, for ventilation—
Left ajar the gates of my mind,—
And Memory, seeing the situation,
Slipped out in the street of “Auld Lang Syne.”— (1-9)

As he traverses his “Memory” the speaker remembers the house in which he was born, his days on the farm, and his school sweetheart. But the poem ends with a celebration of his boyhood friends, whom he earlier identified as “Eck” Skinner, “Old” Carr, and “three / Or four such other boys”:

And down through the woods to the swimming-hole—
Where the big, white, hollow old sycamore grows,—
And we never cared when the water was cold,
And always “ducked” the boy that told
On the fellow that tied the clothes.—
When life went so like a dreamy rhyme,
That it seems to me now that then
The world was having a jollier time
Than it ever will have again. (46-54)

Any number of Riley poems expresses the conviction that the youthful past is better than the present of adulthood. In “‘Friday Afternoon,’” for example, Riley bookends the main
poem with the refrain: “Of the wealth of facts and fancies / That our memories may recall / The old school-day romances/ Are the dearest, after all!” (1-4). “An Order for a New Song” repeats the theme, beginning, “Make me a song of all good things, / And fill it full of murmurings, / Of merry voices, such as we / Remember in our infancy.” (1-4). The few Riley poems still relatively familiar today are generally reminiscences of childhood or monologues in which the main speaker is a child. “Little Orphant Annie,” perhaps the most famous, is written in the voice of a child whose parents have just adopted Annie; Annie proceeds to tell ghost stories inculcating the didactic message that the narrator and the other children “better mind [their] parents, and [their] teachers fond and dear” or “gobble-uns ’ll git [them]” if they “Don’t / Watch / Out!” (41-48). Riley’s poems not only evoke the past to commemorate the carefree joys of childhood, but to celebrate the uncomplicated routines of rural life in the Midwest. Another of the few Riley poems that has survived to the present is “When the Frost Is on the Punkin,” a monologue that presents a simple farmer extolling the pleasures of harvest:

Then your apples all is gathered, and the ones a feller keeps
Is poured around the cellar-floor in red and yeller heaps;
And your cider-makin’ ’s over, and your wimmern-folks is through
With their mince and apple-butter, and theyr souse and sausage, too! . . .
I don’t know how to tell it—but ef sich a thing could be
As the Angels wantin’ boardin’, and thy’d call around on me—
I’d want to ’commodate ’em—all the whole-indurin’ flock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder’s in the shock! (25-32)

Riley’s verses like this one about rural America are clearly laden with nostalgia. Written during a period of intense urbanization, industrialization, and modernization, they romantically recall the farming communities of Riley’s antebellum youth. In a fashion similar to many of the local color stories that were filling American magazines during the
1880s and 90s, they idealize rural America at the very moment that it seemed to be regressing further and further into the past.

Though Riley wrote in an array of poetic styles, including genteel Victorian love verses, it is these colloquial monologues rejoicing in childhood on the farm that endeared him to a mass nineteenth-century audience and that earned him the moniker of the “Hoosier Poet.” According to Angela Sorby, it is precisely Riley’s idyllic and simplified depictions of the past that account for his poetry’s cultural power in late-nineteenth-century America. Sorby argues that by deploying his “infantalized and infantalizing” poetic discourse within the “respectable generic confines of poetry,” keeping his readers “young at heart,” Riley was able to appeal to large middle-class audience that was both allured by popular culture and in search of higher and more refined forms of cultivation (i.e., poetry) (201). In addition, she suggests that this middlebrow poetic summoned a pre-industrial collective experience at a time when American anxieties were peaking about the alienation resulting from urbanization and industrial capitalism. Robert H. Wiebe’s The Search for Order, 1877-1920 (1967) proposes that by the 1880s America had become a “distended society”: as the country experienced demographic shifts from the country to the city, the old rural institutions that sustained social order—religion, friendships, family connections—no longer held sway. Until Americans constituted new urban modes of social order in the 1890s and the early twentieth century, the country was fragmented and individuals were dislocated and isolated (11-12). Sorby contends that Riley’s poetry, as commodity, participates in the mass-market capitalism of the 80s and 90s, but as art it invokes and protracts earlier rural experiences of social cohesion:
Riley’s [poetry and performances] did give (or rather, sell) people the chance to experience poetry as a communal activity. . . . [They] were, of course, commodities—like meat served in a restaurant, as he himself put it—but also expressions of nostalgia for a form of collective aesthetic experience that predated Riley himself; that did not simply serve the marketplace; and that was still imaginable, if not fully realizable, in late-nineteenth-century America. (204-6)

As new generations of primarily white, middle-class Americans living in bustling and chaotic cities sat in their apartments, they could read Riley’s verses and reimagine the simplified forms of cultural and social order that generations of their families had enjoyed down on the farm.

If Riley’s poetry figures “communal activity” and “collective experience,” it does so through the register and language of sentimentality. Though readers typically associate literary sentimentalism with the domestic novels of mid-century, it continued to thrive in the poetry of the postbellum era. Kindilien writes, for instance, that “Most of the poetry of the Nineties was a sentimental expression. The successful poets had learned in newspaper offices that the sympathetic emotion could be marketed and they were willing to accentuate its place in literature” (56). Sentimentalism was not the exclusive provenance of women, moreover. Scott A. Sandage’s analysis of the “begging letters” unemployed workers sent to business leaders from 1873 to 1893 asking for employment reveals that men routinely adopted sentimental rhetoric to facilitate their attempts to enter into the public sphere and to participate in industrial capitalism. Additionally, Vincent J. Bertolini has revealed how male writers imbued the bachelor figure with sentimentalism in nineteenth-century literature. By the end of the century, Riley adopted and exploited the language and literature of affection to become a robust literary and economic success. As Kindilien puts it, “In the end, [Riley’s] subjects, his attitudes, and his language were
keyed to the sentimental tradition. Sentimentalism was the marketable commodity which ‘Sunny Jim’ Riley picked up at the beginning of his career and successfully peddled during the Nineties” (59).

Riley’s indebtedness to the legacy of sentimentalism is evident throughout his verse. His poems chronically brim with tears and make appeals to the heart. “An Order for a Song,” a kind of meta-poem which, as we saw, begins with the call for poetry that is filled with “merry voices, such as we / Remember in our infancy,” also requires that this poetry should be “tender, for the sake / Of hearts that brood and tears that break, / And tune it with the harmony, / The sighs of sorrow make” (3-8). In a poem entitled “Scraps” that, incidentally, reinforces my argument in Chapter 2 about the high cultural currency of periodical poetry in the postbellum era, the speaker revels in little clippings of magazine verse that remind him of the “sentimental time / When [his] life was like a story, / And [his] heart a happy rhyme,—” (2-4). Within the pockets of his vest he keeps “scraps” of poetry recalling him to his youth: “And words all dim and faded, / And obliterate in part, / Grow into fadeless meanings / That are printed on the heart” (21-24). Often the language of sentimentality emerges in these poems that memorialize the intense fellowship of childhood friends from the perspective of a lonely adult. “Tom Van Arden,” for example, begins:

Tom Van Arden, my old friend,
Our warm fellowship is one
Far too old to comprehend
Where its bond was first begun:
Mirage-like before my gaze
Gleams a land of other days,
Where two truant boys, astray,
Dream their lazy lives away. (1-8)
For Tom Van Arden, the speaker feels “All affection’s tenderness,” and he looks back on their past “through [his] tears.” Throughout his verse, Riley’s depictions of childhood friendships are loaded with words like “sweet,” “happy,” “heart,” “affection,” “joy,” and “fellowship,” while adulthood is replete with “tears,” “sorrow,” “loss,” and an unyielding aura of wistfulness. By investing in the language and tropes of sentimentality, Riley is able to pursue the traditional sentimental project of transforming private emotion into public unity. Elizabeth Barnes’s States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel (1997) contends that in the nineteenth century the language of sentimental sympathy provides one of the principal modes by which . . . readers are taught to see themselves as part of a unified political body . . . rhetorical constructions of sympathy serve to make imaginable a body simultaneously public and private, collective and individual. They do so by representing the feeling self as the locus of authority in a democratic society. As Enlightenment philosophers like Adam Smith present it, sympathy creates affective bonds between individuals through vicarious experience and projection: we sympathize with others by imagining what we would feel if put in the other’s position. . . . The more like oneself others can be made to appear, the greater the possibility for sympathy. At its most successful, then, sympathy converts otherness into sameness, organizing sentiments around the perception of familiarity and constructing a community of like-minded individuals. (115)

In this respect, Riley’s nostalgic brand of poetry creates “communal” and “collective” experience by recalling the affectionate attachments of childhood friendships and by evoking the reader’s sympathy for the loneliness and isolation the adult speakers feel. To the extent that these speakers are representative of many Americans transplanted from the farm to the city, their capacity to create sympathetic identification is accelerated and thus, concomitantly, so is their ability to construct a community of readers.
The dramatic monologues of John Marr form their own community of readers through a similar strategic program of nostalgia, sentimentality, and colloquialism. As various critics have noted, many of the sailors these poems remember are described as boyish and childish. John Marr refers to the “lads” with whom he sailed as “Child-like though the world ye spanned”; Bridegroom Dick begins the poem by thinking “o’, the May-time o’ pennoned young fellows”; later he recalls how at night on a ship “some younker, a cadet, / Dropping for time each vain bumptious trick, / Boy-like would unbend to Bridegroom Dick”; Jack Roy, who is full of youthful good cheer, treats his life as “a toy”; and the memories of his life are “kept up by relays of generations young.” Given these descriptions, many critics read John Marr in terms reminiscent of Riley’s verse. Milton R. Stern, for example, posits that in the “nostalgic poetry of John Marr,” Melville depicts the common sailor as an “apolitical child” who is “associated with high-spirited glee and larking sport, with danger and daring, but never with any threat to law, order, and established power” (151). “It is this aspect of Melville’s nostalgic late poems,” Stern continues, “that tends to make some of them merely sentimental—the good times and good chums they yearn for are sometimes too simple to be fitting objects for such yearning, undeniably felt though it be” (151; emphasis added). Similarly, Milder observes that in John Marr Melville “projected geniality backward into a romanticized past and detached it from its intellectual moorings. Ishmael’s ‘genial, desperado philosophy’—fraternal because clear-eyed about humanity’s cosmic plight—became the glamorized recklessness of boy-men courageous toward nature’s dangers but insensible of its tragedies” (214; emphasis added). For these critics the sentimentalism and romanticization of these “boy-men” is part of what makes the late poetry flawed; the
sailors of John Marr pale in comparison to tragic masculine heroes like Ahab, Ishmael, and Pierre, who exemplify Romantic individualism and interrogate their own “intellectual moorings.”

In John Marr Melville does not unconditionally or uncritically create a sentimental poetry. Certainly the punning, the irony, the masculinity, the occasional flashes of darkness—what Shurr deems the “ribaldry”—of these poems cut across his portrayal of the ships as an intimate and sentimental sphere equivalent to the women-centered homes of the mid-century domestic novels. Nonetheless, as both Stern and Milder observe, the language of sentimentalism remains central to the four monologues of John Marr. The most evocative sentimental moment in the collection is the dramatic situation that frames “Bridegroom Dick.” Here we have the domestic setting and female character that are so familiar in sentimental literature, with Dick smoking a pipe as he converses with his attentive wife busy stirring her tea. Throughout the poem, as Dick mines his memories and reminisces about his sailing days, his wife functions as a sentimental reader. The various asides in which Dick interrupts his narrative and speaks to his wife reveal that she reacts to Dick’s anecdotes with intense emotion. At first, she is supportive: Dick says, “All this, old lassie, you have heard before / But you listen again for the sake e’en o’ me; / No babble stales o’ the good time o’ yore / To Joan, if Darby the babbler be” (23-26). After being drawn in by Dick’s memories of the Civil War’s fatal violence, Joan responds in typical sentimental fashion. Dick states to his wife, “Nay, pardon, old aunty! Wife, never let it fall / That big started tear that hovers on the brim” (162-63). Later, after Dick relates a story in which one Captain Turret decides not to punish a Lieutenant Marrot for drunkenness and for mistreating his charges, Dick
comforts his wife: “Magnanimous, you think?—but what does Dick see? / Apron to your eye! Why, never fell a blow, / Cheer up, old wifie, ‘t was a long time ago” (331-33). In addition to shedding tears while listening to Dick, Joan exhibits her domesticity as she cares for her husband who, in his old age, has become child-like himself. At one point Dick says, “Wistful ye peer, wife, concerned for my head, / And how best go get me betimes to my bed”; later, he counsels her not to worry about him, even though he is getting increasingly impassioned as he tells his stories: “Don’t fidget so, wife; an old man’s passion / Amounts to no more than this smoke that I puff; / There, there now, buss me in good old fashion” (208-9; 326-29). The combination of the domestic setting, Joan’s concern for her husband, and her emotive response to his stories reflects Melville’s command of the conventions of sentimentalism.

But in “Bridegroom Dick” the language of sentiment is not primarily identified with or reserved for the domestic situation or the female character. Rather, it is deployed continually by Dick as he recalls and meditates on the relationship among, and on his relationship with, the sailors. Joan is not alone in shedding tears. Near the beginning of the poem, as he is remembering some of his old messmates, Dick admits, “Little girl, they are all, all gone, I think, / Leaving Bridegroom Dick here with lids that wink” (66-67). The winking lids could imply an image of sleeping, appropriate for Dick’s old age, but they also can connote that Dick sheds tears for his past. When he tells the story about the near flogging of Lieutenant Marrot, he reveals the sailors’ capacity for sympathetic emotion. As Marrot stands with “the squeezed tears peeping, / Scalding the eye with repressed inkeeping,” Dick perceives “the sickening and strange heart-benumbing, / Compassionate abasement in shipmates that view; / Such a grand champion shamed there
succumbing!” (309-14). Even the very sailors whom Marrot had abused are moved to look on him sympathetically and compassionately, a feeling that pervades the ship, for Captain Turret abstains from punishing the Lieutenant because, according to Dick, he “hadn’t any heart.” Further, Dick describes the Civil War as the disruption of sentimental bonds among his peers. Some of the “hearts, private hearts” whose “ties . . . were snapped” during the “public stress” of the war were those of the sailors who were forced to choose sides with either the North or the South. Dick mocks his friend Hal’s conviction that the war would never break up their ship, the *Uncle Sam*, by labeling it mere “Sentiment.” Enfolded into the chaos of the war, the sailors’ hearty good-will towards one another transforms into violence:

> But talk o’ fellows’ hearts in the wine’s genial cup:—
> Trap them in the fate, jamb them in the strait,
> Guns speak their hearts then, and speak right up.

> The troublous colic o’ intestine war
> It sets the bowels o’ affection ajar. (166-70)

Here Dick touches on what he terms the “sour” “truth” that human emotion is just as capable of violence as of affection, of animalistic hate as of angelic love. Yet rather than delving into the deeps of this pessimistic truth, Dick changes his tone for his sentimental reader, his wife: “Now, now, sweetheart, you sidle away, / No, never you like that kind o’ gay; / . . . Honey-sweet forever, wife, will Dick be to you!” (275-78). And so he pronounces that he would rather “booze on the days” of the “Old Order,” embarking on the story of Captain Turret and the lieutenant. In effecting this reversal in his narrative trajectory, he redeems sentiment’s humanizing power, switching from a story about violence canceling out sentiment to one about sentiment defusing violence. Though the
portraits of the sailors he then provides certainly possess their rough edges, they unequivocally demonstrate, with their tone of nostalgic fondness, his stated belief that “Only a sailor sails heartily praise” (242; emphasis added).

