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Passing into print: Walt Whitman and his publishers

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PASSING INTO PRINT: WALT WHITMAN AND HIS PUBLISHERS

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Charles Bradley Green
2004
Approval Sheet

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Charles Bradley Green

Approved by the Committee, August 2004

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For Shawnn.
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Abstract

Few scholars have attempted to conduct a close examination of Whitman’s relationship to his publishers in the context of *Leaves of Grass*. In their “Typographic Yawp: *Leaves of Grass*, 1855-1992,” Megan and Paul Benton present a minimal, but interesting examination of the typographic story of *Leaves*, but they ignore three of the editions and deal with author-publisher relations only superficially. Other articles examine individual editions of *Leaves of Grass*, but none really explore what Whitman’s complicated relationships with the publishers of his time tell us about the conditions for his work and for authorship in mid-nineteenth-century America. Most studies tend to focus on Whitman’s poetry, rather than on issues associated with his publication history. In his *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass*, for example, Michael Moon carefully examines various editions, but chooses to concentrate on Whitman’s poetic revisions and program, rather than discussing aspects related to the publication story behind *Leaves of Grass*. This study will try to address this gap in Whitman scholarship and, in so doing, try to answer the following questions: Were Whitman’s ambitions for his *Leaves of Grass* fulfilled? Did he ever reach his intended audience?
Prologue

In 1888, Walt Whitman remarked to his friend and self-appointed biographer, Horace Traubel, that "I like to supervise the production of my own books: I have suffered a great deal from publishers and printers . . . damn 'em!" Throughout his career, Whitman had problems with, and was critical of his publishers. What made these relationships problematical? One difficulty stemmed from Whitman’s seemingly self-contradictory wish to reach the workmen directly, to speak to the craftsman without an intermediary and at the same time, to establish author-publisher alliances necessary to bring his poetry to the American public. This study will situate Whitman’s work within the tangle of interests—personal, economic, socio-cultural, and professional—that confronted the writer as he sought to negotiate a literary culture undergoing radical transformation. A close examination of Whitman’s relationship with his three commercial publishers, Thayer and Eldridge, Rees Welsh and James R. Osgood and Company, and David McKay, and of the works produced out of these relationships can shed light on his purposes and career even as it helps tell the story of authorship, reading, and literary production in late nineteenth-century America.

This study will focus on three key issues underlying Whitman's dealings with his publishers:

1) the politics of publishing (both in the sense of author-publisher personal relations and in the broader sense of the impact the marriage of publisher and writer has on each party)—what did the publishing of Whitman mean within the overall list of works produced by these firms?

2) the economics and aesthetics of publishing—how did Whitman balance cost against attractiveness, marketplace necessity, against his sense of memorable
book making, sale price against his conception of himself as a democratic poet—what do we make of Whitman's involvement, both economically and aesthetically, in the craft of publishing at a hands-on level?

3) the aesthetics of publishing—what do design and typeface, etc. mean in Whitman's books and why was he so intent on maintaining control of these aspects of production?

The method of approach in this study will be to treat three editions of Whitman's most central work, *Leaves of Grass*, as an opportunity for a series of case studies. The study will seek to answer specific questions about individual editions while attempting to address the larger questions by applying them across all of the editions.

This study begins by examining Whitman's early biography, paying special attention to his professional activities and assembling many of the known facts associated with his activities as a printer, magazinist, editor, and publisher. This sketch is necessary in order to both develop a composite picture of the pre-*Leaves of Grass* Whitman as a literary professional and to highlight the continuity between his development as a printer-journalist in the 1840s and as a poet in the 1850s. In the process, this study will also explore a paradox: in the 1840s, Walter Whitman, a moderately successful journalist and fairly ordinary writer of short stories and conventional newspaper verse, was able to negotiate the publishing world with remarkable success. He regularly saw his work appear in noteworthy magazines such as the *Democratic Review*, and the *American Whig Review*. The much more accomplished poet of 1855 and 1856, now calling himself Walt Whitman, did not use book publishers of comparable prestige. In fact, he did not use a publisher at all but instead distributed his work through the firm of Fowler and Wells, phrenologists-publishers. What led to Whitman's decision to publish his work on his own? What were the trade-offs for him as he abandoned the advantages of the established
world and gained some of the freedoms (and liabilities) of self-publishing, hands-on involvement in production, distribution, advertising and self-promotion? Only by understanding Whitman’s early career and the unusual nature of the original publishing circumstances of *Leaves of Grass* can we appreciate some of the more curious features of his later involvement with commercial publishers.

The 1860-61 edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published by the Boston firm of Thayer and Eldridge, a firm that actively pursued Whitman, offering him a contract to publish his work. While Ezra Greenspan points out in his *Whitman and the American Reader* that rapid sales necessitated a second issue of the 1860-61 edition and that the publishers made plans to bring out a cheaper edition as well, he notes that the Boston firm was ultimately forced to suspend operations as a result of its “failure to comply with popular tastes and opinions.” Similarly, although Greenspan characterizes Thayer and Eldridge as “enthusiastic radical reformers,” publishers involved with such abolitionist materials as Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, he stops short of discussing how their interest in Whitman informs us about nineteenth-century perceptions of his work. In this edition Whitman transformed the appearance of his *Leaves*, designing a relatively elegant Victorian shell to present revolutionary poetry intended to speak for all Americans. It has been said that in his later years he sometimes seemed more intent on creating a monument to himself as a poet of all Americans than on reaching that broad audience. What do the form and aesthetics of this edition tell us about Whitman’s perception of popular tastes during this period? This chapter will examine the implications of each of these issues.
Whitman's first two commercial publishers, Thayer and Eldridge, and James R. Osgood were both located in Boston, but neither of these publishing arrangements worked out. Thayer and Eldridge went bankrupt and Osgood's edition was banned from the mails. Gay Wilson Allen does a good job in *The Solitary Singer* at looking at the author-publisher relationship, but does not really discuss the implications of these events for Whitman or for his *Leaves*.

Chapter three will first explore the publishing culture in Boston and the career of one of its leading publishers. It will then examine Whitman's relationship with James Osgood and the events leading up to and including the attempt to ban *Leaves of Grass*.

From 1882 to the end of his life, Whitman settled in with his final publisher, David McKay. Although Allen briefly discusses McKay's dealings with Whitman, and David Reynolds in his *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* calls McKay "supportive," neither biographer really probes the author-publisher relationship, an unfortunate shortcoming given the span and importance of the Whitman/McKay relationship. My inquiry will also address McKay's abandonment of Whitman's final wishes regarding future revisions to *Leaves of Grass*. Despite the fact that in the "Deathbed Edition" of 1891-92, Whitman called for fidelity to his final version, McKay made modifications to the text in printings following Whitman's death. Chapter four examines the Whitman/McKay interactions, trying to determine why it seemed to work for both parties and what factors might have led McKay to make posthumous revisions contrary to Whitman's instructions.

Few scholars have attempted to conduct a close examination of Whitman's relationship to his publishers in the context of *Leaves of Grass*. In their "Typographic
Yawp: Leaves of Grass, 1855-1992,” Megan and Paul Benton present a minimal, but interesting examination of the typographic story of Leaves, but they ignore three of the editions and deal with author-publisher relations only superficially. Other articles examine individual issues of Leaves, but none really explore what Whitman’s complicated relationships with the publishers of his time tell us about the conditions for his work and for authorship in mid-nineteenth-century America. Most studies tend to focus on Whitman’s poetry, rather than on issues associated with his publication history. In his Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass, for example, Michael Moon carefully examines various editions, but chooses to concentrate on Whitman’s poetic revisions and program, rather than discussing aspects related to the publication story behind Leaves.

This study will try to address this gap in Whitman scholarship and, in so doing, try to answer these final questions: Were Whitman’s ambitions for his Leaves fulfilled? Did he ever reach his intended audience?
Chapter 1

MAINSTREAM PUBLISHERS AND UNORTHODOX DISTRIBUTORS

In July of 1855, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* first appeared. Its poet, a minor literary figure of the time, had set out to produce a radically original book, insisting upon an inseparable connection between himself and his poems, as well as between himself and his readers through his poetry. Although critics at the time were generally bewildered by the work or took offense to its sexual frankness, the importance of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to American literary history is difficult to exaggerate. Over a century later, Whitman's work is considered both the cornerstone of modern verse and the book that defines American poetry.

Throughout the 1840s, Walter Whitman, a moderately adept journalist and fairly ordinary writer of short stories and conventional newspaper verse, was able to negotiate the publishing world with remarkable success. He regularly saw his work appear in noteworthy magazines such as the *Democratic Review* and the *American Whig Review*. His first novel, *Franklin Evans*, published as a supplement to *The New World* in 1842, sold over 20,000 copies. The much more accomplished poet of 1855 and 1856, now calling himself Walt Whitman, did not use book publishers of comparable prestige. Instead, he published his 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass* himself, distributing the book through the firm of Fowler and Wells, phrenologists-publishers. Up to this point, Whitman's career had been defined largely by his experiences in print. Clearly, he
was well acquainted with the institutional structures that were in place for publishing works of poetry, such as the Harpers and the Appletons. What led to his decision, therefore, to publish his work on his own? What were the trade-offs for him as he abandoned the advantages of the established world and gained some of the freedoms (and liabilities) of self-publishing, hands-on involvement in production, distribution, advertising and self-promotion? Only by understanding Whitman's early career, his notions of authorship, and the unusual nature of the original publishing circumstances of *Leaves of Grass* can we appreciate some of the more curious features of his later involvement with commercial publishers.

When Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* appeared upon the literary scene, it appeared as an orphan—a work without a publisher and without a named author—leaving the reader to discern authorship from the book itself. In *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields*, Michael Winship explains that "authors" do not make books, that authorship is rather a collaborative effort and not shaped solely by the writer of the text. Based upon both his career and his statements, it is plain that Walt Whitman, for the most part, would have objected to this notion of authorship: "My theory is that the author might be the maker even of the body of his book—set the type, print the book on a press, put a cover on it, all with his own hands."¹ Driving this theory was Whitman's belief in the personal connection, or bond, he felt could be established between himself and his readers, something he feared could be lost, or corrupted, in the mix of laborers, compositors, printers, stereotypers, electrotypers, binders, illustrators, booksellers, wholesalers, auction houses, book agents, express companies, publishers, editors, businessmen, patrons, and others that had emerged as
participants in the production of books prior to and within the rise of modern publishing. Whitman considered this connection to his readers to be vital to the success of his work and, as we will now examine, throughout his career chafed when others attempted to shape his writing or control his writing practices, often preferring to leave his employment rather than modify his approach to authorship. We will then see, throughout the chapters that follow, how this resistance forms a continuity in the way that Whitman's experiences with publishers in his pre-Leaves period directly shaped how he would later deal with commercial publishers.