Though a much shorter poem than “Bridegroom Dick,” “John Marr” perhaps provides an even more amplified manifestation of Melville’s sentimental impulse. The prose headnote to the poem ends in language that is coated in sentimental discourse. Melville writes:

As the growing sense of his environment threw [John Marr] more and more upon retrospective musings, these phantoms, next to those of his wife and child, became spiritual companions, losing something of their first indistinctness and putting on it last a dim semblance of mute life; and they were lit by that aureola circling over any object of the affections of the past for reunion with which an imaginative heart passionately yearns. (266-67)

In the sentimental culture of mid-century, one of the staple objects of mourning and emotional effusion was the figure of the dead child. According to Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s study of the complicated relationship within sentimental discourse between personal grief and commercial consumption, “Dying is what children do most and do best in the literary and cultural imagination of nineteenth-century America,” as evidenced by reproduced photographs of dead children and the unforgettable deaths of Eva St. Clair in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Beth March in Little Women (64). Typically, the logic of sentimentalism invested these children with an angelic and ethereal purity, both before and after their deaths. By grouping the “phantoms” of his seafaring past with his dead wife and child, John Marr transforms them into proper objects of sentimental grieving; they, too, become angelic as they are crowned with an “aureola” of light. Moreover, when Melville writes that Marr “passionately yearns” for these phantoms with an
“affection” of the “heart,” he is directly channeling the conventional language of sentimental discourse.

Marr’s depiction of life on the sea continues to function within a sentimental register. Intensely passionate, Marr pledges his undying love for his lost brothers:

Nor less, as now, in eve’s decline,
Your shadowy fellowship is mine.
Yea float around me, form and feature:—
Tattooings, ear-rings, love-locks curled;
Barbarians of man’s simpler nature,
Unworldly servers of the world.
Yea, present all, and dear to me,
Though shades, or scouring China’s sea. (32-39)

The “form” of Marr’s fellow sailors remains present to him, both as phantom shapes that “float around” him and in the formal structures of poetry. Marr’s feelings for these sailors, who remain “dear” to him with their “love-locks curled,” border on the homoerotic. Whether the implication of Marr’s passion is sexual or not, it is an unmitigated celebration of the “shadowy fellowship” that he persists in feeling years after he steps onto land. At the end of the poem he commemorates this fellowship in an obvious gesture toward sentimentality’s language of the heart. Remembering how the “booming guns” he and the other sailors heard when the ship was under attack woke them from their sleep and summoned them to fight, he metaphorizes the sound to a common heart beat that unites the entire ship: “A beat, a heart-beat musters all, / One heart-beat at heart-core. / It musters. But to clasp, retain; / To see you at the halyards main— / To hear your chorus once again!” (58-62). As in Riley’s verse, the language and tropes of sentimentality here furnish John Marr with a register for figuring moments
of communal unification. Similar to many of Riley’s speakers, his past friendships are unequivocally fellowships of the heart.

As the first two poems in the collection, “John Marr” and “Bridegroom Dick” establish the tone for reading the two other monologues, “Tom Deadlight” and “Jack Roy.” Tom Deadlight exhibits a youthful playfulness and exuberance even as he is dying, facing death with punning witticism and courageous cheer. For example, he tells the other sailors, “And don’t sew me up without baccy in mouth, boys, / And don’t blubber like lubbers when I turn up my keel” (27-28). If more bawdy than the typical pious moralism of domestic sentimentalism, this poem, like “Bridegroom Dick,” still evocatively portrays the emotional “shadowy fellowship” that existed between the sailors. Tom bids farewell to his “noble hearties” and he tells “Jock” to give his “kit” to “the mess,” “for kin none is mine, none” (15). Here again there is a conflation of the sailors with the family unit, with Tom Deadlight figuratively becoming a lost child or brother of the other sailors. In admonishing his family not to “blubber like lubbers” when he dies, he is imploring them not to shed tears. Jack Roy is eulogized by the speaker as yet another kind of dead child. Gay, “magnanimous,” “jovial,” “genial,” and full of “levity,” he and his life were a “joy” and a “toy.” The speaker exudes wistfulness as he elegizes this “belted sea-gentleman” whose life was cut far too short.

The subject of sentimental reverie in John Marr is not limited to members of the “shadowy fellowship,” however. Just as Riley’s poetry nostalgically recalls the fading rural world of pre-industrial America, Melville’s monologues lament the passage of what Bridegroom Dick terms the “Old Order,” the sea of wooden ships and unexplored territories. In the monologue “To Ned,” a poem reminiscent of and parallel to Riley’s
“Tom Van Arden,” the speaker asks, “Where is the world we roved, Ned Bunn? / . . . / To us old lads some thoughts come home / Who roamed a world young lads no more shall roam” (1-6). The speaker contrasts his experiences in “Pantheistic ports” and “Authentic Edens” of a “Pagan sea” with the experiences of tourists in those locales now, and he wonders if they will find the “same” “violet-glow” that enamored Ned and him “years and years ago!” Meanwhile, “Bridegroom Dick” expresses a feeling Melville explored in much of his poetry, going back to “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight” in Battle-Pieces: the new age of iron ships was destroying the heroism and romance of life on the sea. The “Old Order” is the era before “tradition was lost and we learned strange ways” (195). Near the end of the poem, Dick scoffs at those who believe that the Monitor, an “ugly” iron ship, was better than the wooden Cumberland, “a beauty and the belle”:

“Better than the Cumberland!—Heart alive in me! / . . . / Nor brave the inventions that serve to replace / The openness of valor while dismantling the grace. / . . . / Aloof, bless God, ride the war-ships of old, / A grand fleet moored in the roadstead of fame” (409-23).

Finally, the prose introduction to “John Marr” reflects on a time when the prairie was itself a kind of vast and unexplored sea, where “travel was much like navigation” and the green swells were “smooth as those of ocean becalmed” (266). Accentuating Marr’s sense of isolation, Melville depicts the wide expanses of this prairie-ocean before development and technology made travel and communication more expedient, in the days before a “rude” or “reachable” post-office:

Throughout these plains, now in places overpopulous with towns over-opulent; sweeping plains, elsewhere fenced off in every direction into flourishing farms—pale townsmen and hale farmers alike, in part, the descendants of the first sallow settlers; a region that half a century ago produced little for the sustenance of man, but to-day launching its
superabundant wheat-harvest on the world;—of this prairie, now everywhere intersected with wire and rail, hardly can it be said that at the period here written of there was so much as a traceable road. (266)

Melville’s imagination here stretches back to a time even more antiquated than Riley’s farming Midwest, describing the prairie as an almost surreal, otherworldly place unrecognizable in the America of the 1880s, which “can . . . hardly be said to have any western bound but the ocean that washes Asia” (266).

The opening monologues of John Marr, then, are laden with a sentimental nostalgia reminiscent of Riley’s verse. As critical discussions of sentimentalism have progressed from an almost exclusive focus on novels like The Wide, Wide World, The Lamplighter, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and Little Women to more nuanced and expansive considerations of how various authors, both men and women, have deployed it, scholars have begun to interrogate its formidable role in Melville’s oeuvre. Jennifer Phegley, for instance, argues that in “Bartelby, the Scrivener” Melville critiques sentimentality’s “valuation of feeling over action” through the narrator, whose sentimental reaction to first learning about Bartleby’s loneliness prevents him “from facing the fact that his employee is the monstrous creation of a soulless industrial society and allows him to escape recognition of the part he has played in sustaining that world” (86). Tara Penry contends that Moby-Dick and Pierre stage a battle between two competing models of masculinity, Romantic individualism and sentimental manhood. Penry concludes that Melville privileges sentimental masculinity in the end, but only with reservation and ambivalence (235). Meanwhile, Silverman proposes that Melville deploys sentimentalism in Pierre to survey the elements of his own authorship. Silverman reveals how Melville’s letters to Hawthorne are fraught with the tropes and language of sentimentality. In the famous
letter thanking Hawthorne for understanding and praising *Moby-Dick*. Melville comments on their “infinite fraternity of feeling” and he suggests that at the moment of reading Hawthorne’s appraisal “your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours” (142). Silverman extrapolates both from these letters and from her close reading of *Pierre* that sentimentalism is the register in which Melville regularly comprehended and figured his ideal construction of author-reader relations:

> And yet even as Melville extolled authorial iconoclasm, he reveled in the pleasures of mutual textual sensibility—the fellow writer who produced something that resonated with his experience, or the reader who understood and appreciated his own authorial musings. Thus, while he praised autonomous spirit and literary creativity, he also imagined the writer as deeply merged with a select sympathetic audience. (347)

Silverman labels this emotive identification between reader and writer “textual sentimentalism,” underlining how it was constitutive of Melville’s novelistic projects.

Silverman’s contention about how sentimentality contributes to and reflects Melville’s authorship offers a constructive framework for considering the implications of sentimentality in *John Marr*. As I have been arguing, to an extent that previously has not been acknowledged, Melville’s poetry resonates with the popular work of Riley. Both poets composed dramatic monologues representing specific types of characters in their own colloquial language. Both poets used solitary aged speakers nostalgically recalling the golden days of the past and their fellowship with others. And both poets invoked the language of sentimentality to illuminate the fraternal bonds these characters once enjoyed. Even the names of the characters are complementary in their colorfulness. Riley peppers his verse with monikers like Philiper Flash, “Tradin’ Joe,” and “Eck” Skinner, while Melville uses Commander All-a-Tanto, Orlop Bob, and Rigadoon Joe.
Yet there is a central difference between Melville and Riley that exposes the fundamental distinction between their respective poetic projects. Charvat categorizes Riley as an example of a “mass poet,” which he identifies not as an “artist” but a “manufacturer,” as an “impersonal producer of a commodity” (107). Though Charvat’s bald derision of Riley reifies a normative conception of the “artistic” and the “literary,” his characterization of Riley as “impersonal” is prescient, if paradoxical. After all, Riley published scores of poems in which speakers explore private memory and loss, while he was one of the most visible poets in American history, traversing the country on the lecture and Chautauqua tours and personally meeting and reading for his admirers. Yet as Sorby documents, these readings often were prefaced by local poets performing their own brand of Riley verse, imitating and reproducing his characters, humor, and sentiments. Indeed, there is an utterly generic quality to Riley’s poetry. His are representative American characters: living in the heartland of the country, these white speakers go to school, work hard, play innocuously, enjoy the fruits of their labor, respect their God, cause no trouble, and remain devoted to family and country. Although Riley is sometimes called a local color poet, it might be more apt to say that he is a poet of the American myth, reflecting all of the good things America believes about itself and none of the bad. It is not surprising, then, that poets around the country could easily emulate his expressly American fantasies, nor is it surprising that Riley became an American icon, celebrated in schools and immortalized in statues, public buildings, and textbooks.

By contrast, of course, Melville the poet has been all but invisible in American culture, a result at least in part, perhaps, of the fact that his poetic subjects were far more narrowly circumscribed than Riley’s. Whereas Riley’s characters relish in the harvest of
middle-America, Melville’s traverse the open seas and land in foreign ports. While Riley’s children engage in activities that are fairly typical of childhood—playing games, being late for school, fearing goblins—Melville’s “boy-men” embark on more unique adventures—flirting with foreign women, facing the cannon, and trying to avoid premature death through disease or drowning. If Riley’s poems present a portrait of day-to-day life that many Americans could endorse, Melville’s poems offer a more inflated and eccentric romance out of the provenance of most Americans’ reality. Indeed, we might say that Melville’s poems are far more localized than Riley’s: they depict a lifestyle, a vernacular, and a range of experiences more strictly contained than Riley’s Hoosier poetry.\textsuperscript{12}

Another way to put this distinction is to say that Melville’s John Marr poems portray a particular coterie, one made up of the relatively small group of American sailors who traveled the ocean in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. In invoking this term, of course, I am suggesting that Melville’s representation of the sailing community recalls the form of authorship he was practicing in 

John Marr. In the dramatic monologues, Melville performs the terms of his authorship through his portrayal of the emotional fellowship between the sailors. While Melville may not have been writing for the sailors per se, the relationship between the members of the sailing coterie is precisely the kind of relationship he pursued in writing for his coterie audience. The sentimental communion between the sailors becomes Melville’s way of figuring and constructing his own intimate interaction with his readers. In this respect, Silverman’s analysis of the connection between sentimentality and authorship in Melville’s novels is perhaps even more directly applicable to the coterie poetry. Silverman states:
Melville’s vision of the author-reader connection is, of course, not wholly consonant with the sentimental fantasy of union. For the majority of sentimentalists writing in the antebellum period, sympathy was, at least ideally, universal. Middle-class readers were encouraged to identify with all creatures and to imagine a world void of difference and disparity. Melville, on the other hand, restricted his conception of identificatory bonding to an elite group of participants embracing, in his own words, an “aristocracy of feeling.” He imagined novels as expressions of individual thought but also as vehicles of communication—ways to establish ties with a small receptive body of readers. (365)

Like Riley’s verses, Melville’s monologues in John Marr turn on the fluctuating tension between private memory and public fellowship, creating their own type of communal and collective experience. But whereas Riley opts for a balance that leans in favor of a wide public, Melville pursues the opposite, tending more towards a poetics of intimacy that eschews a far-flung audience for a smaller coterie. In publishing his work and disseminating it, he was still investing it with a public function; yet in limiting its readership, he was imbuing it with privacy.

At various moments in the John Marr monologues Melville demonstrates poetry’s ability to act as a congealing force among the “shadowy fellowship” of the sailing coterie. John Marr recalls how the sailors “raised” their “voices” “clearly,” and at the end of the poem he hopes to hear their “chorus” once again. He revels in the fact that their “heart[s] to music” were “haughtier strung,” which suggests not only that they sang to keep up their courage and “good feeling,” but also that through song their hearts were strung together. This image aptly foreshadows the last lines of the poem, in which Marr contends that the ship had “One heart-beat at heart-core.” And of course Marr is remembering the phantoms of his past in “form and feature,” hypostatizing their ghostly abstractions into poetic form. We are told in the prose headnote to “Tom Deadlight” that
as Tom is dying he “sings by snatches his good-bye and last injunctions to two
messmates,” the “Names and phrases” of which, combined with “the measure,” he
derives “from a famous old sea-ditty, whose cadences, long rife, and now humming in the
collapsing brain, attune the last flutterings of distempered thought” (281). Song here is a
natural outlet for a dying man to express his affection for his messmates, and thus it
becomes the natural mode for memorializing the sailor once he has “turn[ed] up [his]
keel.” “Jack Roy” opens with a description of how in the sailing community songs and
their subjects are immortalized even as individual singers eventually die and are
forgotten:

Kept up by relays of generations young
Never dies at halyards the blithe chorus sung;
While in sands, sounds, and seas where the storm-petrels cry,
Dropped mute around the globe, these halyard singers lie.

Finally Bridegroom Dick describes himself as one who is “Pleasant at a yarn” and a “Bob
O’Linkum in a song.” His monologue brings this description to fruition, as the old
“babbler” narrates several anecdotes in the rhythmic cadences of poetry. Thus music,
like poetry, becomes a way to connect generations of sailors, the past and the present, as
well as the actual fellow sailors with whom one traveled.

In the John Marr monologues, then, Melville does not create a primarily “private
utterance.” Rather, he explores poetry’s capacity to act as a unifying agent among a
small public constituency. As the collection progresses the poems take on a more lyrical
voice, but the themes remain consonant with the ones addressed in the monologues. For
every poem like “The Berg” and “Pebbles,” which interrogate the desolate loneliness and
futility of human life, there are others that continue to celebrate the “shadowy fellowship.” In “To the Master of the ‘Meteor,’” a group of sailors drink to a peer who is “Lonesome on earth’s loneliest deep”: “Of thee we think when here from brink / We blow the mead in bubbling foam. / Of thee we think, in a ring we link” (5-7). Not only do the sailors link themselves together, but, in their memories and imagination, they commune with the lost “Master of the ‘Meteor.’” In “The Good Craft ‘Snow-Bird,’” Melville writes about a ship that always finds its way home to port no matter how foul the weather, which counterpoises the “Dismasted and adrift” hulk of the “Aeolian Harp” that wanders aimlessly over the water. “The Maldive Shark,” meanwhile, presents a startling image of natural interdependency. “Sleek little pilot-fish” “lurk in the port of” a shark’s “serrated teeth,” but they have nothing to fear. They lead him to prey, while he offers them protection from predators. As a result of this contractual arrangement we have the most unlikely fellowship, for “They are friends” even though they appear so dissimilar. Thus in theme and image Melville continues in the volume to strike an equitable balance between isolation and communion, the private and the public, even as he moves away from the dramatic form.¹³

III. Coda: **Billy Budd** and **Timoleon**

At the same time that Melville was writing and publishing the poems of John Marr, he was also composing **Billy Budd, Sailor**. The language of poetry saturates this text. Most notably, Captain Vere remarks in his argument for prosecuting Billy that the ship, like humankind, must accord to “forms, measured forms” (380). The genesis of **Billy Budd** seems to have been that Melville began composing it, like “John Marr” and
“Tom Deadlight,” first as a poem with a prose headnote, but soon the narrative overtook
and completely overshadowed the concluding verse, “Billy in the Darbies” (Milder 212). Similar
to the opening poems of John Marr, “Billy in the Darbies” is a dramatic monologue, described by
the narrator as a “rude utterance from another foretopman, one of [Billy’s] own watch, gifted, as
some sailors are, with an artless poetic temperament” (384). He continues, “The tarry hand made
some lines which, after circulating among the shipboard crews for a while, finally got rudely
printed at Portsmouth as a ballad” (384). Melville draws attention to the dramatic nature of the
poem through the contrast between Billy, the character in the narrative, and Billy, the speaker of
the lines. In the story, Billy is remarkably reticent, speaking only on occasion, and of course
when he most needs to articulate himself he is rendered incapable by his speech impediment. In
the poem, however, Billy is far more eloquent and loquacious, if still somewhat crude and naïve.
He remarks, for example:

Good of the chaplain to enter Lone Bay
And down on his marrowbones here and pray
For the likes just o’ me, Billy Budd.—But, look:
Through the port comes the moonshine astray!
It tips the guard’s cutlass and silvers this nook;
But ’twill die in the dawning of Billy’s last day.
A jewel-block they’ll make of me tomorrow,
Pendant pearl from the yardarm-end
Like the eardrop I gave to Bristol Molly—
O, ’tis me, not the sentence they’ll suspend. (1-10)

“Billy in the Darbies” represents just one of the ways the incident on the Bellipotent is
documented. Claggart’s death is reported incorrectly in a newspaper as the result of his
uncovering of “William Budd’s” attempt at mutiny: “he, Claggart, in the act of arraigning
the man before the captain, was vindictively stabbed to the heart by the suddenly drawn
sheath knife of Budd” (382). Printed in a newspaper, this account will be the one the majority of the reading public receives and believes. But the sailors can hold onto their alternative version of the story, in which Billy is a heroic martyr who apotheosizes into godlike status, to the point that “a chip” of the spar from which Billy was hung functions for them “as a piece of the Cross” (383). Early in the text we learn from the captain of the Rights-of-Man that Billy the “handsome sailor” has the rare ability to unite the sailors on a ship simply by his presence. Through his death, Billy again demonstrates this capacity to unite as the sailors join him in proclaiming “God bless Captain Vere!” Melville describes this moment in terms directly reminiscent of the end of “John Marr”: “Without volition, as it were, as if indeed the ship’s populace were but the vehicles of some vocal current electric, with one voice from alow and aloft came a resonant sympathetic echo: ‘God bless Captain Vere!’ And yet at that instant Billy alone must have been in their hearts, even as in their eyes” (375). Once again sentimentality—the “sympathetic echo,” the tears, and the heart-felt emotion—results in communal unification, as the sailors at this moment have “one heart-beat at heart-core.” Similarly, the poem serves as a continual reminder to the sailors of their fellowship with Billy and with one another, as it “circulat[es] among the shipboard crew for awhile” before being printed. Within this hemmed in circle “Billy in the Darbies” is, like the songs recounted in various poems of John Marr, essentially a coterie poem, passed around among sailors but generally unknown to a wider reading public. In commenting that the poem was “rudely printed,” moreover, Melville perhaps makes a sly reference to the self-publication of his own sailor monologues in John Marr.
“Billy in the Darbies” presents one example of art’s capacity to immortalize people and events that otherwise would be erased by the force of history. This function of art is central to Melville’s other coterie publication, Timoleon. Generally speaking, Timoleon is a vastly different production from John Marr. In place of monologues and lyrics reminiscing about life on the sea are mostly highly allusive, tight, and terse lyrical meditations on the nature of artistic creation and on art’s role in cultures throughout history. To a certain degree Shetley is correct that these poems are primarily private musings, neither responding to Melville’s contemporary literary culture nor dependent on a reading public. Even the dramatic monologues in the collection like “Timoleon” and “After the Pleasure Party” depict characters who are spurned by their communities and who reject interpersonal relationships rather than those who long for the old days of fellowship. Thus we might isolate “The Weaver” as emblematic of Melville’s sense of the hermetic poetic authorship he was practicing in Timoleon:

For years within a mud-built room  
For Arva’s shrine he weaves the shawl,  
Lone wight, and at a lonely loom,  
His busy shadow on the wall.

The face is pinched, the form is bent,  
No pastime knows he nor the wine,  
Recluse he lives and abstinent  
Who weaves for Arva’s shrine.

Yet I would argue that even as Melville characterizes the artist as a solitary ascetic, the poems of Timoleon are in a way even more publicly oriented than those of John Marr. Pieces like “Buddha,” “Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the 12th Century,” “The Parthenon,” and “Pisa’s Leaning Tower” either overtly address or evoke, in their subject-matter, the theme of immortality. Indeed, all of the poems about art in this collection
center on ancient structures or pieces of literature that have survived for centuries. These are public works of art in the broadest sense, accessible to generations of readers and spectators. By dwelling on these timeless creations, Melville goes far beyond the bounds of his coterie audience and reflects on his poetry’s ability to live well into the future. But it was precisely by arranging for the self-publication of these poems and by disseminating them to his family and friends that Melville ensured immortality was even a possibility. And as we enter into a period of increased interest in his poetry, Melville is proving his timelessness to us yet again.
Elizabeth Renker predicts that this wave of critical interest is only likely to increase in the coming years, particularly with the expected publication of the authoritative Northwestern-Newberry edition of the poems in the near future. See “Melville the Poet: Response to William Spengemann.”

Throughout the chapter I will cite and explain specific examples of this type of criticism.

See Vernon Lionel Shetley’s published dissertation, A Private Art (1).

For examples of critics who explore the notion of Melville’s “long silence,” which Nina Baym claimed in 1979 was almost “universally accepted,” see Baym’s “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction,” F. O. Matthiessen’s American Renaissance (1941), and Edgar A. Dryden’s Melville’s Thematics of Form (1968).

Melville’s notion of the “public” in the late poems is of course very different from that of either Whitman or Piatt, both of whom conceived of the public in broad national terms. Melville’s sense of the public, I think, is inherently tied up with what it meant for him to publish, regardless of the fact that the late collections were self-published for a limited number of readers. In the “Inscription Epistolary” to John Marr, Melville demonstrates that he is acutely cognizant and conscious of the public nature of the text. Though the “Inscription” is constructed as a private letter to the British sea novelist William Clark Russell, it is still a calculated public performance. At the end of both the letter and a long discourse about giving and receiving literary praise, Melville writes “Thus far as to matters which may be put in type. For personal feeling—the printed page is hardly the place for reiterating that” (Jarrard 169). For Melville, the very medium of the published page turns his work into a public document, even if, at the moment of initial publication, the public it reached was small. Throughout this chapter, then, when I speak of the public impulse in Melville’s coterie poetry, I mean specifically that he published it for an identifiable audience rather than simply for personal expression. Writing as a coterie poet did not mitigate Melville’s sense of his public function.

While, as Wicke shows, one need not necessarily be an amateur writer to be a coterie writer, Melville was in fact both when he published John Marr and Timoleon. In my discussion of Melville’s coterie authorship, his status as an amateur is important for two reasons. First, it accords with both Perkins’ and Kindlien’s description of the type of “handyman” poet that proliferated in the late nineteenth century. Second, it reveals a fundamental change in Melville’s career. As Charvat demonstrates, money was always a significant, if ultimately frustrating, issue for Melville as a professional writer, as he tried to support his family through the sale of his books on the commercial market. After his retirement from New York Customs, Melville could write without regard to financial remuneration, which means, as I suggest in this chapter, that he could finally compose for
the kind of small, selective, and sympathetic audience he had idealized throughout his career. In my reading of the dramatic monologues of *John Marr*, however, Melville focuses far more on his identity as a coterie poet than on his status as an amateur writer: his concern is primarily what it means to write for a small audience, not, necessarily, what it means to write for free, even if the two issues are connected.

7 According to Leyda the review was published in “an unidentified newspaper,” but he speculates that it might have been *The World*. The excerpt from the review as quoted by Leyda reads:

> Familiar from boyhood with such eminent writes of sea stories as Smollett and Marryatt, he adventured into strange seas in “Omoo” and “Typee,” which were speedily followed by “Mardi,” a not very skillful allegory, and “Moby Dick,” which is probably his greatest work. He was the peer of Hawthorne in popular estimation, and was by many considered his superior. His later writings were not up to the same high level. With all his defects, however, Mr. Melville is a man of unquestionable talent, and of considerable genius. He is a poet also, but his verse is marked by the same untrained imagination which distinguishes his prose. He is the author of the second best cavalry poem in the English language [“Sheridan at Cedar Creek”], the first being Browning’s “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Alix.” . . . Nothing finer than his unrhymed poems exist outside of the sea lyrics of Campbell. The present text of these observations is to be found in the little volume, “John Marr, and Other Sailors,” . . . which contains about twenty poems of varying degrees of merit . . . (811)

This excerpt suggests that Leyda was more interested in what the review tells us about late-nineteenth-century perspectives on Melville’s career than about the poems themselves.

8 It is appropriate to consider “Jack Roy” a monologue in the context of the other monologues. Given that the three preceding poems present an identifiable character as the main speaker revisiting and memorializing the sailors of his past, it seems likely that “Roy” is constructed around the voice of a speaking character as well.

9 Riley is not mentioned in Merton M. Seats, Jr.’s *Melville’s Reading* (1988). However, there is the possibility that Melville inscribed a copy of Will Carleton’s poetry collection *Farm Legends*, which would be significant given that Carleton is usually considered Riley’s mentor. Despite the lack of concrete evidence linking Melville and Riley, Riley’s ubiquity in the late nineteenth century, combined with Melville’s wide reading, suggests to me that Melville was probably familiar with Riley’s work.

10 It is possible to interpret the monologues as invoking the conventions of sentimentalism only to ironically undercut them. For instance, Shurr argues that Bridegroom Dick subtly mocks his wife’s emotional reactions, and he points out the lewd
double-entendres that litter the poem. In my estimation, however, even if we grant that the poems possess an ironic and jocular sensibility, it is ultimately secondary to their sincere sentimental posture. In each of these poems the strong emotional attachments between the sailors repeatedly triumphs as the very thing the poems commemorate.

11 Melville’s use of sentimentality to describe relationships between men certainly lends itself to a homoerotic reading, one that I find perfectly feasible. For insightful discussions of the homosexual, homosocial, and homoerotic readings of Melville’s oeuvre see Robert K. Martin’s Hero, Captain, and Stranger (1986) and James Creech’s Closet Writing/Gay Reading (1993).

12 Of course the exoticism of these poems does not preclude them from appealing to a popular audience. Indeed, it was precisely Melville’s most exotic tales, Omoo and Typee, that garnered him his most pronounced public fame. Still, I would maintain that much of Riley’s success was due to his skill at tapping into a generic American myth, while Melville portrayed a far more specific world.

13 John Marr includes the dramatic monologues, the narrative poem “The Haglets,” and several lyrics. The volume is thus typical of Melville in that, like Moby-Dick and Pierre, it explores a number of recurring themes through a range of literary genres. Drama, however, seems to me the most important in the collection, since Melville uses it both to establish his central issues and to perform the terms of his authorship.
CHAPTER 4

ELLIOTT BLAINE HENDERSON, RACE, AND THE LOCAL POET

In his famous Introduction to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), William Dean Howells argues that Dunbar’s African-American dialect poems “describe the range between appetite and emotion, with certain lifts far beyond and above it, which is the range of the race” (ix). “These are divinations and reports of what passes in the hearts and minds of a lowly people,” Howells continues, “whose poetry had hitherto been inarticulately expressed in music, but now finds, for the first time in our tongue, literary interpretation of a very artistic completeness” (ix). Howells champions Dunbar as a representative of the African-American race in two senses. First, as “the first instance of an American negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature,” he is a leading example of the ways in which African-Americans were proving their intellectual and cultural merits to white America. Second, he is able to articulate the essential character, or “range,” of the African-American race and express it eloquently to the rest of the country. In grounding his discussion of Dunbar within these terms, Howells set the standard for over a century of Dunbar criticism. Despite shifts of emphasis reflective of their literary and historical moment, critical appraisals of Dunbar typically hinge on the questions of whether he represents the race positively or negatively and, by extension, of whether his legacy should be celebrated within the African-American literary tradition.
For example, in his Preface to an important text of the Harlem Renaissance, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), James Weldon Johnson contends that Dunbar’s dialect verse, though the best of its kind, limits its depiction of African-Americans to two emotional registers, humor and pathos. Writing that “Negro dialect is at present a medium that is not capable of giving expression to the varied conditions of Negro life in America, and much less is it capable of giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology,” Johnson calls for a new “form” of “Aframericain” poetry that will more adequately “express the racial spirit” (41). Some fifty years later, in the wake of the Black Arts movement, Jean Wagner admits to a feeling of “embarrassment” when reading Dunbar, whom he charges with accomplishing little more in his dialect poems than perpetuating the racial stereotypes of the minstrel tradition. In reifying racist caricatures, while at the same time trying to write “white” poetry—that is, non-dialect poems in standard written English—Dunbar, Wagner claims, is guilty of abjectly renouncing his essential “blackness” (110). As part of a collection published just a few years later intended to redeem Dunbar’s reputation as more than a conceder to white racism, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. asserts that Dunbar’s dialect poems reflect his sincere anthropological effort to encapsulate the folk traditions and lifestyle of the plantation era in African-American experience, which was vanishing quickly at the turn of the century (97-99). Though emerging from different theoretical positions, all of these evaluations of Dunbar’s dialect poetry share in the millenarian and essentializing rhetoric that, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has shown, infused the critical writings of Dunbar’s contemporaries. According to Gates, by the end of the nineteenth century both blacks and whites were trumpeting “urgent calls for a black ‘redeemer-poet,’” one who could express the
indigenous, unique, and unpoeticized aspirations, feelings, and thoughts of the black race (Signifying Monkey 175). Arguing about his successes and failures—often quite acrimoniously—Dunbar’s twentieth-century readers have tended to judge him within these universalist terms, assessing how well he embodies this “redeemer-poet.”