In the summer of 1831, a twelve-year-old Whitman joined the office staff of the Long Island Patriot, a four-page weekly founded and conducted as an organ of the King's County Democratic Party. It was at the Patriot, in the basement composing room, that young Whitman was first introduced to the trade and where the future journalist and poet fell in love with the written and printed word. Learning to operate a hand press that was scarcely more sophisticated than the one used by Benjamin Franklin nearly a century earlier, Whitman was instructed in the mysteries of the printing craft under the careful eye of journeyman William Hartshorne:

the half eager, half bashful beginning—the awkward holding of the stick—the type-box, or perhaps two or three old cases, put under his feet for the novice to stand on, to raise him high enough—the thumb in the stick—the compositor’s rule—the upper case almost out of reach—the lower case spread out handier before him—learning the boxes—the pleasing mystery of the different letters, and their divisions—the great ‘e’ box—the box for spaces . . . the ‘a’ box, ‘l’ box, ‘o’ box, and all the rest—the box for quads away off in the right hand corner—the slow and laborious formation, type by type, of the first line.2
Later in life, as he stood in another print shop in Brooklyn setting type for the first edition of his *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman would memorialize in verse the “always cheerful, benevolent,” and “friendly” Hartshorne:

The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
He turns his quid of tobacco, and his eyes get blurred with the manuscript.³

It was also at the *Patriot* that Whitman first broke into print with small bits of filler material, his earliest beginnings as a writer. Whitman would look back later in life and recall the great excitement he experienced when, while working for the *Mirror*, he set his words in print for the first time: “How it made my heart double-beat to see my piece on the pretty white paper, in nice type.”⁴ The young Whitman undoubtedly thrilled as he set the type, laid his ideas down in ink, and watched as they were carried away to an awaiting audience. As Kenneth Price and Ed Folsom point out in their online biography of Whitman, he would, “[f]or his entire life, …maintain this fascination with the materiality of printed objects, with the way his voice and identity could be embodied in type and paper.”⁵

It is uncertain what led Whitman to leave the *Patriot*, but by the summer of 1832 he was working for another printer, Erastus Worthington. Worthington had taken over a bookstore and circulating library from Alden Spooner, the most successful publisher-printer in Brooklyn at the time, and Whitman made good use of the books he found there throughout the summer. By autumn, he was working for Spooner himself as a printer’s devil at the Long Island *Star*. Spooner was a successful businessman deeply involved in the Brooklyn community. As editor, he often used the *Star* to forward civic causes that he
was interested in, such as the creation of a competent night watch, improvement to the roads, the installation of street lights, and the establishment of a bank in the village. Spooner also used the *Star* to support health and temperance movements of the period. It was here that Whitman came to understand how effectively print could *move* an audience, how it could connect with them to promote activism, reform, and advance politics. Now fifteen, he was acquiring many of the tastes and interests that would work to shape his adult life, and, as previously mentioned, he began to hone his writing skills by publishing “a piece or two” of his own in the New York *Mirror*.

These contributions and early jobs were key experiences in the development of the future journalist and poet. At the *Patriot* and *Star*, Whitman was introduced to the craftwork involved in the early publishing trade. He experienced what it was like to personally select and remove each letter from the racks of fonts and to place them into the metal guides that allowed words and sentences to be formed. It was a personal form of work requiring a level of intimacy between the printer and type as thoughts and ideas were carefully crafted and passed into print. But publishing was a trade in transition. These primitive work arrangements were being threatened by rapid changes occurring in antebellum America.

In his *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public*, Ronald J. Zboray discusses how the economic transformation that occurred during this period reshaped the American reading public and, by extension, the national literary culture.⁶ According to Zboray, a major component within this transformation, the modern industrialization of printing, began with the reorganization of labor in the workplace. When Whitman entered the newspaper trade, work arrangements
were still largely artisan-centered with little division of labor. It was not unusual for the owner of a paper to also serve as its writer, editor, compositor, printer, and distributor:

In the early village years, the functions of the printer, publisher, and editor were assumed by a single individual. In fact, the term editor did not come into use until the early 1830s, previously called proprietor or publisher. As a practical pressman and compositor, he was a mechanic; as owner and manager, he was a businessman; as an employer and maker of books, he was a capitalist; he was always a political partisan.7

The pre-industrialized work rhythms and connections with community that Whitman found so appealing and which nourished his development as a young printer/compositor/writer were giving way under the pressure of modernization. The wage system came to replace the apprentice-journeyman contract. “Work became more specialized as journeymen split into compositors and pressmen; with the latter receiving much lower wages.” Pressmen, needing only the strength to pull the press bar, “glutted the market and drove down wages.”8 Similarly, managers were introduced into the workplace, charged with increasing production while holding wages steady.

This reorganization of the workplace, along with the introduction of significant technical innovations in printing and distribution, underwrote the emergence of the publisher as a modern capitalist rather than heir to craft traditions. Stereotyping, electrotyping, the cylinder press, and the steam press were all introduced during the first quarter of the nineteenth century with major impact:

Before the adoption of these technologies, compositors redistributed the type used to print the first edition of a work. New editions required recomposition and another round of proofing, meaning that labor expenses for compositors remained the same for first and subsequent editions. Stereotyping (1811) and electrotyping (1841) solved this problem: Now impressments could be taken of the set type, and
a permanent, relatively inexpensive metal plate fashioned from it could be stored away and used for subsequent editions.\textsuperscript{9}

In addition, improvements in transportation opened huge new markets as the nation expanded westward. Advances in illumination as well as corrective eyewear served to further enable these growing markets. Book and newspaper production soared, and so did profits, for some.

As publishing capitalized, relations between writers and publishers changed. William Charvat, in his \textit{Literary Publishing in America, 1790-1850}, explains that pre-industrial conditions, including the lack of capital, had led to the development of a number of differing financial arrangements between writers and publishers in which the writer often took on the whole or at least some of the risk associated with publication:

\begin{quote}
sometimes to his own advantage, sometimes to the advantage of the publisher. He took on the entire risk when he paid the cost of manufacture, paid a commission to a distributor, and allowed the retailer to receive the work on consignment. This was the normal fate of the untried author...\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

The “new era” began, according to Charvat, around 1848-1850 as competition began to weed out weaker businesses, retail book prices rose to a level where profits were possible, the distribution made available by the extension of the railroads opened up a vast market for which publishers could produce in quantity, and “enterprising firms began to accumulate the capital which enabled them to take over their proper functions from writers.” Writers, explains Charvat, “began to trust publishers to do the whole job of publishing for them and were thus relieved of the commercial busy-work which many of them detested.”\textsuperscript{11} Although Charvat takes as a given the notion that there is a “proper” role for publishers and, implicitly, a “proper” role for writers as well, not everyone would
draw the line separating these in the same place. While many writers may have
“detested” aspects of this work and welcomed the emergence of the publisher as a
controlling presence in the trade, some, like Whitman, saw the role of the writer
encompassing many of the roles routinely associated with or granted to publishers.

While industrialization created the means for mass production, opened up new
markets for printed material, provided new opportunities for talented and even
experimental writers, and offered to relieve writers from the burdensome task of
managing the commercial aspects of their work, many, both craftsmen and writers, who
had entered the trade or begun their careers prior to this “new era” found themselves
struggling to adapt. Many were left disaffected, feeling as if they were losing control over
their work. In the case of writers, for example, Ticknor & Fields ultimately became
Nathaniel Hawthorne’s banker, his agent, and, as Charvat argues, his unwitting
“exploitors.”

Hawthorne, although a master of the short story, felt intense pressure from
James Fields to produce full-length novels, a more popular genre, and to produce them in
quantity. This pressure is believed by some biographers to have contributed to
Hawthorne’s eventual breakdown and premature death.

Throughout his career, both as a journalist and poet, Walt Whitman maintained a
desire for the more personal, pre-industrialized approach to publishing, for the workplace
in which he had learned his trade, and for the individual control over the production of
his work that more primitive conditions had enabled. Later in his life, in a conversation
with Horace Traubel, Whitman would explain that “I like to supervise the production of
my own books.” In fact, throughout his career, Whitman struggled within a developing
industry that increasingly worked to distance the writer from the direct production and
management of his work. A further examination of Whitman’s early career and his subsequent efforts as a poet helps to demonstrate how he dealt with this struggle and how the connection he sought to establish with his readers in many ways drove these efforts.

In May 1835, Whitman graduated as a journeyman printer, but had difficulty finding satisfactory work until the spring of 1838, when, with the financial support of friends, he began his own newspaper in Huntington. Buying a used press, a case of types, and a white mare named “Nina” for his deliveries; he moved into some rented space above a stable and began publishing the *Long Islander*. The weekly was a throwback to old-time artisan publishing with Whitman serving as founder, publisher, editor, and deliveryman. As his own master for the first time, Whitman was in complete control over the production of his work, though he proved to be somewhat careless of schedules, money, and a productive work ethic. His deliveries to the local farmers often turned into extended chats in hayfields, discussions at supper tables, or daylong excursions along the Atlantic shore where the young editor would join other young men in what he referred to as “beach parties:” “I was a first-rate aquatic loafer,” “I possessed almost unlimited capacity for floating on my back.” Unsurprisingly, Whitman’s stint as an independent newsman did not last long and in May 1839, after his sponsors were forced to sell the weekly out from under him, he left the paper and set-off for New York.