Yet Dunbar criticism contains a central paradox, for at the same time that scholars speak of his poetry as representative of the race, they commonly align it with the local color movement of the late nineteenth century. As Elizabeth Ammons and Valerie Rohy explain, local color writing, as a subset of the larger realist movement, is grounded in a particular geographical region and attempts to embody the area’s unique characters, dialogues, lifestyles, and landscapes (vii). Myron Simon argues that “like other local colorists,” Dunbar believed that the realistic depiction of different peoples and regions would teach Americans about one another (128-29). Joanne M. Braxton agrees, proposing that Dunbar’s handling of dialect “may represent a philosophical alignment with local-color writers of other regions and affirm a belief” that local color literature could unite the country (xxiv). Dunbar was tremendously influenced by the preeminent local color poet of the day, James Whitcomb Riley, whose treatment of the Hoosier dialect was central to Dunbar’s decision to try his hand at African-American dialect pieces. As Klaus Ensslen explains, quoting one of Dunbar’s letters, Dunbar saw himself as participating in “the development of a distinctly Western school of poets, such as Riley represents” (144). Broadly speaking, Dunbar’s dialect verse participates in the plantation tradition of local color writing. Popularized in the novels and stories of Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris, the plantation tradition represented the characters, dialect, and settings of antebellum plantation life. In poems like “An
Antebellum Sermon,” “Accountability,” and “When de C’on Pone’s Hot,” all of which present a slave character speaking in dialect, Dunbar’s affiliation with the plantation tradition is utterly apparent. Though there is much debate about whether Dunbar contests or is complicit in the racial politics of the plantation tradition, his dialect work, as Wagner argues, must be read against the backdrop of this popular kind of local color literature.

Dunbar’s verse, then, exhibits a fundamental tension between the universal and the local; at one and the same time scholars have seen it as the essentialized expression of “the race” and as a more particularized documentation of black life in the South in the decades before the Civil War. Even if we perceive it as the latter, however, the local context is often hardly defined. Despite somewhat common references to the “master,” most of Dunbar’s poems do not explicitly identify when or where they are taking place. Ensslen contends that several of these pieces are “so unspecific that it is totally open as to [their] historical context” (144). According to Gates, in the late nineteenth century “blackness was a metaphorical ‘region’ within the republic of letters,” a kind of frozen in time place in and of itself (In His Own Voice xi). As I will discuss in more detail, the plantation tradition sought to turn the historically and geographically contingent identity of the “Plantation Negro” into a fixed archetype of the African-American race. For those who consider Dunbar a perpetuator of the plantation school, this is precisely what his work accomplishes: it is essentialist in that it conflates the local color stereotypes typical of the plantation school with African-American identity more broadly. Thus in the case of Dunbar’s dialect poetry, the “local” and the “essential,” or, put another way, the
“local” and the “racial,” are vexed terms—sorting out how they function goes a long way towards determining how we understand his work.

Dunbar, of course, was not the only African-American composing dialect poetry in the 1890s. Writing plantation verse in the 1870s and 80s, Irwin Russell, a white Southerner, usually is credited with being the first poet to use African-American dialect. The African-American poet James Edwin Campbell published dialect poems in periodicals several years before Dunbar began writing. His collection *Echoes from the Cabin and Elsewhere*, which Joan R. Sherman claims was “the finest group of dialect poems of the century,” came out in 1895, a year before Dunbar’s *Lyrics*. Daniel Webster Davis also was composing dialect poems at this time, publishing them in his collections *Idle Moments* (1895) and *'Weh Down Souf* (1897). None of these poets, however, ever achieved the fame or success of Dunbar, whose verse became widely read both by black and white audiences. Dunbar’s influence was so pervasive that critics have used the term the “Dunbar school” to refer to the many African-American poets who produced dialect verse around the turn of the century. Indeed, Sherman argues that dialect verse was the last major movement in African-American poetry of the nineteenth century, becoming a “respectable, fashionable, and profitable” form for a number of black poets (12).

An example of an African-American poet influenced by Dunbar was Elliott Blaine Henderson. Today Henderson is virtually an unknown writer. Though Sherman includes his name in her appendix to *Invisible Poets* (1989) as a twentieth-century African-American poet, no extensive or detailed accounts of either his life or work exist, nor do any of his poems appear in anthologies of either American or African-American poetry. Born on October 6, 1877 in Springfield, Ohio, the son of Benjamin Franklin
Henderson, a barber, and Sarah A. Henderson, the poet lived the majority of his life, respectively, in Springfield and Columbus, Ohio. He died on August 3, 1944.

Throughout his life he produced ten volumes of poetry. The earliest of these, *Plantation Echoes* (1904), was published in two editions by a press in Columbus, and is comprised almost entirely of dialect poems. The rest of his books appear to have been self-published and, for the most part, they intermix dialect poems with verses in standard written English. Currently available evidence indicates that Henderson’s work garnered little attention outside of Ohio.\(^3\) He was one among numerous examples of the fin-de-siècle local poet. As we will see, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, scores of American local poets composed verse intended only for a small circle of friends and fellow townspeople.

Henderson is an important poet in the history of African-American literature and American poetry, I believe, because he complexly interrogates the local dimensions of African-American dialect verse. In the dramatic poems of *Plantation Echoes*, Henderson performs the role of the local poet by emphasizing the intersections between race and place. Writing from and for a particular local context, his poetry explores the fraught relationship in dialect verse between the localism of plantation literature and its essentialist conceptions of African-American identity. More specifically, his work troubles the status of the “Plantation Negro” as a viable identity for African-Americans within the context of his local setting, central Ohio in the first few years of the twentieth century. It does so through Henderson’s motivated use of dramatic techniques, particularly the dramatic monologue. By inflecting the theatrical components of his monologues, Henderson underscores the extent to which the black speakers of his poems
are performing a particular version of blackness, not conveying an authentic and universal rendering of the “range of the race.” In exposing these performances, and in meditating on the relationship between African-Americans and their communities, Henderson implies that African-Americans are displaced from both his local setting and American society more generally.

I. The Local Context and the Influence of Dunbar

As we saw in Chapter 3, Melville’s practice of coterie authorship is part of the phenomenon of amateur poets in the late nineteenth century composing work as avocation. Unlike John Marr and Timoleon, however, much of this poetry served a local function. Printed in regional newspapers or by community presses, if published at all, this verse was intended for a local constituency. Referring to the “handyman” poetry of the late nineteenth century, for example, Perkins writes, “Much of this poetry was written for decorative and minor supplementary purposes at public or private occasions—weddings, deaths, groundbreakings” (90). In this respect, Perkins concurs with Mary Loeffelholz and Shira Wolosky, both of whom demonstrate that nineteenth-century poetry was a form of public discourse that often served a localized civic, social, and political purpose.\(^4\) Local poets wrote verse to commemorate new public buildings, eulogize fallen members of the community, celebrate anniversaries and festivals, and dedicate public monuments. They also meditated on the pressing public concerns of their day. For example, Robert H. Walker’s *The Poet and the Gilded Age* (1963) documents how in the 1880s local constituencies of farmers formed clubs where they read poems,
some of which later circulated in newsletters or books, that meditated on their trade and on economic policies that affected them (103).

The phenomenon of the 1890s local poet is rendered with precision and pathos in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s 1890 short story “A Poetess.” As opposed to Minister Lang, a poet who successfully places his poems in magazines, Betsey Dole is a rural New England woman who writes poems for pleasure and self-fulfillment, and who circulates her poems to friends and local villagers. The story centers on the elegy she composes for the deceased child of her neighbor, Mrs. Caxton. Encouraged by the positive reception the poem receives from its circumscribed audience, Betsey has it printed herself and sends copies to various friends. She is the local poet *par excellence*, writing as avocation for a local community and for public utility. By having the minister condemn the poem as “*poor as it could be*” and “*in bad taste,*” Freeman puts into sharp relief the differences in status and authority between the educated poet who reached a wide audience by publishing in a magazine, and the amateur local poet who wrote only to fulfill the needs and expectations of the readers in her immediate environment (115). Whether we interpret Betsey’s death as Freeman’s nostalgic elegy for the passing of the local poet or as her satire on the damaging effects of the patriarchal publishing industry’s trivialization of the local woman writer, the story indicates that the local poet is a recognizable type with which 1890s readers would be familiar.

Henderson conformed to this type quite well. After the two printings of *Plantation Echoes* in 1904 and 1905 by the Press of F. J. Heer, he appears to have self-published his remaining books of poetry in Springfield, Ohio, a town roughly 45 miles west of Columbus. His second collection, *The Soliloquy of Satan and Other Poems*
(1907) is marked as very much a local production, for a little less than halfway into the book Henderson begins dedicating poems to various individuals. After some of these dedications Henderson includes “Columbus, O,” but the majority of dedications are the names of persons only. A sampling of these people includes James H. Rabbitts, who served as both a judge and postmaster in Springfield, and who was editor of the Springfield Republic; F. W. White, a physician in Columbus; and Pearl W. Chavers, owner and editor of the weekly newspaper the Columbus Standard. In his 1910 collection, Darky Meditations, Henderson takes this dedicatory practice a step further. His fifth book in just six years, Darky begins with a dedication to “the following named persons,” who, Henderson claims, “were among the very first to encourage my literary efforts.” He then proceeds to cite 173 people. A few of these people are identified as being residents of either Dayton or London, Ohio; the rest appear to have lived in either Springfield or Columbus. The list includes Professor J. S. Weaver, Chairman of the Committee on Education in Springfield; C. B. Anderson, owner of London, Ohio’s Anderson and Hume Hardware and Furniture; James P. Goodwin, a judge in Springfield; and C. H. Pierce, President of the Springfield Building and Loan Association.5

Henderson’s overwhelming list of acknowledgments, combined with his dedications to residents of Columbus and Springfield, suggests his self-conscious identification as a local poet. Rather than dedicating his book to a nationally or internationally renowned figure with an eye towards achieving fame well outside of his immediate surroundings, Henderson remains entrenched in central Ohio. His acknowledgments intimate that his audience was a local group, comprised of the people he names and of others who would recognize or know them.6 Further, by invoking the
names of people who held traditionally valorized positions within the community, such as judge, lawyer, physician, business owner, and pastor, Henderson seems to imagine his work being tied up with the public life of the community. As opposed to just listing the names of relatively conspicuous friends and family, Henderson acknowledges the “pillars” of his region, the symbols and representatives of economic, political, and religious life in Columbus and Springfield. In doing so, he inserts his work into the civic life of these two towns and suggests that his verse serves a locally circumscribed function.

As a local production, however, Henderson’s African-American dialect poetry also has to be considered in relation to Dunbar. Springfield lies roughly between Columbus and Dayton, Dunbar’s hometown. Dunbar’s influence is made explicit at different moments in Henderson’s collections. In Plantation Echoes, E. G. Burkham [sic] mentions Dunbar by name in his Introduction to the volume.\(^7\) Speaking of dialect poets, Burkham writes, “One of the most notable of these exponents or interpreters is an Ohio negro, Paul Lawrence Dunbar [sic], who has taken high rank among the poets of the day. Another is Elliott Blaine Henderson, also a son of Ohio . . .” Though Burkham stops short of drawing a direct connection between Dunbar and Henderson, clearly the cultural ascendancy of Dunbar must have figured as a tremendous impact on Henderson’s career. Indeed, the second poem of The Soliloquy of Satan bears the Tennysonian appellation “In Memoriam,” and is inscribed “TO THE LATE PAUL L. DUNBAR,” who had died in 1906, a year before Henderson published Satan. The middle stanzas of the elegy read:

Brilliance of mind beyond discount,
The birthright of this noble son,
Forged verse which moved the hearts of men,
And brought him laurels truly won.

Deeds of potency and power
    Wrought he ’mid clouds of dire dispair,
Upon successes sun kissed heights
    He found at last a welcome there.

Verse flowed as magic from his pen,
    Encouching sweet and beauteous thought,
Of negro life before the days
    When struggling men for freedom fought.

As long as history endures
    He there shall find abiding place;
Plaudits and honor e’er for him—
    The greatest poet of his race.

Not in monumental stone,
    Not in history alone,
But in our loving, grateful hearts,
    He there shall live—shall find a throne. (13-32)

Appropriating the platitudes and poeticisms of the standard genteel elegy, Henderson crowns Dunbar “The greatest poet of his race.” Presumably the last stanza, which posits that Dunbar will ascend his rightful throne in the “loving, grateful hearts” of his readers, also functions as a statement of poetic inheritance. Between the lines Henderson asserts that by continuing to live in his own heart, Dunbar’s legacy will animate his poetic endeavors. And, in fact, one sign of this perpetual influence is Henderson’s decision to write his elegy in standard written English, proving, like Dunbar, that he could navigate the stylistic conventions of both the African-American and the Anglo-American poetic traditions.

As both Burkham’s statements and Henderson’s elegy indicate, Henderson clearly cast himself as an admirer of Dunbar, if not his protégé. In the early twentieth century, African-American poets typically had to situate themselves in relation to Dunbar, given
his success and popularity. In 1902, for example, the aspiring African-American poet James D. Corrothers published “Me ’n’ Dunbar,” a brief poetic narrative written in dialect about a fictional hoeing competition between Corrothers and Dunbar. Told from the perspective of Corrothers, the action of the poem begins when he issues a challenge to Dunbar to see who can hoe the most corn the fastest:

Tuck off ma coat, rolled up ma slebes, spit on ma han’s an say:
“Ef God’ll he’p me—’n’ not he’p him—I beats ma man today!”
S’I: “Paul, come on, le’s have a race!—I see you achin’ foh it”—
S’e: “All right, Jeems, ma son; strack out—I sho’ admire yo’ spurrit.”
S’I: “Son er father, I’m yo’ match—jes’ ketch me, ef you ken!”
S’I “You’d gib up now, ef you’d take advice f’om yo’ bes’ fr’en”—
An’ den de way dem two hoes flew wuz scand’l’us—gen-’l’men! (8-14)

At one point Corrothers tires and checks on Dunbar to see how he is progressing. When he accuses Dunbar of fatigue, Dunbar retorts, “‘Am dat a fack?— / Who wuz it lef’ his hoein’ fuss? You bettah go on back,— / An’ go to wo’k, ’r I’ll be so fur dat you cain’t fine ma track!” (26-28). Corrothers does return to work, but soon comes to realize that this “kine o’ foolishness wa’n’t he’pin’ him ner me” (32). So he confronts Dunbar one more time and the poem concludes: “S’I: ‘Hole on, Paul, le’s stop awhile, an’ talk an’ git ouh breff— / ’Ca’se bofe uv us has got to hoe his own patch foh his se’f.’ / Sez he: ‘Dat’s right; hey ain’t no use to wo’k ouhse’fs to deff’” (33-35). Undoubtedly the poem is an allegorical rendering of the Bloomian anxiety of influence. At the dawn of his literary career, Corrothers feels the overwhelming challenge and burden to overcome the dean of the African-American dialect poets. Hoeing is an apt metaphor for this literary contestation, for Corrothers literally has entered the same field as Dunbar and is trying to clear out a space for his individual poetic voice.
But the poem is also a lucid example of “Signifyin(g),” the rhetorical gesture that various critics have identified as central to African-American linguistics and that Gates has isolated persuasively, if controversially, as the unifying trope of the African-American literary tradition. As Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) demonstrates, arriving at a concrete definition of Signifyin(g) is a tortuous process, too cumbersome to pursue here. On its most basic level, however, many scholars (mistakenly, according to Gates) have understood the concept as the competitive linguistic gaming between two, usually urban, African-Americans. The two “contestants” try to use wit, wordplay, histrionics, verbal indirection, jokes, and nuances to put down, silence, or outtalk each other. Gates greatly expands this definition to include all of the rhetorical stances and practices that seem to him distinctly African-American. Signifyin(g), then, becomes “the black trope for all other tropes, the trope of tropes, the figure of figures. Signifyin(g) is troping” (81). In the literary context, Signifyin(g) is “a metaphor for textual revision” and intertextuality, denoting the process by which one text in the African-American literary tradition, “by tropological revision or repetition and difference,” draws on and reworks a previous, foundational text (88). All of these elements of Signifyin(g) are present in Corrothers’s poem: the hoeing allegorizes a sense of literary one-upmanship, a competitive linguistic battle between two poets, and the poem shows Corrothers, the new poet in the field, adopting Dunbar’s brand of dialect poetry, but struggling to find his signal difference, his way to revise and distance himself from Dunbar’s example. Thus the poem positions Corrothers as a competitor and rival to Dunbar, but, acknowledging Dunbar’s status as the more established and celebrated author, recognizes that Corrothers must find a way to “hoe his own patch foh his se’f.”
Corrothers was far from alone in Signifyin(g) upon Dunbar’s achievements. James Weldon Johnson’s proposal for and attempt to write a new kind of “Aframeric” dialect poetry that acknowledges Dunbar’s contributions but modifies them is clearly a case of “Signifyin(g)” as Gates describes it. Countee Cullen’s first book of poetry contains an epitaph for Dunbar conveying that his decision to write in non-dialect forms is an extension and progression of Dunbar’s own desire to compose in standard written English. Most famously, perhaps, Langston Hughes, like Dunbar, became enormously popular by writing poems grounded in black dialect and vernacular, with the important exception that his work is located primarily in the modern city rather than in the bygone plantation.

Just as these twentieth-century poets “Signified” on Dunbar’s legacy, so too, I would argue, did Henderson. While Henderson concedes Dunbar’s standing as “the greatest poet of his race,” he does not simply and unabashedly mimic Dunbar’s dialect poems. Rather, Henderson appropriates Dunbar’s dialect poetry, or repeats it, to use Gates’s formulation, but significantly revises it to fit the needs of his particular local setting and his objectives as a local poet. Henderson’s poetry raises the question of what it means to employ dialect in a circumscribed, local scene. Does the local context significantly alter the political and racial motivations behind, and effects of, dialect verse? More specifically, how does Henderson’s localized scene of production and reception affect and problematize dialect’s association with local color writing, particularly when the local site of the plantation tradition is far different from Henderson’s local setting? Henderson’s relationship with Dunbar, then, is a complicated
illustration of the dynamics of literary influence, the contours and implications of which can be traced throughout *Plantation Echoes*.

II. *Plantation Echoes*

Henderson’s first book, *Plantation Echoes*, is an illustrative example of the kind of local poetry produced around the turn of the century. The Press of F. J. Heer, which published *Plantation Echoes*, was a Columbus company that focused primarily on publishing texts of local and state interest. In the early twentieth century, the majority of Heer’s publications were official government documents contracted by the state legislature, including proposed bills, passed laws, and censuses. Additionally, Heer brought out several books on Ohio history and geology, as well as pamphlets and genealogical records for Ohio civic organizations and families. Though it did not appear to publish much fiction or poetry, it did print a few collections of literature on Ohio themes or by Ohio authors. In conjunction with being published by Heer, *Plantation Echoes* is forwarded by words of approbation and encouragement by two Columbus dignitaries, Dr. Washington Gladden and Burkham. Burkham was editor of the daily Columbus newspaper the *Columbus Dispatch*, and his formal Introduction is yet another instance in a long history of a white Americans validating an African-American writer: John Wheatley and “the most respectable characters in *Boston*” for Phillis Wheatley, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips for Frederick Douglass, and Howells for Dunbar. With the exception of Ohio’s governor, Gladden was perhaps the most prominent and nationally recognized resident of Columbus at the time. Pastor of Columbus’s First Congregational Church from 1882 to 1918, Gladden was the primary
polemicist of the Social Gospel movement. Responding to the new cultural challenges instigated by the industrial revolution, urbanization, immigration, and the emancipation of slaves, the Social Gospel movement was an activist form of Protestantism that applied Christian principles of fellowship and charity directly to the alleviation of social perils, including poverty, alcoholism, and the exploitation of labor (Knudten 1-19). Following a career as a writer and religious editor for the New York Congregationalist newspaper the Independent (1871-74), Gladden became famous and well regarded as the prophet of this progressive movement, which in part preached cooperation between the races in the project of “lifting up” African-Americans.8 As the words of an unquestionable moral authority and a leading citizen of Columbus, therefore, Gladden’s introductory “COMMENT” to Plantation Echoes both exemplified his message of supporting African-Americans and imbued Henderson’s text with augmented credibility.

The opening pages of Plantation Echoes, then, confirm the text’s status as a local production. Yet if all of these textual markers indicate that this is a book written in (and for) central Ohio, its title suggests that it deals with a different local setting altogether—the antebellum Southern plantation. By virtue of its name alone, Plantation Echoes invokes the plantation tradition of local color writing that was so popular near the end of the nineteenth century. In their stories and novels, plantation writers like Page and Harris sought to memorialize antebellum plantation life. Most famously, Harris’s “Uncle Remus” stories used an African-American dialect speaker whose Brer Rabbit tales emerged from the folk traditions of slave culture. Uncle Remus is witty and playful, unsophisticated, unpretentious, and unaspiring. Generally, his narratives depict the
plantation as a place of pastoral repose, where whites and blacks got along swimmingly because the slave system of the Old South kept the slaves in their proper place.

Various critics have argued that plantation literature became culturally important in the postbellum era because it helped obscure the actual conditions of Jim Crow America, a period that is often deemed the most oppressive in African-American history post-Emancipation. As Lucinda H. Mackethan contends, for example, plantation literature offered white audiences “a vision of order and grace” in postbellum race relations through the retrieval of the contentedly inferior slave (211). As more and more African-Americans migrated North, just at the time when America was experiencing an influx of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization, many whites, particularly in the North, tended to view African-Americans with resentment, bitterness, apprehension, and aggression. Blacks were the South’s problem; by coming to the North they were compounding social perils such as unemployment, poverty, urban squalor, and crime. While the South had implemented Jim Crow, Northern cities were forced to consider how they would treat African-Americans and what place they would allow blacks in their societies. Thus we hear in this period so much discussion of the “Negro problem,” and thus, in part, the rise of the Social Gospel movement. Plantation literature played on both Northern and Southern fantasies of social and racial control. Both regions of the country could look back nostalgically on slavery as a time and system when blacks knew their places within the overarching fabric of American society. By implanting in the national consciousness an image of black America as simple, good-natured, and naïve, as a race that, as Booker T. Washington promised, had a long way to go to improve itself and thus did not threaten white superiority at all, these forms of cultural production painted over
the lynchings, violation of rights, and economic hardships that characterized the Negro problem. They reminded whites of the submissive slaves African-Americans used to be, and they warned blacks that, to be accepted, they ought not to try to exceed their second-class status. In short, plantation literature turned a fictional character associated with a particular time and locale, the obsequious, cheerful, and contented slave, into an enduring and universal prototype of African-American social identity (Wagner 51).

Henderson’s esteemed authenticators, Gladden and Burkham, draw on this understanding of plantation literature in their readings of Plantation Echoes. For both of them, Henderson’s portrayals of slaves and former slaves effectively represent the limited but charming character of the race. Burkham’s Introduction, for example, almost reproduces in toto Howells’ Introduction to Lyrics of a Lowly Life:

Among the negroes there have sprung up a number of exponents of the wisdom, wit and humor of the race. They have caught the spirit of others—the humble philosophers of their kind—and they have employed the dialect to reproduce the thought in all its quaintness and originality. . . .

In much that Mr. Henderson here presents, there is the rush of expression and the jingle of words that are so characteristic of the negro. There is also humor and there is sentiment, and always that other quality which makes verse in these days readable—good cheer.

He who correctly interprets the spirit of his race serves a good cause, and it is believed that Mr. Henderson will be found to have succeeded in his undertaking to make his people better and more widely understood.

Just as Howells claimed for Dunbar, Burkham contends that Henderson is able to catch, “interpret,” and articulate the “spirit” of his race through the use of dialect. And again this spirit is depicted as innocuous and picturesque: “negroes,” according to Burkham, are humorous and pathetic, and their thought and wisdom, though original, are quaint and humble. Like Howells and the local color writers, Burkham ascribes to Henderson and
African-Americans an essential primitiveness and childlike innocence. Viewing African-Americans as an inferior people mentally and morally, Burkham, Howells, and other white Americans could laugh at and sympathize with their naiveté and touching humanism, but always from a position of paternalistic superiority. Though not explicitly using the language of slavery, Burkham’s Introduction implies that Henderson’s “echoes” from the plantation provide an idyllic and essentialized representation of African-Americans as benevolent and simple social inferiors.

For Burkham and Gladden, the “Plantation Negro” offers a tonic not only for the Negro problem, but also for all of the difficulties that plagued modern America. Aside from validating and promoting the book, Gladden’s “COMMENT” provides insight into the basic stylistic and thematic characteristics of the poems. Gladden writes:

> Mr. Henderson’s little book of verses, “Plantation Echoes,” is a meritorious attempt to give logical expression to our common human feelings. He deals, I should think, quite successfully with negro dialect, and his verses are musical and sometimes quaintly humorous, while the sentiment is sound and wholesome. I take pleasure in commending the volume.

While undoubtedly approbatory, Gladden’s remarks are also cautionary. By characterizing Plantation Echoes as a “little book of verses,” a “meritorious attempt,” and “quaintly humorous,” he tells readers to enjoy the poems but not to take them too seriously. For Gladden, these poems are earnest but decidedly minor efforts at verse-making. At first, his assertion that the poems “give logical expression to our common human feelings” might strike us as problematic, for it seems to contradict the
essentialized rhetoric of racial difference that operates in the rest of the introductory material. Yet Burkham provides some clarification, writing that “THE music of the American negro, the fresh and spontaneous expression of a good and care-free heart, has long been one of the most pleasing features of American life. It is human nature in its first vocal garb—original and unique, often humorous and always true to the sentiment of the singer.” In Burkham’s construction, the common bond of humanity between the races simultaneously provides the rationale for their vast differences. Gesturing towards the racial Darwinism of his day, Burkham’s statement indicates that he considers African-Americans a primitive race at or near the bottom of the evolutionary chain, various stages behind the highly advanced Anglo-Americans who long ago occupied the same position. In their primitiveness, African-Americans are simple, uncultured, foolish, and incapable of higher thought; yet, because they are primal, they also possess a kind of natural wisdom, purity, humor, and good sense, that, in the case of Anglo-Americans, has been complicated, corrupted, and lost in the process of civilization. Burkham’s attitude towards blacks was not uncommon. As Wagner argues, in the late nineteenth century

[for] northern citizens, who every day felt the tentacles of the industrial octopus a little tighter around their throats, the Negro came to incarnate instead the natural man who, because of his essentially rural activities, was still privileged to live, like the primitive, in harmony with the seasons. Purer and fresher than civilized man, he was, so to speak, the last vestige of an age of innocence, in a world plagued with financial scandals, corruption, and the cult of Mammon. (69)

In light of his endorsement of this racial attitude, Burkham clearly considers Henderson’s poems laden with romantic nostalgia for a simpler life and time. For Burkham, then, Henderson’s plantation poems not only present a romanticized ideal of African-American identity, but also a consoling affirmation of how pure and good all Americans once were.
Thus, before we even read the first poem in Plantation Echoes, we are provided with a critical apparatus for interpreting the poems, one that entreats us to understand them as innocuous and wholesome portraits of an unassuming race. The local gives way to the universal, as the plantation character becomes a representative of the “spirit” of the race. Further, by almost totally neglecting to mention it, the prefatory material suggests that the local context of the poems’ production and distribution is of little to no consequence. Yet Henderson’s verse immediately resists this interpretive framework. Behind the façade of humble, simple, and amusing dialect poems, Henderson complexly negotiates the efficacy of the plantation tradition for dealing with the racial and political realities of his immediate local context. He does so through a series of subtle strategic moves. First, he serves notice to his readers that he possesses the authorial power to defy the conventions of dialect poetry. Second, by calling attention to the inherently dramatic nature of dialect monologues, he exposes the theatricality and performativity of both the plantation figure and racial identity more broadly. Finally, he suggests that, rather than returning to the plantation, African-Americans should be able to occupy a legitimate place within their present, local communities.

Henderson’s opening poem is a remarkably powerful indication of his authorial prowess, particularly given that it is the first poem in his first published collection. As we progress from the book’s title, to the subtitle, to Gladden’s “COMMENT,” to Burkham’s Introduction, we seem to receive an increasingly sharper sense of what to expect from the poems. Rather than confirming our expectations, however, the first poem returns us to a relative state of uncertainty. Entitled “When the Moon Hangs Low,” this opening poem is surprising for several reasons. In its entirety, it reads:
A straying chicken
Lost from home
Bewildered, finds
Itself a-roam.
And innocently
Stalks the ground,
Not dreaming
That a coon’s around.

As evening’s shadows
Gently fall,
The chicken, lonesome,
Gives a call.
A coon steals out
Soft in the night,
To catch him
For his appetite.

The night is still!
The moon is low!
Not e’en a zephyr
Seems to blow.
The coon with sack
Clutched in his hand,
Moves silently
Across the land.

The chicken gives
Another squawk!
The coon has got her
Like a hawk.
The moon now breaks
Forth into light.
The coon and chicken’s
Out of sight.

From the start, “When the Moon Hangs Low” thwarts our expectations because it is in standard written English, not “negro dialect.” Thematically, too, it seems out of step with the kinds of poems promised in the prefatory material. Granted, chicken stealing was a “stock-and-trade theme” in plantation literature and minstrel shows (Bruce 111). For example, it is the subject of one of Dunbar’s more famous early poems, “Accountability.”
Spoken by a slave in dialect, “Accountability” offers his philosophical justification for pilfering one of his master’s chickens. The poem begins as a long discourse about how God preordained all of creation to occupy a particular place and to fulfill a particular function, thereby making moral standards relative: “Folks ain’t got no right to censuah othah folks about dey habits; / Him dat giv’ de squir’ls de bushtails made de bobtails fu’ de rabbits. / . . . We is all contructed diff’ent, d’ain’t no two of us de same; / We cain’t he’p ouah likes an’ dislikes, ef we’se bad we ain’t to blame” (1-6). After this extended harangue about divine determinism and moral relativism, the speaker finally makes it clear that he is merely trying to exculpate his own actions: “Viney, go put on de kittle,” he states, “I got one o’ mastah’s chickens” (16).