While the impulse might be to attribute the failure of the *Long Islander* to Whitman’s inattentiveness, it is important to understand that a country paper, dependent upon advertising to supplement a very limited circulation, represented a risky enterprise from the outset. Advertisements and subscriptions to the *Long Islander* were, in fact, often paid for in potatoes and cordwood. Certainly, Whitman’s restlessness contributed to
the losing venture, but more important to this study, however, is recognizing an emerging pattern in Whitman's work practices that would have a significant impact on his career. He was simply unwilling or unable to sit behind a desk and regularly produce columns as if they were a commodity. He had an overwhelming desire and need to get out and explore, to take in the sights and feel the pulse of his surroundings, to communicate with members of his community, to get to know them, and to develop connections with them. Later in his life, when Whitman wrote about his experiences at the *Long Islander*, his focus was still on the people and sights he absorbed:

> I bought a good horse, and every week went all around the country serving my papers, devoting one day and night to it. I never had happier jaunts... The experiences of those jaunts, the dear old-fashion'd farmers and their wives, the stops by the hayfields, the hospitality, nice dinners, occasional evenings, the girls, the rides through the brush, come up to my memory to this day.¹⁵

These experiences ultimately made their way into Whitman's prose and poetry. In terms of his aquatic loafing, for instance, he would later generate his loving and lyrical treatment of "Twenty-eight young men" bathing by the shore in Section 11 of "Song of Myself." Significantly, Whitman's treatment of these bathers includes a twenty-ninth participant, a woman who secretly watches from a nearby window, and an audience with whom Whitman develops a communal connection. In his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman charges that "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."¹⁶ For Whitman, then, writing was largely concerned with sharing what he had absorbed with those lurking behind the "blinds," his readers, and making contact with them through his writing. In the case of his work on the *Long Islander*, Whitman's opportunities for absorption and contact with his audience

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¹⁶
were directly tied to the writer's involvement in various roles of publishing, or authorship, including not only writing, but delivering papers to his subscribers as well. Unfortunately, a form of authorship which was, to a large degree, dependent upon "jaunts," was, as we will see in the following pages, not necessarily encouraged in the fast-paced, production-minded newspaper industry of Whitman's day.

Back in New York, Whitman landed a job with James J. Brenton, editor of the Long Island Democrat. Brenton had reprinted some of Whitman's pieces from the Long Islander and apparently liked the young man. Whitman's work habits soon bothered Brenton, however, and the arrangement ended in December when Whitman took a position as a schoolteacher back on Long Island. The break with Brenton was apparently amicable, for the Long Island Democrat printed a number of Whitman's "Sun-Down Papers from the Desk of a School-Master" during 1840 and 1841. This would not be the last time that Whitman would be dismissed due to his unconventional work habits which, as we can begin to see, were becoming an integral part of his process of authorship.

In late 1841, Whitman returned to New York to find the city's newspapers embroiled in an editorial war and compositors in great demand. Now twenty-two years old, Whitman found that the penny press had risen to feed the fray with the Napier cylinder press facilitating rapid production of newspapers for a hungry reading public. Quickly finding a job in the printing offices of Park Benjamin, then editor of the daily Evening Signal and weekly New World, Whitman set himself to the task of becoming a full-fledged journalist. Under Benjamin, Whitman learned the ins-and-outs of the New York newspaper business. It was at the New World that he also became keenly interested in Democratic Party politics. Although he was evidently engaged enough to speak at a
political rally, the aspiring author never felt strongly enough to consider pursuing a career in politics. Instead, he focused on writing and, during this period, managed to have three of his stories appear in the prestigious *Unites States Magazine and Democratic Review*. Additionally, Benjamin printed a handful of Whitman’s poems in the *New World* and another of his papers, the giant New York story paper, *Brother Jonathan*. Each of these publications represented a significant achievement for the young writer. Barely twenty-three, he had been published in some of the most noteworthy periodicals of his day.

In February 1842, Whitman decided to leave the pressroom for freelance writing, hoping to make a living with his pen rather than with his skill around a press. Several of his articles were published in the New York *Aurora*, a paper edited by Thomas Low Nichols, and by March he was working full-time for the paper. When Nichols was fired for libelous comments he had made about city officials, Whitman found himself in the editor role of a New York City metropolitan daily. On the twenty-sixth of March, the *Aurora* announced the appointment as editor a man who would “sustain the dignity and interests of our country,” a “Mr. Walter Whitman, favorably known as a bold, energetic and original writer.” The boy from Brooklyn appeared to be coming into his own.

Striving to make a name for himself as both a journalist and an editor, Whitman set to work in such a manner that drew the attention of the Brooklyn *Eagle*. In a commentary dated March 30, 1842, the paper announced: “A marked change for the better has come over this spirited little daily since the accession of Mr. Whitman to the ‘vacant chair.’ There is, nevertheless, a dash of egotism occasionally.” This “dash of egotism” was reflected in Whitman’s decision to improve his manner of dress during this period. William Cauldwell, then a young apprentice on the *Aurora*, recalled many years
later that the young editor “usually wore a frock-coat and high hat, carried a small cane, and the lapel of his coat was almost invariably ornamented with a boutonniere.”

Whitman was pleased in the dignity of his new role and his new attire and in an editorial on April 6 described how he enjoyed strolling down Broadway in fine fashion and how a group of children, during one of these outings, stopped in the midst of their play to remark, “Ah, ... There comes a gentleman.” Whitman’s efforts appeared to be leading to success and, for a short time, he was very happy with the way things seemed to be working out.

While his job as editor of the *Aurora* started out well, Whitman ran into trouble fairly quickly. Depending on the source, the young man was either too bombastic in his editorials, refusing to tone them down, or the owners of the paper found him to be too lazy. The evidence is mixed, but given Whitman’s work habits, it is not surprising that his practices wore on the patience of men more accustomed to assiduousness. Comments later recorded from members of Whitman’s *Aurora* staff suggest that their editor was either not very attentive to his duties, or that he found it difficult to sit in his office for long periods of time and write, although the record does indicate that he regularly managed to get his work done and his editorials sent down to the pressroom on time. Later, Cauldwell would recall Whitman normally reaching his office around eleven or twelve in the morning, spending a short time looking over the exchanges, and then leaving for a stroll down Broadway to the Battery, spending an hour or two amid the trees and enjoying the view before returning to the office around two to three o’clock in the afternoon. Again, Whitman’s writing process required that he spend time out of the office, absorbing the sights and sounds of the city and mixing with its masses, an
approach that must have been viewed as unconventional in an era that increasingly stressed a rationalized system of production. Whitman is also said to have refused his publishers’ call to tone down his leaders and is said to have responded to their requests by suggesting that if they wanted “such stuff” in the Aurora, then they should write it themselves.\textsuperscript{21} Regardless of why he was dismissed, in mid-May the publishers announced that “Mr. Walter Whitman [is] entirely disconnected with the editorial department of the Aurora.”\textsuperscript{22} Significantly, although achieving a level of success at the Aurora that he had never before realized, Whitman chose to rebuff his publishers’ attempts to modify his writing and his work habits, thus ensuring his departure from the paper.

The resilient Whitman was not to be discouraged and, within a few weeks, he was editing another paper, the Evening Tattler. During this period, he continued writing for other publications as well, dabbling in a variety of popular genres. The Democratic Review published five of his stories between January and September 1842 and, in that same year, he published a novel entitled Franklin Evans or The Inebriate, a Tale of the Times. Like Whitman’s early poems, Franklin Evans was so imitative and amateurish that most critics would not have recommended a career change for its author, but as a supplement in The New World, the novel actually reached a significant readership, one estimate being that over 20,000 copies were sold. Although he seemed embarrassed by this work after he had brought forth Leaves of Grass, Franklin Evans did reflect Whitman’s own temperance beliefs and he was proud enough of it that, once he became editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, he reprinted it as “The Fortunes of a Country Boy.”

Like most of the jobs Whitman had held and would hold in the future, his tenure with the Evening Tattler was brief and for the next several years, he continued to work
for a succession of New York papers, never holding a single position for very long.

Although Whitman's notebooks reveal little about this period of his life, we know that he edited the Statesman, a Democratic paper, for a few months in the spring of 1843.

Evidently, earlier that year Whitman published the first part of another temperance story, The Madman, in the Washingtonian and Organ on January 28, 1843. In her "Walt Whitman's Whereabouts in the Winter of 1842-1843," Esther Shepard provides additional evidence suggesting that between January 10 and the end of February, Whitman was working in the office of the Daily Plebeian.23

While the willingness of one publisher after another to hire Whitman represents a testament to his developing skills, his constant movement from one employer to another further suggests that he was ultimately unable, or, more likely unwilling, to conform to the expectations of the controlling interests in these businesses. Whitman's efforts with freelance writing represents, to some extent, a recognition that he needed to develop additional outlets for earning a living and publishing his work. If he could not sustain himself through conventional employment, he would instead focus on becoming a successful freelance writer and poet. His poem, originally published as "My Departure" in 1839, for example, was substantially revised and published in Brother Jonathan on March 11, 1843 under the title "Death of a Nature Lover."24 While he wrote this and other poems, he covered the police desk and coroner's office for the Sun in order to supplement the meager income he was generating through his writing.

As David Reynolds rightly points out, Whitman's work during this period is too often "dismissed or neglected altogether by those who turn immediately to the major poetry or try to guess about Whitman's change from pedestrian journalist to major
poet.”25 This is unfortunate because, again, only by understanding Whitman’s early career, his notions of authorship, and his struggle to maintain control over his work can we come to appreciate some of the decisions he later reached in terms of publishing *Leaves of Grass*. While a close examination of the twenty-four pieces of fiction, nineteen poems, and countless journalistic pieces that Whitman published prior to 1855 suggests that he was experimenting with popular modes of writing during this period, it is also important to recognize that this record, when considered alongside of events occurring in Whitman’s career during this period, reveals a young writer struggling to find a niche in both a literary culture and publishing industry in which he was somewhat of an anomaly. Later in life, even as some of the most famous literary figures of the age were seeking him out, Whitman would comment to Horace Traubel that he had never felt comfortable in their company and that he did not “fit in.” His difficulties in fitting in become more apparent as we continue to examine Whitman’s career.

Early in 1844, Whitman wrote for the New York *Mirror* and then, in the summer, he briefly edited the New York *Democrat*. His stories continued to appear in such publications as the *Aristidean, American Review, Columbian Magazine, Democratic Review, New Mirror, and Rover*. He published yet another of his temperance tales, “Revenge and Requital,” in the *Democratic Review* in serial form from June to August 1845. Whitman’s wild ride across New York’s journalistic landscape finally came to a close in August when the young writer left Manhattan to return to Brooklyn where he would more-or-less remain, with the exception of a few months in New Orleans, until the outbreak of the Civil War.
Whitman would later recall that during this difficult period, "I was simmering, simmering, simmering." Justin Kaplan suggests that he was working out "a temporary resolution of forces." What is clear is that Whitman was ready to leave New York. It is also clear from his later writing that during his four years in the city, Whitman took advantage of the opportunity to explore the life and the people of the city. "Remember," Whitman would later say, "the book [Leaves of Grass] arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1855, absorbing a million people, for fifteen years, with an intimacy, eagerness, an abandon, probably never equaled." For the moment, however, Whitman was, in the words of Gay Wilson Allen, still writing from the "surface of his mind. He had learned to play this artificial journalistic game with some skill, but nothing he had written so far had any genuine merit, and perhaps he had begun to become aware of this fact when he decided . . . to leave New York and return to Brooklyn."27

Whitman returned to Brooklyn as a seasoned editor and journalist, and although he had just about run out of newspapers to work for in New York, he was hired quickly by the Long Island Star, edited by Edwin B. Spooner under whose father, Alden, Whitman had served earlier as an apprentice printer. Over the course of 1845, Whitman wrote about fifty articles for the Star. The titles of these articles reflect their didactic tone: "Hints to the Young," "Hints to Apprentices," and "Some Hints to Apprentices and Youths." His main topics were music, theater, education, and books. On November 29, 1845, his "Art-Music a Heart-Music" was published in the Broadway Journal, with an endorsement from Edgar Allan Poe, its editor at the time. Although Whitman desperately tried to steer clear of any political feuds with Spooner, a Whig, their relationship was an uneasy one and, after only five months as editor of the paper, Whitman was asked to
leave. The Star, Whitman would later write, was in such a condition of "inanimation" that it needed to "lean against the wall and die." Spooner, in turn, responded by labeling Whitman a disreputable "country schoolmaster" and "hectoring scrivener" whose politics invariably "throw his Democratic friends into convulsions." Whitman once again found himself on the outs, but a neighboring paper quickly expressed an interest in the unemployed editor and writer.

In January 1846, Whitman went to work for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, the Democratic Party organ of Kings County edited by William C. Marsh. When Marsh died in early February 1846, Whitman was named to succeed him. Whitman's editorship with the Eagle represents his longest and most sustained journalistic experience. From the outset, he had the support of the paper's owner, Isaac Van Anden, a prominent Democrat, and it is probable that Whitman's Democratic Party leanings helped to secure his position. Like many of the newspapers of the day, the Eagle was a four-page multi-columned paper with news and editorials covering the second page and with advertisements, real estate listings, and political announcements filling the rest. Whitman devoted himself wholeheartedly to the paper, writing articles on almost every topic, contributing at least two columns a day. During his editorship, readership of the paper grew, the Eagle's quarters were expanded, new type was purchased, and he oversaw the installation of a Napier cylinder press, "about as pretty and clean-working piece of machinery as a man might wish to look on," he wrote. The telegraph brought stories and reports directly to the news desk "in the twinkling of an eye." Even papers of the Whig opposition, Horace Greeley's New York Tribune and Spooner's Evening Star had to admit that the Eagle under Whitman's editorship was "exceedingly well got up" and
that it contained “a brilliant lot of editorials and original articles.” Among the work of various European and American authors, Whitman managed to reprint eleven of his own stories.

Whitman enjoyed working at the *Eagle*. Later, he would note that he had “one of the pleasantest sits of my life” while employed there. He appreciated the “good owner, good pay, and easy work and hours.” Additionally, no longer restricted by the Whig views of the likes of Spooner, Whitman was free to expand his range of topics to include politics. During his early editorship, Whitman expressed himself plainly as a Democratic loyalist: “[t]he struggles of those who have any faith at all, must be made in the frame and limits of our own party.” Ironically, Whitman, who had in December 1845 warned against war with England over the disputed Oregon Territory boundary, now enthusiastically heralded General Scott’s victories in the war with Mexico. Whitman had come to support American expansionism and its promise of carrying forth democratic principles to other countries. Unfortunately, this position along with his editorial activism would prove to be Whitman’s downfall at the *Eagle*.

When, in 1846, President Polk requested $2,000,000 from Congress to be used to purchase any lands acquired from Mexico by treaty, David Wilmot of Pennsylvania introduced an amendment to the appropriations bill requiring that any new territories so acquired would not be slaveholding territories. As a result, the Wilmot Proviso, as it was called, brought the question of slavery in the new territories to the forefront. Whitman split from his party in supporting the Proviso, arguing that to contest it could lead to a civil war. In the process, Democrats opposing the Wilmot Proviso took control of the New York Party machinery and Van Anden, the *Eagle’s* owner and treasurer of the local
committee was forced to deal with Whitman. Despite warnings to Whitman to tone down his fiery rhetoric, a final editorial on January 3 rebutting General Lewis Cass’s attack on the Wilmot Proviso was seen as excessive and, shortly afterwards, Whitman was dismissed from the paper. Once again, his refusal to tone down his writing led to his termination. If anything, Whitman was consistent in getting himself fired from positions in both New York and Brooklyn.

A few months after his departure from the *Eagle*, Whitman was at the theatre when he struck up a conversation with a stranger named J. E. McClure. McClure told Whitman that he planned to start a newspaper in New Orleans but was lacking a chief editor. Two days later, Whitman was on his way to New Orleans with a $200.00 advance in his pocket. His brother Jeff had been hired as a printer's apprentice, so Whitman had company on the 2400 mile trip that included travel by train, stage, and steamer. Whitman had never traveled west before and found the two-week trip through the American wilderness to be thrilling. In March, Whitman, working without a title, supervised the production of the first edition of the New Orleans *Crescent* and the paper began publication on March 5. Whitman was specifically responsible for preparing the general news column. Much of this was accomplished by cutting and pasting political and human interest material from other papers, and occasionally contributing a few articles he had written himself. Not surprisingly, within a few months Whitman had a falling out with McClure. On the face of it, their disagreement was about a cash advance, but McClure probably wanted to get the anti-slavery Whitman out of the editorial office before he offended the *Crescent's* southern readers. Again, Whitman’s refusal to conform to either
the business and/or political agenda of his publisher led to his dismissal. The brothers resigned on May 25 and returned to New York, arriving home on June 15.

Upon his return, Whitman became involved again in local party politics and was appointed a member of the Free-Soil General Committee. Not long afterwards, he was offered the opportunity to launch a new paper dedicated to the Free Soil cause. Whitman was anxious to become his own master again and wasted no time in offering his audience his fiery political rhetoric in the *Freeman*. The first issue, dated September 9, 1848, records Whitman warning readers not to vote for any candidate who would add "a single inch of slave land, whether in the form of state or territory," instead offering a slate of acceptable Free Soil candidates. Unfortunately, this is the only issue to have survived as a disastrous fire wept through the *Freeman* office shortly after the first issue was published. By the time Whitman could get set up to publish again in November, his party was soundly defeated with Van Buren, the Free Soil candidate, carrying not a single state. Party enthusiasm was dwindling and the following year, the paper was taken over by rival Hunker Democrats. Dealt this final series of blows, a discouraged Whitman decided to retreat from politics and, in the process, from journalism as well, at least in part.

Over the next few years, Whitman tried his hand at a number of new enterprises. He picked up the hammer and saw and went to work for a while with his father as a carpenter. He shed most of the fine points of manner and dress that he had adopted while living in New York and resisted any long-term professional commitments. In 1851, in order to generate some additional income alongside of the penny-per-line he was receiving for his freelance writing, he rented a small store where he set up a stationary
shop. He also dabbled in real estate, building a number of homes which he ultimately sold at a small profit. Although Whitman continued to submit freelance penny-liner writing to a number of publishers, including contributions to William Cullen Bryant’s *Evening Post*, Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, and the New York *Sunday Dispatch*, these contributions trailed off after 1851 and Whitman gradually retreated from journalism and public life. Ironically, at the time of this retreat, he had in fact become a moderately successful journalist, writer of short stories, and conventional newspaper verse poet.

Although it might appear that Whitman was drifting professionally between 1850 and 1855, he was actually honing his writing skills, spending time alone thinking, and jotting down ideas for poems and drafts of verses in his notebooks. He began to experiment with a free verse technique that appeared in some of his occasional contributions, such as “Biblical” and “Resurgemus,” both of which were published in the *Tribune*. In his *Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality*, Roger Asselineau suggests that during this period “an obscure process of germination” was underway, that a face was “forming behind the mask of the journalist and the man of letters – the face of a poet.” In the words of Gay Wilson Allen,

The most important period in the life of Walt Whitman the poet was in the years between 1850-1855. Outwardly, it was undramatic, and judged in terms of worldly success it was a failure. But intellectually and spiritually, these were the most exciting and adventurous years that Whitman had experienced, for during this half-decade, he wrote and printed the first edition of his *Leaves of Grass* and thereby created a new epoch not only in American but even in world literature.

Whitman himself, in looking back over this period of his life would agree, “They were big strong days... days of preparation; the gathering of the forces.”
As we have seen, over the course of his professional life, Whitman worked or wrote for more than a dozen newspapers, four of which he came to edit. He published numerous articles, reviews, sketches, short stories, a novel, and dozens of poems. He even set up and ran his own newspaper on at least two occasions. Educated in the midst of a spectacular expansion of the American literary marketplace, he had witnessed the significant opportunities that the flourishing demand for all manner of writing had created. He wasn’t alone in this view. In fact, many literary figures of the period held in high regard today – including Hawthorne, Emerson, Lowell, Fuller, Poe, and Bryant–either edited or wrote for periodicals. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, relied on writing for magazines for his primary means of support and, like Whitman, tried his luck at publishing his own periodical. Even poetry seemed in demand.

Anthologies of poetry had begun to appear as early as 1840. Susan Belasco in her “Leaves of Grass and the Poetry Marketplace of Antebellum America” points out that “[d]uring the decade of 1830-1840, some two hundred books of poetry were published in New York alone...”39 That number tripled in the next decade with the publication of such works as Poe’s The Raven and other Poems, Frances W. Harper’s Forest Leaves, and Emerson’s Poems. Over the four-year period between 1851 and 1855, more than three hundred volumes of poetry were published, of which several sold very well.40 It is important to note, though, that only a small minority of American poets actually reaped the benefits of this boom. A Life Illustrated article that Whitman cut out and saved described the situation: “All publishers are naturally shy of a new MS. of poetry, for they know by experience that the deadest of all dead books is a dead volume of poetry.”41
Despite this dreary warning, Whitman had decided that the time was right for a budding poet to spring forth his leaves.