Despite their corresponding subject matter, “Accountability” and “When the Moon Hangs Low” are two very different poems. For one, “Accountability” is written in dialect where “Moon” is not. Moreover, “Accountability” is a dramatic monologue while “Moon” is a narrative. This generic distinction utterly transforms the tenor of the poems. Robert Langbaum’s foundational study of the dramatic monologue, *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), argues that the monologue form inherently provokes the reader to either of two possible reactions, sympathy or judgment. “Accountability” lends support to Langbaum’s thesis. At the end of the poem we are forced to consider whether we accept the speaker’s justification for stealing the chicken: do we condemn him? laugh at him? sympathize with him? Is he a criminal, a buffoon, or, as Bruce contends, the articulator of a specifically African-American cosmology that condones a slave tricking and stealing from his master? Part of our response to these questions depends on whether we take dialect speakers seriously or, as Howells, Gladden, and Burkham suggest, we
always perceive them to be simple, naïve, and “quaintly humorous.” Our attitudes about the intelligence of dialect characters impact our sense of the speaker’s level of self-conscious intentionality, which, in turn, affects our moral assessment of his actions.

In contrast, “When the Moon Hangs Low” does not offer the reader the same opportunity to sympathize with or judge the stealer of chickens. Indeed, the ethical conundrum that frames “Accountability” is wholly absent from “Moon,” for the chicken, “straying” and “lost from home,” is nobody’s property. By evacuating the poem of moral implications, Henderson uses it primarily to create an emotional tone for the rest of the collection. And rather than being either humor or pathos, as it would have been, presumably, if the first poem were in African-American dialect, this tone is one of stealth, darkness, and ambiguity. Written in compact stanzas of rough iambic dimeter and with terse language, “When the Moon Hangs Low” paints a shadowy picture of abduction and suspends any type of moralizing conclusion. Thus, it strikes an unsettling note for the beginning of the collection. Composed in standard written English, ambiguous, and furtive, it clearly is not the type of poem for which Gladden or Burkham prepared the reader. Rather, it seems to serve the reader with a type of authorial warning. Just as the coon steals the chicken, Henderson, a “coon” author, steals away his audience’s assumptions, writing a poetry that is far more ominous and ambivalent than what many would have expected from African-American dialect poetry. To reinforce this sense of authorial power, Henderson uses standard written English, proving right from the start that he can and will defy such expectations.

Henderson’s sly suggestion in “When the Moon Hangs Low” that he could potentially trick his readers when they least expect it immediately materializes in the next
poem in the collection, “Seems Dey’s No Place.” At first glance this poem appears to make good on Gladden’s and Burkham’s promises. Here we have just the kind of African-American dialect poem that had become so popular around the turn of the century. In its totality, the poem reads:

Well er coon kin go to kollege
Git his head chucked full o’ knowledge,
Till he knows ez much ez Solomon de wise.
He kin study an’ summize,
Count de stars up in de skies,
Seems dey’s no place
Fo’ de eddeekayted coon.

Tawk erbout yo’ eddeekayshun
Gittin’ in de cullahd nayshun,
Gittin’ “lighten” in de head an’ sich ez dat,
Yo’ kin larn sah, till yo’ hat
On yo’ head woan’ fit exzac’,
Seems dey’s no place
Fo de eddeekayted coon.

Eddeekayshun am all right
Ef er coon kin git er sight
’Stead o’ makin’ bread an’ buttah by de hoe,
He kood entah any do’
Whah he’s qualified to go.
Seems dey’s no place
Fo’ de eddeekayted coon.

He doan’ allus want to hoe,
He wood like er little sho,
Fo’ to git er little sweetness out o’ life;
He has had er worl’ o’ strife,
Allus struck by trouble’s knife.
Seems dey’s no place
Fo’ de eddeekayted coon.

All de coons kin cut dey pranks
Fo’ to git into de banks,
Wid de white fo’ks fo’ to handle wid dey cash
Dat wood sorter spile de hash.
Make er fraycus an’ er clash.
Seems dey’s no place
Fo’ de eddeekayted coon.

All de coons kin go to Yale,
Larn Greek, Latin, by de bale,
Larn to numbah all de hyahs up in dey head;
Dey may read dis thing wid dread,
Nuffin’ else kin dey be said.
Seems dey’s no place
Fo’ de eddeekayted coon.

Ez I saunter ‘roun’ de town,
An’ I skim hah eyes eroun’,
Whah de white fo’ks am in business ebbry whre,
Yo’ kain’t find er coon in dare
Wid de white fo’ks sellin ware.
Seems dey’s no place
Fo’ de eddeekayted coon.

But if stylistically and linguistically “Seems Dey’s No Place” is a conventional “negro dialect” poem, thematically it is not. Clearly an expression of racial frustration and social protest, this poem does not very easily lend itself to being read, in Burkham’s words, as “the fresh and spontaneous expression of a good and care-free heart,” nor as “human nature in its first vocal garb—original and unique, often humorous.” Rather, the poem is an overtly political piece that strains against the conventions of the dialect mode and the plantation tradition. Unlike most plantation literature, which expressed nostalgia for the plantation precisely to ignore the social plight of African-Americans during Jim Crow, “Seems Dey’s No Place” uses the dialect speaker to make these conditions its central message.

In the opening pages of Henderson’s very first collection, then, the reader encounters two poems that fundamentally collide with the claims made in the prefatory material and with the conventions of dialect and plantation poetry. By distancing himself
from these conventions, Henderson not only reveals his authorial self-will, he indicates that they ultimately fail to meet his poetry’s needs. More specifically, Henderson’s complication of the dialect genre in these two poems expressly troubles one of the basic claims often associated with dialect verse and plantation literature—that they are *authentic* expressions of the essential “character” of the race. In dialect poetry, this claim to authenticity usually is tied to the monologue form. In her overview of Southern plantation fiction from 1865 to 1900, Mackethan proposes that one of the single largest contributing factors to the popularity and effectiveness of plantation fiction was its use of the black slave speaker, who was “brought forward to authenticate a version of the plantation system as tragic Eden”: “All [Page, Harris, Charles Chesnutt] placed the slave narrator at the center of the plantation scheme, not only because he fulfilled local-color standards but also because he provided an air of veracity and more subtly a persuasive doctrine of master-slave relations” (211-18). The use of the slave voice as the central narratological speaker, that is, authenticates the depiction of the slave system and of race relations that the author is trying to advance. As Mackethan’s mention of local color suggests, the slave voice provided a fiction of the real for both its author and its readers. Wagner seconds Mackethan’s assessment, arguing that the slave voice was a veritable goldmine for Irwin Russell’s poetry. “[Russell’s] humorous monologues,” Wagner writes, “are not just farce. [They] are put together with remarkable skill, and the mere idea of choosing the genre of the monologue, and having a Negro speak it, was a find in itself. What better means could he have hit upon to persuade the reader of the truth of any declaration or insinuation than to have the Negro himself utter it? It rendered the association of ideas, in the minds of Russell’s audience, all the more solid and lasting”
Wagner correctly hypothesizes that it is through the dialect monologue that Russell was able to infuse his depictions of African-Americans with the semblance of truth. It is certainly Dunbar’s skillful use of the dialect monologue in a poem like “Accountability” that has led so many critics, from Howells to the present, to view his plantation poems as an attempt to document faithfully the “character” and “spirit” of his race.

The juxtaposition of “When the Moon Hangs Low” and “Seems Dey’s No Place” contests the dramatic monologue’s association with the real, emphasizing instead the theatricality and falsity of the dialect poem and the plantation speaker. The equation of the dialect monologue and the real overlooks basic problems resulting from the monologue’s theatrical heritage. The monologue is associated with acting and performance, and hence with a kind of artificiality. This is not to say that the monologue, or acting, accesses and represents the real any less effectively than other literary genres. Indeed, as Harold K. Bush, Jr. argues, actors in the late nineteenth century increasingly espoused theories of “absorbing” their characters, or literally becoming them to the fullest extent possible rather than merely mimicking them, in order to make theatrical productions more realistic (41). Randall Knoper’s Acting Naturally: Mark Twain in the Culture of Performance (1995) contends that this relationship between theatricality and realism animates much of Twain’s fiction. However Twain, according to Knoper, explored provisional dichotomies between “staging and realization, posing and expression . . . mimicry and mimesis, the performative and the informative,” in order to refuse any notion of an easily accessible, transparent reality that can be accurately documented (2). “Twain was indeed a realist,” Knoper writes, “partly in his grasping for the ‘genuine,’ partly in his persistent sense that it was out of reach” (2).
Just as the relationship between the theatrical and the real was contested ground in Twain’s fiction, it was the subject of great concern for African-American writers of the late-nineteenth-century minstrel tradition, the theatrical counterpart of plantation literature. Begun in the 1830s with Thomas Dartmouth Rice’s performances of “Jump Jim Crow,” minstrel shows, which popularized the plantation slave as a character on the stage, enjoyed a considerable revival in the 1890s, with “troupes beyond number . . . traversing the land, putting on their shows in theaters and circuses” (Wagner 44). As Eric Sundquist points out, these performances differed from their predecessors in one critical regard: whereas mid-century minstrel shows were composed by whites and acted by whites in blackface, late-century minstrel productions often included the contributions of blacks, both as actors and playwrights. Dunbar, for instance, created several songs and shows for minstrel productions on Broadway. Even when he was not writing explicitly for the stage, the theatricality of the minstrel tradition always figured prominently in his work. As David Perkins contends, when reading Dunbar’s poetry “one should keep in mind that Dunbar was a talented showman, who composed for public performance” (400). “Never far removed from song, stage show, and popular entertainment,” Wagner concurs, “[Dunbar’s poems] are designed not for reading but for live performance” (112-13). In Sundquist’s estimation, the minstrel show was crucial to turn-of-the-century black artists like Dunbar because, despite its degrading humor, it gave them the professional opportunity to exert some artistic control over the representations of their race, thus opening up an avenue for them to contest and subvert racist stereotypes. As writers and performers, they were able “to combat the ‘old-time darky’ image and play the trickster, infusing their performances with legitimate African American cultural
expressions and including, surreptitiously or not, ideas and routines that protested plantation mythology and contemporary racism” (286).

Within the first two poems of Plantation Echoes, Henderson indicates that his work explores the relationship between the stock minstrel figure and its purported claims to embody real African-Americans, ultimately showing this figure instead to be a theatrical or performative myth. The juxtaposition of “When the Moon Hangs Low” and “Seems Dey’s No Place” undermines dialect’s status as the “true” voice of African-Americans. “When the Moon Hangs Low” informs Henderson’s readers that no matter how many dialect poems are to follow in the collection, he is, like Dunbar, fully capable of writing in standard written English. Thus we can sense behind the mask of the dialect speaker—and here Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” is wholly appropriate—another voice, the voice of, presumably, an educated African-American who can write in the Anglo-American tradition. So when the speaker of “Seems Dey’s No Place” states that “All de coons kin go to Yale, / Larn Greek, Latin, by de bale,” we can imagine the author who, if he has not attended Yale necessarily, is knowledgeable in classical languages and aware of their social importance as a marker of educated status. In other words, it is clear when we turn to “Seems Dey’s No Place” that dialect is not the natural voice of the author but an affectation that Henderson is appropriating. As John G. Blair reminds us, even what would seem to be the most obvious and authentic mark of the real in the minstrel tradition, black dialect “was only partly inspired by actual black speech and as a stage language its stylistic conventions quickly rigidified into an artificial simulated creole which, unlike actual speech, changed very little over the years” (74).
The political content of “Seems Dey’s No Place” similarly attenuates the authenticity of the stereotypical minstrel character. Henderson’s dialect speaker paints a portrait of African-Americans as anything but ignorant and oblivious clowns. Rather, he shows them to be acutely aware of the discriminatory practices that perpetuate racial inequities. Blair argues that “nothing that takes place in blackface seemed serious. ‘Jim Crow’ is a dressed-down figure of fun, a dancing fool, a boasting nobadaddy, a model for multiple generations of laughable black character types” (73). Henderson, by contrast, adopts the minstrel figure to express a fundamentally earnest political message, thereby reconfiguring the stock elements of this character. The pairing of “When the Moon Hangs Low” and “Seems Dey’s No Place,” then, confuses the boundaries between the real and the performative, showing how a form that putatively had access to the real is in fact laden with artificiality. If plantation literature as deployed by Russell and Harris tries to *naturalize* the minstrelized slave figure as an accurate representation of blackness, Henderson’s verse deftly indicates that this figure is a performance, a character type, not a faithful reproduction of “real” African-Americans; in other words, the local color slave character is not a universal representative of the race. Henderson gestures towards the crippling effects and the falsity of this character type in “Seems Dey’s No Place” when the speaker declares that educated African-Americans “may read dis thing wid dread.” Literally, this line refers to the poem’s stated message that there is no place in America for educated blacks. On another level, however, this line resonates as Henderson’s admission that educated African-Americans will deplore the poem’s cooption of the minstrel character and his potentially spurious and degrading use of dialect.
Yet just because the minstrel figure is not “real,” *per se*, Henderson does not abandon him in *Plantation Echoes*. Perhaps reflecting the difficulty, at the time, of creating a legitimate and accepted alternative to dialect verse, Henderson maintains the minstrel speaker as his primary poetic outlet. And indeed, as a theatrical character type, this speaker acts as a useful vehicle for performing a certain kind of political and cultural work. Throughout *Plantation Echoes* Henderson repeatedly uses the dialect speaker to articulate his disillusionment with the state of American race relations. Most characteristically Henderson invokes the good-natured common sense of the minstrel speaker to point out the blatant and obvious discrepancies between white and black Americans. For example, in “Kaze I Kno’ I Kain’t Stop,” Henderson’s speaker, who is working in the fields, repeatedly proclaims the refrain:

- But er niggah, kain’t stop!
- Mus’ keep hoein’ at de crop!
- Out de weeds mus’ keep er pullin’
- Till he’s ready, mos’ to drop!

At one point he states:

- Sumtimes git to ’fleckin’
- Scratch dis head whah it doan’ itch!
- Axin’ why de Lawd, sah,
- Diden’ make dis niggah rich!
- But dey hain’t no use to kick,
- But jes’ keep er josslin’ ’long. (25-30)

Coming just a few pages after “Seems Dey’s No Place,” this poem reinforces Henderson’s sense that African-Americans were indiscriminately stuck at the bottom of the economic and social ladder. By invoking “de Lawd,” the speaker expresses a kind of fatalistic determinism, revealing his own belief that his situation is hopeless. Through this traditionally pathetic and bathetic character, then, Henderson subtly but saliently
critiques the racial structures of his society. To be sure, not every dialect poem in
*Plantation Echoes* possesses some kind of overriding political message. Several,
including “Blissful Anticipations,” “Peepin’ Th’ew de Husk,” and “Hustle” all appear to
be unabashed and stereotypical minstrel or plantation literature. Yet I would argue that
even in these poems there is always an undercurrent of instability and apprehension.
Behind them we can always feel the palpable presence of the author who, as he warned
us in “When the Moon Hangs Low,” is shifty and deceptive, manipulating the
conventions and characterization of the dialect poem to achieve his *uncharacteristic*
objectives. By the time we emerge from the tangled complication of the minstrel figure
in the first two poems, it is hard to take later dialect poems merely at face value.