Whitman's experiences in the newspaper trade had taught him that competition and an evolving publishing trade were transforming the workspace into an industry in which journeymen were becoming disembodied hands operating in a rationalized system of production and readers were becoming "markets." He had come to believe that the relationship he sought to establish with his readers would be increasingly difficult to develop in an industry that continued to expand the number of factors mediating the process of "authorship." Whitman's efforts to counter these factors, to establish some level of control over his work, had repeatedly ended in his dismissal from one firm after another. His attempts in various popular genres had not suited his aims. Over time, he became convinced that the connections he sought to establish with his readers were most likely to occur through his poetry and only if he could maintain direct supervision over his work. This would mean bypassing existing publishing structures and bringing his work forth on his own.

Undoubtedly, a variety of factors figured into Whitman's decision. As publishers had become stronger throughout the nineteenth century, for instance, they learned to interpret more accurately the reading public's taste and, in response, encouraged writers to cater to popular demand. As William Charvat describes it, writers were driven to "behave like producers of a commodity."\textsuperscript{42} Whitman may have felt that the publishing institutions of his day were far too involved in shaping and defining who and what would be published to suit his aims. In light of his experience as a journalist and published writer, it is also probable that Whitman felt that conventional publishers would be
resistant to publishing his experimental poetry. Alternatively, the lack of any record suggesting that Whitman actually sought out mainstream publishing firms for the publication of his first edition adds some credence to Whitman's later claims that he intentionally bypassed conventional publishers because he sought to establish his work as a statement of literary independence, a revolutionary kind of poetry that would speak to and for all Americans. Perhaps one or all of these factors played into Whitman's decision. It is also important to consider, however, that although Whitman, in his poems, came to celebrate many of the economic and technological advancements occurring during the age as examples of human progress, he, throughout his life, held on to and praised simpler, artisan-centered practices that offered the level of control that he felt necessary to his work. A tribute that he wrote while editing the *Daily Eagle* demonstrates this nostalgia: "It was not an uncommon thing for the editor and proprietor of the paper to serve them with care to the subscribers through the town, with his own hands," thus bringing the author, text, and reader together in a very personal way. As I hope I have made clear by now, it was this type of relationship that Whitman sought to establish through his writing and which he felt that could be best achieved if he could retain close supervision over his work. His first book of non-conventional poetry would, therefore, be presented to the reading public in a non-conventional manner: without a commercial publisher.

Whitman's desire for control over his work anticipates, to a large degree, what Roger Chartier proposes in his *The Order of Books*: that authors do not really write books: "they write texts that become written objects," and the manner in which a work is read, received, and interpreted is critical to establishing meaning. Based on the decisions
he made regarding the 1855 edition, it is clear that Whitman believed that the
construction of meaning largely takes place in the space between the text and the reader,
and, therefore, sought to have as much influence, or control, over this space as possible. It
is here that he felt he could develop an inseparable bond with his reader:

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

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

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

(“A Song for Occupations”)

As Chartier suggests, “reading is not uniquely an abstract operation of the
intellect, it brings the body into play, and it is inscribed in a space and a relationship with
oneself or with others.” Whitman sought to manipulate this space, specifically the
physical form through which his text was transmitted, in such a way as to bring his
readers into play with his poems and, through his poems, establish a relationship between
himself and “others.” He felt strongly that such physical devices as format, page layout,
the way the text was broken up, typographical presentation, as so on, were all factors
involved in inscribing readable space (espace lisible), to use Michel Certeau’s terms. In
short, Whitman sought to exercise control over the forms associated with his text that
were charged with expressing intention, orienting reception, and constraining
interpretation. The actions he took in 1855 to control the publication of Leaves of Grass
bear this notion out.
As we have seen, Whitman’s initial efforts in bringing his *Leaves of Grass* forth had begun in his notebooks as he jotted down ideas for poems and drafts of verses during the years leading up to 1855. His first efforts to address the form of the work, however, can be traced to 1854 when Whitman posed for a portrait by Gabriel Harrison, an artist and photographer whose work Whitman very much admired. Whitman felt that Harrison’s daguerreotype portraits represented “perfect works of truth and art” and that they captured the “spirit” of the inner self. It is this “spirit” that Whitman chose to represent *Leaves of Grass* by placing a steel engraved frontispiece of his portrait facing the title page of the first edition. At this early stage in the development of *Leaves of Grass*, we can already see Whitman consciously involved in manipulating the form of his work to construct meaning and, judging from the first known review of the book and its treatment of the frontispiece portrait, Whitman’s efforts appear to have been effective:

... we may infer that he belongs to the exemplary class of society sometimes irreverently styled “loafers.” He is therein represented in a garb, half sailor’s, half workingman’s, with no superfluous appendage of coat or waistcoat, a “wideawake” perched jauntily on his head, one hand in his pocket and the other on his hip, with a certain air of mild defiance, and an expression of pensive insolence on his face which seems to betoken a consciousness of his mission as the “coming man.”

In terms of when Whitman actually started writing out his poems for this edition, the record in unclear. Whitman’s own statements, recorded at various points in time after the fact, are contradictory. If we examine his statements closely, however, we can get to the most likely scenario. As we have seen, Whitman was, up until 1854, honing his skills and experimenting with his poetry. A poem he wrote around June of 1854 (“A Boston Ballad”) still reflected a preliminary style. Notes recorded just after this point in time,
however, reflect a tension that Whitman began speaking of in terms of “perturbations” and “great pressure, pressure from within.” It is likely that *Leaves of Grass* sprang from these “pressures” and that Whitman produced both the poems and his “preface” during a surge of creativity that occurred sometime between late summer of 1854 and the following spring. The book, he would later write, was something that he “felt that he must do” immediately:

I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,  
And I become the other dreamers. 

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake.  
[“The Sleepers”]

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* itself seems to corroborate these statements as it appears, to some degree, as if it were assembled in “a moment,” or at least in haste. Finally, in a statement he made six years after the publication of the edition, Whitman said that he “definitely” began writing the poems in 1854.

Regardless of when he actually wrote the text of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman showed up one day in the spring of 1855 at the District Court of Manhattan with a completed manuscript he wished to register for copyright. Soon afterwards, he contracted with the Rome Brothers, immigrant job printers from Scotland who specialized in legal texts, to put his manuscript into print. Whitman consulted with the brothers at length regarding the physical appearance of the volume, including typeface, inking, paper, layout, margins, etc., insuring that every detail was discussed and understood. Then, there in the printing shop, he would sit, alternating between reading the *Tribune* and reading through proof as leaves of his poetry came off the press. He occasionally took a turn at
the press setting his long lines of verse in print himself. It is ironic that Whitman’s career ultimately led him back to the printer shop, but, in an important sense, the compositor in Whitman had always been a vital part of his makeup, a key component in his concept of writing and authorship. His work in the Rome Brothers print shop reflected an outdated process, a throwback, the type of hands-on, artisan publishing in which he had first learned the trade and experienced the joy of seeing his work pass into print, but it was here that he was most comfortable. Whitman enjoyed the atmosphere and camaraderie of the workmen in the printing office. He enjoyed the feel and touch of the type and the press, and, because of his background, preferred to work, if possible, from proof. As Ezra Greenspan points out in *Walt Whitman and the American Reader*, this arrangement enabled Whitman to exert a considerable amount of control over the design of his work and thereby “allowed him to place his highly personal poetry before the public in a more personalized manner than would otherwise have been possible.” Whitman was, in fact, establishing a pattern of direct author involvement in the production of his work that he had struggled with throughout his pre-*Leaves* career and which he would now follow throughout his remaining career.

Taking on the role of professional bookmaker and publisher, Whitman wasted little time getting to work once the sheets came off of the Rome Brothers’ press. He took the daguerreotype of himself intended as a frontispiece to the volume to Samuel Hollyer for engraving. He then made arrangements with Brooklyn bookbinder Charles Jenkins for the binding of 295 of the 800 sets sheets that had been printed. For the binding, Whitman decided to wrap his text in a dark green cloth, the color of deep, rich grass; with gilt edges and ornate gold stamping, its title sprouting little roots and that seemed to weave
directly into the binding. Each feature was personally selected by Whitman and intended
to convey meaning. The thin oversized quarto (about eight by eleven inches) would be
elegant and designed for display in a Victorian parlor. Later, in explaining the elegant
appearance of several of his editions to Horace Traubel, Whitman stated that “[p]eople as
a rule like to open books on center tables, in parlors, and so on and so on.” It is probable
that Whitman sought to tap into a growing market for elegant books. Henry Ward
Beecher, in describing this market in 1854, wrote:

Within ten years the sale of common books has increased probably 200
per cent, and is daily increasing. But the sale of expensive works, and of library-
editions of standard authors in costly bindings, is yet more noticeable. Ten years
ago, such a display of magnificent works as is found in the Appletons’ would
have been a precursor of bankruptcy. There was no demand for them. Now, one
whole side of an immense store is not only filled with the most admirably-bound
library books, but from some inexhaustible source the void continually made in
the shelves is at once refilled.

This publishing context helps explain the initial steep price of $2.00 that Whitman set for
the volume, although the price was reduced a few months later to $0.75 due to a lack of
sales.

As demonstrated in his choice of bindings, Whitman did not shy away from
borrowing from some of the more successful publishing conventions of the day. Another
example of this was his desire to publish Leaves of Grass in several different formats,
variously priced, in order to appeal to as many audiences as possible. This was a
somewhat common practice during this period as a result of advances in technology and
distribution methods. Books of poetry could be found in a variety of formats and prices,
ranging from expensive half-leather morocco to twenty-five cent paperbacks. Despite this
desire, however, in the end Whitman designed relatively elaborate editions of Leaves of
Grass. In their article, “Typographic Yawp: Leaves of Grass, 1855-1992,” Megan and Paul Benton argue that Whitman, in the publication of his poetry, ultimately “seemed more intent on creating a monument to himself as poet of all Americans than on reaching a diverse audience.” Whitman, they argue, “labored to make his book both iconoclastic and respectable, common and prestigious—a paradox he visually punctuated by designing elegantly Victorian tomes to embody his songs of the open road.” Interestingly, this paradox in many ways reflects Whitman’s career-long struggle to fit in with the literary culture of the day, yet maintain control over his work and its message.

Once arrangements were settled with the binder, there remained the important task of selecting a distributor for his work. He offered this task to a firm with whom he held a long-standing acquaintance, Fowlers and Wells, the leading phrenologists in the country and the operators of a middling-sized publishing house. While lacking the distribution power of the larger firms, the publishers did a fairly good nationwide business. They had bookstores established in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia and had developed an extensive network of sales agents around the country. They typically published works covering “Phrenology, Physiology, Psychology, Hydropathy, Phonography, Spirit-rapping and Women’s Rights.” Whitman had become acquainted with the firm when, as editor of the Eagle, he reviewed some of their books. He had also sold a wide-range of Fowlers and Wells books when he ran his small stationary shop in Brooklyn. Additionally, in 1849, Lorenzo Fowler had read Whitman’s skull and created a phrenological chart for the poet. Whitman was so proud of the analysis that he quoted from it several times and published the chart on four different occasions. Whitman shared many interests and views with the publishers, Orson Fowler in particular and in early
July, Orson, his brother Lorenzo and Samuel R. Wells agreed to serve as distributor of
the first edition and, later, the publisher of the second. Soon afterwards, Fowler and
Wells advertised *Leaves of Grass* for sale at their new Phrenology Depot at 308
Broadway.

Consisting of ninety-five pages of text, ten of them Whitman’s prose preface, the
text of *Leaves of Grass* is roughly printed and bears the look of a political pamphlet
someone might thrust at you on a street corner. It has, as David Reynolds describes it,
“resonances of the newspaper and the street.” The typeface actually gives it a newspaper
look and the preface is arranged in columns that mimic the newspaper format. In contrast
to its elegant exterior, the interior presents something more akin to democracy and “rough
simplicity.” As mentioned earlier, opposite the stripped-down minimalist title page with
simple caps, no author or publisher named, Whitman placed his extraordinary engraving.
There the reader is confronted by a young Whitman slouching in his shirt sleeves, throat
bare to his underwear, hat tilted rakishly on his head. There is nothing gilded here, but
rather an image of a man of the streets, staring with insolence at the reader beyond. This
image is followed by the preface, a dense double-columned preface looking more like “a
tabloid call to revolution,” than an introduction to a volume of poetry.

The preface is followed by the poems, with the famous “I celebrate myself”
introducing the reader to long, unmetered lines stretching out across wide pages which
create a feeling of spaciousness. On page twenty-nine the poet identifies himself as

*Walt Whitman, one of the roughs, a kosmos,*
*Disorderly fleshy and sensual .... eating drinking and breeding,*
*No sentimentalist .... no stander above men and women or apart
from them .... no more modest than immodest.*
This description might be applied to the typographic design of the text as well: poems have been left untitled or let "Leaves of Grass" serve as a heading, ornaments and illustrations excluded, the printing reflects poor inking and presswork, blurred letters and fade-away lines. All of this suggests a deliberate roughness, a typographic reminder of the "rough" opposite the title page and his challenge to convention. "I will not be meddlesome," he promises in his "preface," "[I] will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains." Again, we see Whitman involved in dialogue with the reader through both his text and its form. As Megan L. Benton notes in *Illuminating Letters: Typography and Literary Interpretation*, Whitman's text is "insolent in its forthright simplicity; the typography introduced perfectly the revolutionary style and substance of his poems." As we will see, Whitman would make dramatic changes to these initial typographic choices in later editions. The book's initial dubious critical reception, he believed, could be linked in part to the fact that it simply did not resemble conventional volumes of poetry. People did not know what it was. His 1860 edition, for example, would take on a much softer, even feminine, typography, replete with adornments, calligraphic letterforms, and decorative flourishes, all working purposely to insure that the reader recognized it not only as poetry, but poetry to be taken seriously in mid-Victorian America.

The book was offered in several stores in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia on July 6th. A few copies were sent to Fowlers and Wells' connections in London, Horshell and Company, although there was no English edition published. One of these copies fortuitously found its way to William Rossetti, an event that would lay the foundation for
Whitman’s reputation among a group of British elite. Fowlers and Wells also sent out copies to customers who had prepaid orders for new books and complimentary and review copies were sent out to various editors and members of the American literati, including Emerson, Longfellow and Whittier. With the writing, printing, folding, binding, advertising, and initial distribution completed, Whitman sat back and anxiously awaited the verdict of the critics.

The public response to Leaves of Grass was initially mixed. Emerson had received his copy and had promptly read it. On July 21, he responded with a glowing letter to Whitman welcoming him “at the beginning of a great career” (this letter was reprinted, quoted, cited by Whitman’s defenders, and used by Whitman himself, to Emerson’s dismay, to promote an 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass). Whitman was so pleased that he carried the letter around in his pocket for months. Such a letter from so eminent a man of letters was fortunate for Whitman, for it would help to brace himself against the brutal onslaught he faced from many critics. The first notice, probably written by Charles A. Dana in the New York Daily Tribune, complained of “a somewhat too oracular strain” and of language that is “too frequently reckless and indecent ... quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society.” Charles Eliot Norton, writing in Putnam’s Monthly, was not at all impressed with what he considered a “curious lawless collection of poems . . . without any idea of sense or reason.” Rufus W. Griswold viciously attacked the “poet(?)” who demonstrated “natural imbecility.” It is “impossible to imagine, wrote Griswold, “how any man’s fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey who had died of disappointed love.”
Fortunately, *Leaves of Grass* had a defender willing to come to its aid: Walt Whitman. With his background in journalism, the pages of the *United States and Democratic Review*, the *American Phrenological Journal*, and the Brooklyn *Daily Times* were open to Whitman and he took full advantage of this to defend his book in unsigned reviews: “An American Bard at last ... The movement of his verses is the sweeping movement of living people.... You have come in good time, Walt Whitman!”60 “Of the spirit of life in visible forms ... of them is the spirit of this man’s poetry”61 and “the begetter of a new offspring out of literature.”62 Evidently, publishing-authorship for Whitman included self-promotion and participation in the critical debate surrounding his work, albeit anonymously. Even at this point in the trajectory of his book, Whitman was unwilling to stand by idly as others defined his work. Whitman would use whatever extra-literary means he could marshal to defend, explain, and promote his poems. Of course, Whitman was not completely alone in these efforts. Some of the reviews mentioned above, as well as others, were mixed and a few were quite positive. In the beginning of 1856, for example, Edward Everett Hale commended the book as strongly as Griswold had condemned it. In the *North American Review*, he wrote of the “freshness, simplicity, and reality” of this “truly accomplished book.” Despite the mixed reviews, as with many other first attempts by aspiring poets, very few copies of Whitman’s volume were sold.

As Ezra Greenspan points out in *Walt Whitman and the American Reader*, meager sales did not prevent the book from having “at least a modest and rather influential circulation.” Greenspan ascribes this to Whitman’s all-out efforts to promote the work. “He publicized it by word of mouth among ... friends and acquaintances, sent out
numerous complimentary or review copies” and wrote “extravagantly positive self-reviews” intended to generate further publicity. Reportedly, John Trowbridge became an admirer of Whitman’s poetry before he had ever seen the book when he read some excerpts in a newspaper review that had reached him in Paris in the fall of 1855. Whitman’s poems were read at various events and the poet was discussed at private gatherings. Copies began to circulate among the British intelligentsia and, by 1857, evidence suggests that a copy of *Leaves of Grass* found its way to the Springfield, Missouri law office of Abraham Lincoln. Moreover, the book was noticed or reviewed in several dozen newspapers and magazines in America and England, many of which were influential publications. In a manner of months following the publication of his *Leaves of Grass*, the little-known, unemployed journalist-poet managed to gain the attention of Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Parker, Whittier, Longfellow, Norton, Lowell, and Griswold, and would, in a matter of years, become one of the most widely-known, if not understood and respected, literary figures in Anglo-American letters.

Despite mixed reviews and lack of sales, Whitman was carried away in the excitement of it all and set quickly to work on another edition. In late 1855, he gathered a variety of reviews of *Leaves of Grass* as well as some excerpts from critical pieces unrelated to his book dealing with cultural nationalism and the importance of considering new forms in the evolution of American poetry. About this time, Whitman worked out an arrangement with Fowlers and Well’s to make contributions to their *Life Illustrated*, a popular weekly paper. In one of his discussions with the publishers, he proposed the idea of a Fowlers and Wells edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The firm initially agreed to serve as publishers for the edition and although Orson Fowler left the firm (now Fowler and
Wells) soon afterwards, for a time it looked as though *Leaves of Grass* would have a formal publisher.

By the spring of 1856, Whitman had produced twenty new poems and had made revisions to some of his earlier ones. By June, 1000 copies were bound incorporating this material. The second edition now included thirty-two poems in 342 pages, plus a forty-two page appendix of "Leaves Droppings," which included Emerson's letter to Whitman along with Whitman's reply, as well as selected reviews of the first edition. The new edition presented a table of contents and each poem appeared under a separate title. The 1855 "Preface" had been eliminated, although large parts of it had been worked into a new poem entitled "Poem of Many in One" ("By Blue Ontario's Shore").

Whitman had high hopes for this edition; it was stereotyped rather than printed from standing type as the 1855 edition had been. Physically, it stood in sharp contrast to the 1855 edition. It was a much smaller, plainer-looking book. Still bound in green cloth, its floral designs had been toned down significantly, although on the spine, stamped in gold for the world to see, appeared the following: "I Greet You at the Beginning of A Great Career. R. W. Emerson." Unfortunately, Emerson's endorsement—which Whitman continued to use without permission—did not seem to help. Sales were minimal and reviews scanty in the wake of the position taken by many prominent critics regarding the previous edition. To make matters worse, Samuel Wells, feeling pressure as the reviews took an intensely negative tone, decided to suspend publication of *Leaves of Grass.* Griswold's "mass of stupid filth" comments, trashing reviews in London, and then attacks from Boston by the *Intelligencer* had evidently given Wells second thoughts.
about his involvement with the project. In a letter to Whitman from Boston on June 7, Wells wrote,

After “duly considering,” we have concluded that it is best for us to insist on the omission of certain objectionable passages of Leaves of Grass, or decline publishing it. We could give twenty reasons for this, but, the fact will be enough for you to know. We are not in a position, at present, to experiment. We must not venture.