To the extent that Henderson approaches dialect poetry as a kind of performative
script (as opposed to an authentic effusion) that can be adopted wholesale, problematized,
or turned inside-out, he is again potentially much like Dunbar, who is traditionally
considered to have viewed his dialect poems as unfortunate but necessary performances
for his white audience. Dunbar famously complained to his good friend, James Weldon
Johnson, “I’ve got to write dialect poetry, it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me”
(Book of American Negro Poetry 35-36). Given this statement, many critics interpret
poems like “We Wear the Mask” and “The Poet” as Dunbar’s autobiographical
commentary on his own frustrated misgivings about the popularity of his dialect verse.
In “The Poet,” he explains that he was consumed by aspirations to write sublime,
romantic Anglo-American poetry, but instead the “world . . . turned to praise / A jingle in
a broken tongue.” A typical portrait of Dunbar, then, is as a poet whose dreams went
unfulfilled, whose authentic artistic selfhood lay hidden behind the “mask” of plantation
poetry that he had to write to appease a white audience and to make a living. It is precisely his renunciation of dialect verse and his stated desire to write traditional romantic poetry that has led critics like Wagner to postulate that he was a sort of race traitor, a poet who, like Mr. Ryder in Chesnutt’s “The Wife of His Youth,” identified more with Tennyson than with his own people. In contrast, part of what is so interesting about *Plantation Echoes* is that Henderson never provides any access to a “true” self that existed behind the mask. Whereas Dunbar composed so many personalized lyrics touchingly expressed in the Anglo-American mode, among them “The Poet,” “Sympathy,” “When All is Done,” and “We Wear the Mask,” Henderson’s primary poem in standard written English, “When the Moon Hangs Low,” is an evocative but obscure allegorical narrative. Rather than composing autobiographical utterances in white poetic discourse, in fact, Henderson shows this discourse, and whiteness itself, to be just as performative and theatrical as minstrelized projections of blackness.

This message comes across most saliently in two poems, “A Profuse Encomium” and “Stick to Your Race!” “A Profuse Encomium” is notable for the apparent contradiction between its highfalutin Latinate title and its immersion in African-American dialect. The conceit of the poem is “Mistah Johnsin’” trying to court “Miss Liza” at a party. The poem reads:

Lookin’ nice to-night, Miss Liza,  
Yo’s out dressed ’em all to-night.  
Wid dat ah so frusterkaytun  
Yo’ so dazzlin’ in de light!  
Please doan’ ’strew mah wurds fo flattah  
Spoken incandessenly,  
But! wid mutuallistic frankness  
’Cep ’em frabbrykayshenly.

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“Thank you, Mistah Johnsin’,
Do yo’ think I look so fine?
’Deed sah, Mistah Johnsin’,
Yo’ so asterroshus kine.
Woan’ yo’ sot beside me
An’ conversykate er while,
Please doan’ hab no skooples
Kaze Ize togged up in dis style.”

“Yo’s suppassed yo’se’f, Miss Liza,
Quiv-vah-kay-shah-ently gran’,
An’ yo’ grace dis runkshus ’kayshun
Lak one fum de glory lan’.
Ef yo’ hab no interjecshuns
Will yo’ dance er step wid me?
Kaze sech ’joicin’ frollerkayshun
Gibbs fellerisher-tish-shus glee.”

“’Skyoose me, Mistah Johnsin’,
I doan’ kyah to mingel late,
I wood raddah be specktay-shus,
Sotin’ hyeah wid Mistah Gate.
Not dat I doan’ d’ sah yo’ tenshun
An’ doan’ preeshee-ate yo’ ‘ques’,
I prefer tan-quil-ler-kayshun
Sotin’ lookin’ at de res’.”

“’Cep’ mah’ ’pology, Miss Liza,
Fo’ mah troo-ser-tay-shus ’ques’.
I jes ax’d yo’ fo politeness,
Tho’t yo’d lak to jine de res’.”

“’Tain’t er bit o’ trooshun,
Mistah Johnsin’, not at tall!
I may grant yo’ axin’
When we ’ten’ sum uddah ball.”

Unlike “Seems Dey’s No Place,” “A Profuse Encomium” is constructed on a type of
dialect that consists of more than just misspelled words. In this poem the reader
encounters words that are outside of the lexicon of standard English, regardless of
however much they might seem to be based on English words: “fabbrykayshenly,”
“Quiv-vah-kay-shah-ently,” “frollerkayshun,” and “trooshun,” to name but a few. The
disassociation between these dialect words and the poem’s title demonstrates again Henderson’s ability to cross in and out of both dialect and standard written English. It also intimates that word play is itself a central concern of the poem. But to what end? Even more than in the case of “Seems Dey’s No Place,” it is perfectly reasonable to understand this poem as a degrading portrait of African-Americans trying to put on airs. Just as adults tend to laugh at children when they play grown up, the reader seems to be invited to snicker at these clearly uneducated and unsophisticated African-Americans attempting to use big words and to observe formal courting rituals. But however foolish the characters in “A Profuse Encomium” appear to be, they also demonstrate the extent to which racial identity, whether whiteness or blackness, is a matter of performative role-playing. They understand that to become cultured and civilized—which, given the racial topology of the day, meant to be as white as possible—it was necessary to concede to the pretensions of, or, literally, to pretend to be just like, white America. And so they try to use impressive Latinate words in their formalistic courting games.

If we read the poem as Mistah Johnson’s and Miss Liza’s attempt to perform cultural and social roles not natural to them, then it is unclear as to where the humor lies. The poem could be making fun of their vain efforts to act white, but it could also be considered a send up of the silly ceremonial rituals of white bourgeois society. Through the mimicry of the racialized “other,” that is, the foibles of white genteel America come into sharp focus. In particular, the poem satirizes the linguistic practices of “civilized” America, showing them to be overly formal, pretentious, and anachronistic. However we understand the poem’s humor, and whomever we understand to be the object of it, the poet seems to come out unscathed. Whereas Mistah Johnson and Miss Liza ultimately
fail to use the English language in socially sanctioned ways, the poet demonstrates his linguistic capabilities by titling the poem “A Profuse Encomium.” These complex, Latinate words are deployed in the proper context and they appropriately describe the action of the poem. But it is hard to know whether to take the title seriously or not. While it certainly marks Henderson’s distance from the characters, identifying him as educated and them as ignorant, it is, in itself, a “profuse” use of language. That is to say, it is an overly ornate and sententious phrase, poetical in the pejorative sense of being excessively abstruse and flowery. In its very excess Henderson shows off his ability to speak “white,” to enter into Anglo-American poetic discourse and assume and perform the stereotypical role of “poet” that Dunbar so longingly pursued, to the point of even satirizing this kind of poet’s ostentatious use of language. In addition, the poem confirms the suspicion we have when reading “Seems Dey’s No Place” that the author is educated, is familiar with “Greek or Latin,” and is simply enacting the minstrel stereotype of the ignorant black.

The humor with which Henderson treats the performativity of racial identity is muted in “Stick to Your Race!,” a comparatively deadpan piece. Again in the voice of a dialect speaker, Henderson articulates a scathing social critique. The poem illustrates the theatricality of racial roles, and it unyieldingly excoriates African-Americans who try to appear white:

Umph! how some cullahd fo’ks wan’ to be white.
Bekaze dey am brack dey doan’ nebah seem right.
Dey’s shame ub dey cullah; dey’s shame ub dey race;
Dat’s why dey wood lak to be white in de face.

Bekaze dey kain’t bleech out, O, how dey deplore,
Fo’ to be cullahd to dem’s sec her bore.
To think de Lawd sent dem all into dis lan’
Wif hyah dat am kinky an’ faces dat’s tan.

Fus’ to de lef’ an’ den nex’ to de right,
Dey look to see if dey am sumfin’ in sight
To make dem bleech white, gib dem cheeks ub de rose
An’ sumfin’ to gib dem a high Roman noze.

Dey’s kickin’ an fussin’ an’ raisin turmoil
Bekaze dey kain’t git hol’ de right kine ub oil
To take way de kinky effect dey kaint bah,
An’ make it jes’ lak de white folk’s auburn hyah.

Dey use mutton sooit an’ tallow, an’ lard,
Oh Lward er Mussy! but don’t dey try hard!
To make it look wabey an’ glossy an’ slick.
Den path in de middle dey am right to de quick.

Et dey hain’t no hope, why dey go git a wig.
It mus’ be made fum white fok’s hyah, too, by jig.
Umph; who; Miss Sukie? why she wooden’ dah
To wah a wig made fum a coon’s nappy hyah.

Whut’s de use er kickin’
Bekaze o’ sech rot?
Bekaze yo’ kain’t bleech,
An’ turn white on de spot!

Ef yo’ hyah’s kinky,
Yo’s brack ez de tar,
Thank de good Lawd
Dat yo’s jes’ lak yo’ are.

Anticipating Hurston, Hughes, and other Harlem Renaissance writers who reclaimed
blackness and redefined it as a source of beauty and pride, Henderson’s speaker entreats
African-Americans to be thankful for their racial identity. He reveals in this poem his
understanding that the politics of racial difference are based primarily on spectacle.
Despite the severity of the one-drop rule, and despite the layers of cultural associations
we have attributed to race, race is still, according to Henderson, a matter of physical
appearance, of having the right hair, the right skin color, the right nose—in short, of wearing the right costume. If it were possible for African-Americans to change their appearance and look white, then it would be impossible to distinguish “true” whites from “acting” whites. Henderson intimates, that is, that race is primarily a construction, not an essential difference, a series of assumptions and attributes that we associate with certain types of cultural performance. Rather than seeing the performativity of race as creating an opportunity for African-Americans to gain equality, he considers playing white a humiliation.

Through a series of sometimes subtle and sometimes direct textual strategies, then, Henderson implies that much of our racial identity, whether whiteness or blackness, is a cultural performance. Having delineated Henderson’s complex and cagey attitudes towards race, we are now in a better position to go back to the issues that opened this discussion—namely, Henderson’s status as a local poet, and, more specifically, how his verse functions in his local setting. In particular, I would like to return to the question of how Henderson’s local context affects his use of the plantation tradition, which is associated with a local site far removed from Henderson’s own. As we saw earlier, Henderson invests his work with a decidedly local purpose, presenting his poetry as part of the civic life of his community. In his later collections, he dedicates poems to influential and powerful members of Springfield and Columbus. In Plantation Echoes, Gladden’s and Burkham’s introductory notices imbue the text with a strong local flavor. The cumulative effect of all this local positioning, I would argue, is that it suggests that Henderson saw his poems at least in part as a vehicle for communicating his thoughts.
about his community, and particularly his thoughts about his race’s status within the community.

What, then, is the effect of Henderson’s use of the local color plantation tradition within his local setting? In retrospect, Henderson’s verse exposes the disconnect between the plantation location and Columbus in 1904. Keeping Henderson’s local context in mind, that is, what is perhaps most striking for a current reader is the anachronism of writing plantation poetry in the North forty years after slavery ended. Indeed, Henderson seems intent on revealing this anachronism in poems like “Seems Dey’s No Place” and “Kaze I Kno’ I Kain’t Stop” that deploy the dialect speaker while also commenting on the racial tensions and inequities of Jim Crow America. The resulting contrast intimates that the romanticized social order of the slave system, celebrated in most plantation fiction, has unequivocally receded into the past. In other words, rather than nostalgically revisiting the plantation past, Henderson appears in his dialect poetry to underscore that that past has gone for good: as a country, America has moved on to a new set of all too real racial issues that persist and need addressing regardless of how much Americans might wish for a fantastical return to the plantation. While the title of Plantation Echoes suggests that the book, as the last poem implies, will “renew” the “good ol’ times” of slavery, the term “echo” also connotes diminution and fading away. This emphasis on the passing of the plantation tradition would indicate that, from his local perspective, Henderson is suggesting to his community that the plantation tradition is out of touch with and disassociated from the realities of their local setting.

Read within his local context, in fact, Henderson’s dismantling of the plantation speaker’s authenticity takes on specific permutations. By exposing race as a cultural
construct, Henderson demonstrates that the plantation slave of the local color tradition 
*does not* represent the essential “range” of the African-American race. Contrary to 
Burkham and Howells, Henderson refuses to elevate this figure to the status of the 
universal. Henderson’s demystification of the plantation speaker’s universal authenticity, 
then, logically implies that this speaker does not represent real African-Americans of his 
immediate local context: if this speaker no longer effectively represents the “spirit” or 
“range” of the race, he also no longer effectively represents Henderson’s friends and 
neighbors. The plantation character is a fantasy or performance from a different place 
and time, a local color character no longer contiguous with the local scene of 
Henderson’s central Ohio.

This message becomes clearer in the several poems of *Plantation Echoes* in which 
Henderson explicitly argues that African-Americans should feel at home within their 
current geographical place. With the exception of the introductory pages, the local 
context is entirely absent from *Plantation Echoes*. No poem makes any explicit reference 
to the geographical positioning of Henderson’s text. To be sure, however, several pieces 
make references to a sense of geographical displacement. “Seems Dey’s No Place” is 
just one example, with its refrain of “Seems dey’s no place / Fo de eddeekayted coon.” 
“What We Gwine to Do?” broadens this argument and complains that there is no place 
for any African-American whatsoever. The poem begins:

Well, de way de thing am lookin’  
To ol’ Hezzeekyah Yoon,  
Dis kentry’s gittin’ wussah  
Fo’ de po’ and he’pless coon.

Dey lynch him on de lef’,  
An’ dey lynch him on de right,

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Dey cum an’ git er niggah
In de day an’ in de night.

What we gwine to do?
Hain’t dey no whah in de lan’?
Hain’t dey fo’ de niggah
Not er kin’ an’ he’pin’ han’? (1-12)

One of Henderson’s most explicit responses to the Jim Crow era, “What We Gwine to Do?” contends that African-Americans do not have a safe space to occupy in America and never have, for that matter. Later in the poem Henderson writes,

De niggah hain’t to blame—
To cum hyeah he didn’ kyeah.
De white fo’ks, why dey made him,
Why dey fotch’d him obeah hyeah.
An’ now to knock his head off
Kaze he’s tryin’ to git erlong,

Accawdin’ to my Bible,
Why de whole thing ub it’s wrong. (37-44)

This sense of displacement in America is the subject of another poem, “Yes, Wees Got Er Flag.” This poem begins by explaining that many African-Americans complain that “ebry bressed nayshun’s / Got er flag excep’ de coon” (3-4). But in both of these poems the speakers conclude that African-Americans do in fact belong in this country and are patriotic Americans. African-Americans have fought valiantly for the country, both poems assert, and their flag is “de red! de white! de blue!” Their patriotism in hand, they do not deserve to feel displaced and should in fact be totally embraced by their fellow Americans.

By showing that his race can claim no place in America, Henderson complicates the project of most plantation literature. If the stories of Page and Harris sought to obfuscate the Negro problem by putting African-Americans back in their place, the
antebellum plantation, Henderson shows that that place is no longer an option. Not only is the stereotypical plantation slave a mythical performance, but African-Americans have done the things necessary to be included in white communities: they have become educated, fought for the country, become good Christians, and worked hard. Within the local context of Plantation Echoes, Henderson’s implication is that African-Americans deserve a legitimate place within the community instead of being reinscribed into a time and place that ceases to exist. This conviction might help explain his efforts to continue self-publishing poems and dedicating them to the major figures of his local environment. Rather than maintaining silence, Henderson seeks to implant himself within the civic and public culture of central Ohio. By performing the role of the local poet, he provides himself an identity within the community.

That Henderson relies heavily on dramatic techniques to perform this local poetry is significant given the theater’s status as an important local institution throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Though more and more cities were establishing elitist “legitimate” theaters to present “serious” drama as opposed to middle-class theaters that offered melodramas, burlesques, and minstrel skits, the theater, as a whole, was a vital public organism in most American cities. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the twentieth, for instance, Springfield, a relatively small town, had several halls and buildings that housed theatrical performances at various times, and it boasted at least three different theater houses—the Grand Opera House, the Black Opera House, and the Fairbanks Theater (Prince 433). The theater was a popular attraction in Springfield, according to Benjamin F. Prince, with even the “straight-laced male citizens” attending the visits of “the female minstrels and burlesque
shows” (434). For Henderson to write performative and dramatic poetry, then, was to draw upon an art form shared widely among the members of the community. And to have the approbation of the most respected pastor in Columbus, combined with that of the editor of Columbus’s main newspaper, was to cast his poetry not as an effort to explore the universal range of the race, but as an important local voice within the community. What is eventually one of the most striking and telling aspects of Plantation Echoes is the extent to which these community leaders only read Henderson’s poetry as the reaffirmation of universal stereotypes, while Henderson slyly suggests that because of these stereotypes African-Americans have been unable to claim a real sense of place for themselves.

Indeed, in each of these four chapters the issue of misreading has been a recurring concern. In his dramatic performances Whitman sought to ensure that the war could not be misread. Throughout the twentieth century, Piatt’s poetry was misread as simple genteel magazine verse, while Melville’s was misread as “private utterance.” As we have seen, Henderson’s verse was misread as merely a “meritorious attempt” at expressing the humble thoughts of his race. In my discussion in Chapter 2 of Piatt’s poem “Beatrice Cenci,” I called attention to the line “The Tragedy, which we have brokenly read.” This line could very well apply to the work of all of these poets. The postbellum era has been understood as the “Tragedy” of American poetic history, but, as I have argued, this is because we have misread it according to the wrong set of terms. By foregrounding the drama as a critical concept, I have tried to present a framework that would allow us to understand and reread this body of work in all of its complexity once again.
NOTES

1 For example, see Wagner’s almost wholly unsympathetic interpretation of Dunbar’s attitudes regarding race.

2 Henderson does have a brief entry in a book entitled Ohio Authors and Their Books (1962). Other than the dates of his birth and death, however, this entry simply quotes from E. G. Burkham’s Introduction to Plantation Echoes, which I discuss in detail later in the essay.

3 The extent to which Henderson was known inside and outside of Ohio is difficult to track. I base my claim that he is primarily a local poet on three pieces of evidence. First, the fact that he appears in almost no critical scholarship suggests that he did not garner much attention on the national literary scene. Second, I have been unable to find any references to him in any national magazines or newspapers from the period. And third, a search of the WorldCat database shows that the majority of libraries holding his books are located in Ohio. While Plantation Echoes and The Soliloquy of Satan are now held in twenty to thirty libraries outside of the state, most of these volumes are part of university library collections. In contrast, many of the thirty or so libraries in Ohio that carry these books are local public libraries.

4 See Loeffeholz’s “The Religion of Art in the City at War: Boston’s Public Poetry and the Great Organ, 1863” and Wolosky’s “The Claims of Rhetoric: Toward a Historical Poetics.”

5 The question inevitably arises as to whether these dedicatees are black or white. As best as I can tell, the majority appear to be white. Weaver and Rabbitts appear in photographs to be white, which of course is not entirely reliable. The esteemed positions some of these people held, particularly the leaders of civic organizations, would lead me to believe that they were not black, for given my understanding of the racial politics in these towns it would have been unlikely for African-Americans to occupy such positions. Resources such as Prince’s Standard History tend to discuss “Negroes” in a separate section, and these dedicatees are not included there. And the dedicatees who lived in Columbus tended not to live on the East side of the city, which was the “Negro” section at the time. There is one important possible exception to this assessment, however. Chavers’s newspaper, the Columbus Standard, is listed in the 1907 Columbus directory as a “colored organ.” It is wholly plausible, then, that he was an African-American.

6 In fact, Plantation Echoes was part of Gladden’s personal library at the time of his death (Arnold 40).

7 I have retained the spelling of Burkham’s name as it appears in Plantation Echoes. In other texts, both Henderson’s and others, his name appears as “Burkam” or “Burkram.”
Gladden’s views about race were complicated, evolving over time. It is useful to consider his race attitudes in the context of the famous debate between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. For much of the late-nineteenth-century Gladden endorsed segregation, arguing that black and white societies could mutually coexist, and were, to a certain degree, dependent on one another, but ultimately too different to intermix. Like Washington, he exhorted whites to encourage blacks on the long and difficult road to social and intellectual advancement, deferring stomping for social and political equality until they had improved themselves as a people. After reading Du Bois’s The Souls of Black Folk (1903), however, Gladden became convinced that African-Americans deserved immediate political and civil rights and he questioned the legitimacy of segregation. For more on Gladden’s life and on his career as leader of the Social Gospel movement, see Richard D. Knudten’s The Systematic Thought of Washington Gladden (1968).

Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.’s “W.D. Howells and Race: Charles W. Chesnutt’s Disappintment of the Dean” concludes that Howells’s attitude towards African-Americans was fundamentally romantic: “Simply stated, Howells’s behavior suggests that there was, indeed, much more of Isabel March in him than one would be inclined to suspect: he wanted to maintain his belief in the innate ‘sweetness’ of the unresentful African American and to enjoy an optimistic view of a progressively improving race whose good qualities, when more widely recognized and acknowledged, would elicit a greater degree of acceptance on the part of white America” (248). This warm regard for the “sweetness” of African-Americans similarly operates in Burkham’s Introduction.
CODA

DRAMATIC POETICS AND THE EMERGENCE OF MODERNISM

In my Introduction I elaborated some of the possible reasons for the critical neglect of late-nineteenth-century poetry in the twentieth century, particularly in regards to how the dramatic poetic tradition resists inclusion in either the nationalist or New Critical/modernist canons. I conclude by refining this latter claim a bit more, since most historical accounts posit that the “twilight interval” finally comes to an end with the poetic renaissance of the modernist movement. I would like to suggest that the twilight interval did not really end with modernism, but that in various ways modernist poets extended the poetic practices and projects of the postbellum era, particularly in their use of dramatic poetics. Certainly the most notable and vocal advocates of the high modernist aesthetic cast their work as a conscious act of rebellion, not only against their immediate American predecessors, but against the overwhelming bulk of nineteenth-century Anglo-American poetry in general; as David Perkins writes, the modernists “were eager to reject the nineteenth century mentality and the habits of verse associated with it” (4). Both T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were adamant that the modern poet write with a keen sense of literary tradition in mind, but in consecrating their version of “the tradition” they reached back primarily to older European writers like Ovid, Dante, the sixteenth-century troubadours, the metaphysical poets, and the French symbolists. In the
group of essays listed under the heading “The Tradition” in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (1935), the poets discussed are almost all outside of the Anglo-American literary heritage; in the essay “The Tradition,” Pound asserts, “The two great lyric traditions which most concern us are that of the Melic poets and that of Provence” (91). Generally speaking, critics agree that Pound, Eliot, and other high modernists engaged in stripping verse of what they considered its fatal flaws in the nineteenth century: in place of the Romantics’ and Victorians’ predilection for genteel romanticism, poetic platitudes, and “effeminate” sentiments, they proposed a poetry of linguistic terseness, scientific precision, “masculine” objectivity, irony, and imagistic concreteness. In this respect, then, the postbellum dramatic tradition is implicated in the high modernists’ larger condemnation of nineteenth-century poetry as a whole.

Yet as both Joseph Harrington and Frank Lentricchia have shown, in the early part of the twentieth century high modernism was not the only poetic movement striving for legitimacy. Against the elitist avant-garde school of Pound, Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, H. D., and the New Critics—all of whom primarily endorsed a notion of poetry as an insulated and erudite aesthetic discourse, removed from practical social and political considerations and all but impenetrable to a popular audience—there was a group of poets and critics who envisioned a modern poetic that was a fundamentally public form of writing, an important type of social and political expression.¹ For these writers, most of whose names now are unfamiliar, including Walt Mason, Arthur Davison Ficke, and Madeline Alston, poetry was “an immaterial influence that uses the text as a sort of conduit to the people. Popular notions of poetry present it as at once spiritual, transitive, and naturally social or political” (Harrington 500). As Harrington intimates,
this school of modern poetry is really an extension of prevailing attitudes in the
nineteenth-century about the nature and function of verse. As I argued in the
Introduction, and as I have maintained throughout the individual chapters of the
dissertation, poetry enjoyed a kind of popular and public currency in the nineteenth
century that it no longer holds today.

According to both Harrington and Lentricchia, Robert Frost is one of the most
notable exponents and practitioners of this more social and popular type of modernist
verse. Like Whitman, Lentricchia argues, Frost proposed that the “very spirit of
literature” found “its fullest incarnation in an American scene that provided its true
(because democratic) political directive. . . . Frost named the multiheaded . . . enemy of
literature—as the professorial sentence, the dead, grammatical discourse taught at school;
the poets of the classical tradition” (274-75). Though Frost, too, saw himself as writing a
“manly” literature in contradistinction to the feminized rhetoric of the genteel lyric, he
created a poetry that was colloquial, accessible, American, and that responded to and
purported to represent “real life” rather than “the tradition.” Moreover, he eschewed the
free verse movement and continued to present his work in the patterns of formal poetry
with which most readers were accustomed. As Harrington documents, while critics often
identified Frost as part of the “New Poetry” movement of the 1910s, they regarded him,
along with Carl Sandburg, E. A. Robinson, and Amy Lowell, as poets who were “much
more approachable” than the high modernists, as poets who dealt “with themes close to
hand” (500).

Indeed, if any modernist poet seems to have antecedents in the postbellum
dramatic tradition, it is Frost, who achieved in the twentieth century the kind of celebrity
status Riley enjoyed in the nineteenth and who, interestingly, expressed deep convictions about the centrality of drama to his work. In his Preface to the play _A Way Out_ (1929), Frost writes:

> Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing. . . . Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that can save prose from itself. I have always come as near the dramatic as I could this side of actually writing a play. (13-14)

When Frost explains that he has “come as near the dramatic” as he could without writing a play, he is most explicitly referring to the poems of his second collection, _North of Boston_ (1914). In addition to dramatic monologues like “Mending Wall” and “A Servant to Servants,” _North of Boston_ contains several remarkable mini-dramas, including “The Death of the Hired Man,” “The Mountain,” “A Hundred Collars,” “Home Burial,” “Blueberries,” “The Generations of Men,” and “The Housekeeper.” In Frost, then, we have an example of a twentieth-century modernist poet who, like his late-nineteenth-century predecessors, privileges the drama as a central element in his program of creating an eminently public and popular type of American verse. Whether he was cognizant of it or not, Frost was following in the footsteps of poets like Riley, Dunbar, and Piatt who, ironically, essentially vanished from the literary scene in the wake of the modernist movement in which Frost participated.

Of course, like most dichotomies the one I have been sketching between the private, aestheticized forms and public, popularized forms of modernist poetry is much blurrier and more problematic in reality than in theory. In many ways Frost, like Eliot and Pound, envisioned himself as an avant-garde writer who was creating a realistic
poetic language far different from what he considered the flowery and effeminate diction of the nineteenth-century Romantics and Victorians. In the meantime, the work of Pound and Eliot also exposes meaningful connections to the postbellum dramatic poets. Pound identified Browning as one of the few nineteenth-century poets in the Anglo-American tradition that exerted a critical influence on his career. In a 1928 letter to the French critic Rene Taupin, in fact, Pound asserted, “Above all I derive from Browning. Why deny one’s father?” (218). Several scholars have speculated on the various ways Browning’s verse impacted Pound’s, particularly in relation to Pound’s dramatic monologues like “Sestina: Altaforte” and “Prayer for His Lady’s Life.” That Pound’s interest in multiple characters and speakers was indeed a profound component of his aesthetic principles can be gleaned from the title of his 1926 collection, Personae. Eliot also shared in this dramatic impulse. The working title of The Waste Land (1922) was “He Do the Police in Different Voices”; and, fittingly, the poem is replete with numerous dramatic interludes, including the famous one between a husband and wife that many critics take as Eliot’s dramatization of his own failing relationship with his wife, Vivian. Further, Eliot went on to pen several plays and to produce criticism about the theater.

In short, drama continued to retain a central position of importance in the poetry of the modernist era. Mark S. Morrisson argues, in fact, that, as in the postbellum period, in the early years of the modernist movement verse recitation and public performance were integral parts of the formation and development of the modernist aesthetic. “British and American poets,” he writes, “shared a preoccupation with the importance of speech to poetry,” a preoccupation that was fostered by providing oral readings of their work (55). By naming Browning as his literary father, Pound recalls the Browning acolytes of
the 1880s, indicating that even as the vogue of the Browning societies passed, Browning’s influence remained strong through the turn of the century. Pound’s identification with Browning is particularly relevant given that Pound, through his poetry, mentoring, and criticism, arguably provided more of a guiding hand to the direction of modern poetry than any other poet. Though in light of their cultural identifications they probably would not have been willing to acknowledge it, then, Pound and Eliot reveal important continuities with the tradition of dramatic poetics in late-nineteenth-century America.

What this very cursory discussion suggests is that while the forces of high modernism and New Criticism effectively effaced postbellum poetry from Anglo-American literary history, a critical approach that locates drama as a central term in considering these different eras reveals fundamental affinities between them. In this way my focus on dramatic poetics provides yet another avenue for reconfiguring the standard narratives of American poetic history: in addition to redefining our understanding of late-nineteenth-century poetic culture, it suggests one of the ways in which, despite their assertions to the contrary, modernist poets had roots in and connections to the American poetic landscape from which many of them sprung. In his famous poem “A Pact,” Pound writes that he has “detested” Whitman long enough and acknowledges that the two poets share “one sap and one root.” Calling for a pact with Whitman, he ends by stating “Let there be commerce between us.” Similarly, I would argue that in their motivated use of the drama, late-nineteenth-century American poets (including Whitman) and modernist poets share “one sap and one root;” rather than continuing to see these two groups of
poets as polar opposites, it is time to allow “commerce between” them by coming to terms with their similarities and interactions.
NOTES

1 As I acknowledge later in the Coda, this characterization of these high modernist poets is of course sweeping and simplified. Like Harrington and Lentricchia, however, I do think it is a useful way of talking about high modernism in relation to postbellum verse and other types of poetry in the early twentieth century.

2 Two insightful treatments of Pound’s relationship with Browning are George Bornstein’s “Pound’s Parleyings with Robert Browning” in the collection of essays he edited, *Ezra Pound Among the Poets* (1985), and Chapter 2 of Thomas F. Grieve’s *Ezra Pound’s Early Poetry and Poetics* (1997), “Two Traditions and the Drama of Influence.”


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