Again, it will be better for you to have the work published by clean hands, i.e. by a House, not now committed to unpopular notions. We are not in favor, with the conservatism, and a more orthodox House would be better for you. Try the Masons, Partons publishers, (They publish Fanny Ferns works.) They are rich and enterprising, and I guess would publish Leaves of Grass, on fair terms.  

Once again, a publisher had complicated things for Whitman. Although he himself had opened the door to publisher involvement in Leaves of Grass, he had done so in this case because he felt that he could maintain an acceptable level of control over his work. As we have seen throughout his career, control for Whitman did not extend to allowing a publisher, or anyone else for that matter, to modify or censor his writing. As a second run had already been stereotyped and bound, it seemed impractical for the firm to completely abandon the work and so a deal was struck whereby Fowler and Wells would publish, distribute, and advertise the edition, but the firm’s name would never appear on the title page. Whitman undoubtedly chose this route because it was one in which he could insure control over his work.

Significantly, there is no record to show that Whitman ever followed Wells’s advice to “try the Masons,” a well respected publisher and member of the New York Publisher’s Association. The Mason Brothers of New York were the publishers of a great number of creative works, including the writings of Sara and James Parton. The Partons were the most successful literary couple in the United States at the time, and
acquaintances of Whitman from Brooklyn. James Parton was an accomplished biographer while his wife, Sara, was one of the most popular writers of the decade, writing under the pseudonym of Fanny Fern. It is likely that Whitman’s title for his book was borrowed from her *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Portfolio*. Speaking to her half a million readers in her New York *Ledger* column, she had written of her “unmingled delight” in Whitman’s volume and heralded the “glorious Native American” who had created its poems. According to Well’s letter, Sara and James were “rich” and “enterprising,” and if Whitman were able to enlist their help to get his book before the Masons for consideration, things might just work out well for the poet and his book.

Despite these intriguing possibilities, Whitman, as we have seen, instead chose to work out an agreement with Fowler and Wells. On August 16, Fowler and Wells dutifully ran a nice little puff announcing the sale of the work in their popular weekly, *Life Illustrated*. Although it is unclear whether or not the piece was written by Whitman, it is interesting in that it begins with a dissection of Whitman’s publishing missteps. *Leaves of Grass*, it informs its reader, improperly arrived without any announcement and in a form few recognized. The volume was odd-looking, “clumsy,” “uninviting,” and “peculiar” in style. The new edition, the puff promises, will address these shortcomings. Although the first edition of 1000 copies “disappeared very quickly,” readers are assured that the price of the book would “remain” set at one dollar and copies would be ready around the first of September. Whitman, we are told, “his message” having “been found worthy of regard” by none other than Emerson, was here to stay, a “fixed fact.” Readers were lastly called upon to grant Whitman’s work “respectful mention” if only for the sake of cultural nationalism.
Ultimately, some of these claims did not measure up to the facts. The new edition was more compact and portable, about four by six, and the paper quality was a bit improved, but the cover was in fact less attractive and inviting than the earlier edition. Like the first edition, the new edition was to arrive without a named author or publisher, although the name on the copyright page did change between editions from "Walter" to "Walt." Moreover, the wide pages of the first edition had been very appropriate for Whitman's long lines. Even with a smaller, more delicate type used for the new edition, the majority of lines had to be run over in the new edition, creating a much more "clumsy" or crowded look on the page as compared to the earlier edition. As far as a demand for the book, it is generally believed that the first edition did not readily sell and that Whitman gave most of the copies that were bound away to friends, critics, and influential individuals. Additionally, the price of the earlier edition had been initially set at two dollars and so it would be difficult for the price to "remain" at one dollar in any case. Similarly, Emerson's letter was never intended to be associated with the second edition and it was particularly not intended to be used as an endorsement for poems that Emerson had not ever seen before. Finally, although Whitman considered himself to be America's new poet, the American reading public remained unconvinced.

The lack of any real recognition for the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the retreat of Wells as publisher for the work, and a rapidly deteriorating financial situation, ultimately left Whitman disappointed and depressed. Although he had gained a certain level of notoriety through his efforts, his desire to connect to his audience, to be absorbed by the American public, was apparently not to be, at least not for the moment, and his private notes during this period are quite bleak. Despite all the attention he had received,
the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* was almost entirely ignored, although it did generate further criticism. After a few months, Fowler and Wells gave up their attempts to advertise it. As Gay Wilson Allen indicates in *The Solitary Singer*, “if any edition of *Leaves of Grass* was a complete failure, it was the second.” Whitman’s association with *Life Illustrated* was eventually terminated and despite the creative poetic surge he had been experiencing during this period, he was still unemployed and needed to support himself and his family. The death of his father on July 11, 1855 had made Whitman the family’s sole provider. Without any other immediate options, the disappointed poet had little alternative but to return to writing occasional pieces for newspapers and periodicals. Despite having several of his articles published, Whitman’s financial situation continued to deteriorate. In the winter of 1856-1857, Whitman, in dire financial straits, was forced to borrow $200 from James Parton and, in the following spring, he reluctantly returned to journalism as editor of the Brooklyn *Daily Times*.

As we have seen, Whitman’s career up to this point was largely defined by his work in printing. Throughout the 1840s, he had successfully written for and been published by some of the leading publications of his day. He was well aware of the institutional structures in place for publishing his writing. In the 1850s, however, he did not seek out publishers for his book of poems, but rather chose to publish the work on his own. The one time that he did enter into an agreement with a publisher, the agreement fell through and he decided not to pursue a promising alternative commercial publisher. Again, he chose to publish the work on his own. The trade-offs for Whitman have been made clear. Although the first edition of his poems was received with bafflement by many and described as “clumsy” and “uninviting” by Whitman’s own supporters,
Whitman retained nearly complete control over his work, seeing it through each phase of its composition, design, and production, allowing himself to define the precise form and, to some extent, influence the reception climate in which his work was received and interpreted by readers.

In the preceding pages, we have seen how Whitman’s desire to develop an inseparable bond with his readers compelled him to adopt a method of authorship which was in many ways anachronistic and unorthodox. We have seen how Whitman resisted, both in his early career as a journalist and then later, as a poet, the attempts of others to shape or modify his writing in any significant way. We will see in the chapters that follow how Whitman’s desire to retain control over his work extended to subsequent editions. Similarly, we will see that the editing process that Whitman engaged in with the 1856 edition carried through to each subsequent edition, with each new edition serving to present an evolving representation of Whitman’s ideal. Finally, we will see how Samuel Wells’s reluctance to publish *Leaves of Grass* because of its supposed obscenity became a common theme in Whitman’s relations with publishers throughout the rest of the century.
Chapter Two

THAYER AND ELD RIDGE

The story of Thayer and Eldridge, Publishers, and their relationship with Whitman and his poems needs to be pieced together because only a small fraction of the firm’s records, contracts, account books, or associated documents have survived. Most of what we know about the firm has emerged from an autobiography left by William Wilde Thayer in which he provides a vivid description of the dynamic character of Boston’s entrepreneurial class, recounting the activities of a generation of capitalists and political activists who rapidly shifted careers in order to seize opportunities of the moment. The business did not last long, roughly two years, with the firm publishing only about fifty works before access to capital and viable markets vanished in the gloom of the approaching civil conflict. By cobbling together what can be learned about the publishing house of Thayer and Eldridge we can gain greater understanding of Whitman’s appeal during the period leading up to the Civil War as well as insight into the production of a book critical in his overall development.

William Wilde Thayer was an enterprising young man. While he aspired to become a Harvard College student, his sense of duty to his mother led him to give that up and to instead seek his fortune in the bustling marketplace of Boston. Working for a wholesale grocery house, he worked his way up from clerk to salesman to bookkeeper. When cutbacks forced him to seek other employment, he started up his own vegetable
and fruit stand, later expanding into the wholesale produce trade. Unfortunately, a particularly hard winter and two carloads of rotting potatoes led to the end of that enterprise and Thayer sought employment as a clerk with a local bookseller and publishing firm, Dayton and Wentworth.

Thayer had only been with Dayton and Wentworth a few months when the firm closed its shop on Washington Street and moved to New York City. There the partners quarreled and it was decided that Wentworth would buy Dayton out. Wentworth, being grateful to Thayer because the clerk had sided with him against Dayton, suggested that they form a new firm—Wentworth, Thayer, and Hewes. The sale with Dayton had not been finalized, however, and the firm was eventually split, with Wentworth forced to return to Boston in order to address his business there. The proposed firm was tabled and Thayer was “utterly crushed.” In his autobiography, he laments this lost opportunity, reporting that, for a young man, it was a chance of a lifetime and that he had grieved over it for months: “I cried all night long...we had every prospect of making a fortune and in a highly honorable business.”

Thayer seems to have never given up on this prospect. In 1859, perhaps relying on assurances of support from members of the antislavery community, he borrowed money and, in partnership with a current clerk in that business, Charles Wesley Eldridge, bought out the bankrupt book firm of his old employers, Wentworth, Hewes & Co. The purchase consisted of all of the holdings of the Wentworth publishing company including existing stock, equipment, copyrights, and the bookstore located at 116 Washington Street. With the sale completed in late 1859, Thayer, age 29, and Eldridge, age 21, set out
to make a name for themselves on Boston’s “Publisher’s Row.”\textsuperscript{5} They couldn’t have picked a more challenging moment to enter the marketplace.

The Boston book business of the day was a tight little community of like-minded people, clustered in a small area of the city; half of them having their quarters situated within three or four blocks of Washington Street between State and Milk streets. The men who had founded many of these houses had come from humble beginnings and although publishing had come to be seen as a highly honorable, genteel business in the public’s eye, they weren’t afraid to soil their hands in the business of the day. It was a very competitive industry full of risk, uncertainty, and chance, equally capable of producing riches or disaster.\textsuperscript{6}

There were certainly business models at hand that may have served to motivate the young entrepreneurs. Ticknor & Fields, for example, had, by 1858, developed one of the most successful publishing houses in America. No other firm could match its list for literary brilliance: among American writers, it had contracts with Longfellow, Holmes, Whittier, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Emerson, Stowe; among English writers, Tennyson, Browning, Thackeray and Dickens. In 1860 alone, the house published 225 titles, a total of 216,536 books, costing the firm $90,000 and generating a retail value of $231,000.\textsuperscript{7}

There was money to be made in Boston publishing.

Just prior to the war there was great talk among the trade regarding a renaissance of Boston as a publishing center. The \textit{American Publisher’s Circular and Literary Gazette} observed, for example, that

\begin{quote}
 a few years ago, Boston took the lead in the business of bookselling and publishing, but seems for a certain period of time to have lost ground. She is rapidly regaining her old position. The trade of 1855 has increased 25 per cent, over the average of the last five years, and it is reported by some of the principal
\end{quote}
publishers who have carefully made detailed statements of the business, that it amounts, for 1855, to $5,500,000. This is, of course, entirely apart from the paper and stationery business ... This is a notable exhibit to be made by only 53 houses, all that are represented from that city in the catalogues of 1855.8

In fact, American book publishing had reached the climax of its initial thrust into the mass market. It was experiencing a boom on a scale never even approached before and that would not be abated until the Panic of 1857.9 Publishers would recall these days with nostalgia, referring to them as the “Fantastic Fifties” when more “best sellers” were published than in any previous decade. In the December 1857 issue of Harper’s Monthly, for example, the occupant of that magazine’s famous “Easy Chair” wrote of the past seven years as a time

when every book of every publisher was in the twenty-sixth thousand, and the unparalleled demand was increasing at an unprecedented rate; when presses were working night and day; when, owing to the extraordinary demand, the issue of the first edition must be postponed from Saturday to Thursday; when not more than 50,000 copies could be furnished in three days; when the public must have patience, and would finally be supplied....10

Thayer and Eldridge could not have been blind to the promising prospects. In 1856, the estimated value of the American publishing industry had climbed to nearly $16 million with $2.5 million attributed to Boston businesses alone.11

Although these statistics were impressive, some very real problems confronted the industry. Few publishers, for instance, were able to reach the majority of available markets. There was also a chronic shortage of risk capital in the business, so that any kind of serious reverse, even a momentary one, might be enough to wipe out the narrow profit margin on which most publishers existed. Distribution concerns, swings in the economy, and the general instability of credit left many companies vulnerable and, following the Panic of 1857, the industry was thrown into chaos and many companies simply did not

...
survive. Mergers were common and expected, and many firms disappeared overnight. The threat of war did little to lesson the risks. Thayer and Eldridge, seeking to thrive in these complex circumstances, must have felt that they could beat the odds in assuming the large debt necessary for them to enter the business.

Albert J. Von Frank, in his recently published “The Secret World of Radical Publishers: The Case of Thayer and Eldridge of Boston,” speculates that Thayer and Eldridge made this gamble based upon assurances they had received from their “wide acquaintance in Boston’s anti-slavery community.” “It seems likely,” offers Von Frank, “that Thayer and Eldridge came into existence as part of a larger antislavery strategy to affect the elections of that year.” Examining the list of works published by Thayer and Eldridge in light of Von Frank’s hypothesis sheds light on both the firm’s business and political strategies as well as on the individual publishing decisions that the firm made. For instance, given that the firm was engaged in an antislavery, pro-Republican political agenda, it seems likely that its initial publishing project was a biography on the life of William H. Seward, written by Richard J. Hinton and released just prior to the election. When it became evident that Lincoln would be nominated rather than Seward, the publishers quickly arranged for Hinton to produce a biography of Lincoln which was ready for the market just a few days after the Seward biography appeared and just ten days after Lincoln’s nomination was secured. But these political projects required capital, and for this the pair turned to the stock of plates and copyrights they had acquired from Wentworth in the purchase of his holdings.

Thayer and Eldridge recognized that the boom of the fifties celebrated what would today be called the virtues of Middle America, or, as Mott refers to it in his...
Golden Multitudes, the “Home-and-Jesus” formula in which religious applications and admonitions are offered up as solutions to nearly every issue of family life. In response, the pair quickly set out to publish a set of such works that they had on hand (for a complete listing of the works brought forth by Thayer and Eldridge, please see Appendix A). They immediately brought out *The Home Angel, or, Rich and Poor* (1859), by L. B. Urbino, and *Thrilling Scenes in Cottage Life, or, The Opposite Effects of Vice and Virtue* (1860), by a Son of Temperance. These were followed by *The Christian Counsellor, Jewels for the Household, Being Selections of Thought and Anecdote for Family Reading* (1860), by Tryon Edwards, *The Oasis; or Golden Leaves of Friendship* (1860), edited by N. L. Ferguson, and *Life Among the Flowers, or Rural Wreath* (1860), by Laura Greenwood, among others. The works of the Rev. Daniel Eddy were particularly popular, and the firm published four volumes of his religious advice.18

Thayer and Eldridge were also aware that readers in the U.S. wanted to be told over and over again how magnificent and wonderful their country was, and they therefore brought out several pictorial and illustrated works on U.S. History. They published *Rocky Mountain life, or, Startling Scenes and Perilous Adventures in the Far West, During an Expedition of Three Years* (1859) by mountaineer and adventurer Rufus B. Sage, for example, and four histories by John Frost including *The Indian: on the Battlefield and in the Wigwam* (1860), *A Pictorial History of the United States of America from the discovery by the Northmen in the tenth century to the present time...* (1860), and *The American Generals From the Founding of the Republic to the Present Time: Comprising Lives of the Great Commanders and Other Distinguished Officers who have Acted in the*

The real money of the day, though, was in the popular novel and Thayer and Eldridge sought to capitalize on this trend as well. They released Rovings on Land and Sea (1860) by Capt. Henry E. Davenport, Experiences of a Barrister and Confessions of an Attorney (1860), by Samuel Warren, The Recollections of a Policeman (1860) by William Russell, A Female Wanderer, or, The Remarkable Disclosures of Cordelia And Edwin (1860) by Cordelia Stark, Amy Lee, or, Without and Within (1860), by George Canning Hill, and Rachel: a Romance (1860), by Josephine Franklin.

While the firm also brought out a few children’s books, a handful of religious works, one anti-Catholic volume, and a “common sense” medical reference book, a large part of its initial publishing program sought to leverage its acquired inventory so as to respond to the period’s fascination with works on ethics and conduct, with illustrated American histories, and with novels. This business strategy proved fairly successful with the firm realizing a profit in its first year of operation. These profits were then available to underwrite Thayer and Eldridge’s activist agenda, beginning with Hinton’s biographies.

In his Walt Whitman: A Life, Justin Kaplan refers to Thayer and Eldridge as “movement publishers,” citing their commitment to antislavery and radical Republican ideals. The firm’s publication list bears this out: of the seventeen works that the firm developed and brought out on their own, thirteen of these were clearly anti-slavery in subject and intent. Following Hinton’s biographies, the firm sought out and successfully
contracted with James Redpath\textsuperscript{21} to bring forth a memorial biography dedicated to Capt. John Brown who gained national attention for his raid on the United States armory at Harpers Ferry, Va. on Oct. 16, 1859, his subsequent trial for treason, and his execution on Dec. 2, 1859.

Thayer was able to attract Redpath by promising that a share of the profits from the book would go to support Brown’s surviving widow and children.\textsuperscript{22} Redpath began work on the book in early November, sending his friend Richard Hinton to Kansas to conduct interviews there while he relied on Thomas Higginson to provide material from the Brown family papers. Redpath interviewed Franklin B. Sanborn,\textsuperscript{23} one of Brown’s Secret Six,\textsuperscript{24} in Concord sometime in December, and the resulting work, \textit{The Public Life of Capt. John Brown}, was issued on January 10, 1860, just over a month following Brown’s execution.\textsuperscript{25} The book sold over seventy-five thousand copies and represented the peak of Thayer and Eldridge’s commercial and political success.

The firm set to work to follow up this success with several additional volleys against slavery, including \textit{The Barbarism of Slavery Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner} (1860), \textit{Address of the Free Constitutionalists to the People of the United States} (1860), \textit{Southern Notes for National Circulation} (1860), \textit{Thaddeus Hyatt's Contributions to the Cause of Human Liberty and Constitutional Rights, a sermon} (1860); and \textit{An Eye Opener for the Wide Awakes} (1860). The development of these projects, however, was overshadowed by events related to the raid on Harper’s Ferry as a committee of the United States Senate launched an investigation into the events of the insurrection with the intent of identifying and possibly indicting Brown’s Northern supporters, some of whom may have been unwittingly implicated in Thayer and Eldridge’s biography of Brown.
Thayer's *Autobiography* offers an invaluable account of these episodes in the history of the antislavery campaign, describing how he became an active member of a younger generation of abolitionists who lost patience with the pacifist tactics of the movement's founders as well as with the temporizing of antislavery politicians. Thayer, Redpath, Sanborn, and Higginson, were all ripe for recruitment by John Brown and his conspirators for participation in more violent means intended to end slavery. Thayer's memoirs attest to the continued willingness of these men, even after the failure of Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, even in light of the Senate investigation and the serving of arrest warrants, to break laws and employ force on behalf of their cause. Somewhere in this mix, the lure of action drew Thayer and, to some extent, Eldridge, from the more conventional role of publishers of anti-slavery books to the center of the plot to rescue Brown's captured raiders. While there is a possibility that Thayer's interest in this rescue plot was part of some sort of sensational advertising associated with his Redpath projects, the record suggests that he was far more involved and committed than would have been necessary for a mere advertising stunt.

In late December, a chance event may have occurred that served to bring Walt Whitman into the orbit of these radical young men and their activities. In his "The Secret World of Radical Publishers," Von Frank describes how Hinton, while returning from the Kansas territory, "happened to arrive in New York the same day as John Brown's body which was being transported for burial to the family's farm at North Elba." Hinton took the opportunity to view the body, joined by his friend and managing editor of the New York *Times*, John Swinton. As they "gazed down on the grey-bearded corpse," "they came to the astonishing conclusion that it looked a good deal like their mutual
acquaintance Walt Whitman." Von Frank goes on to suggest that Hinton most likely told this story to his friends Thayer and Eldridge back in Boston, thus igniting or reviving an interest among the pair in the poet and his work.

Regardless of whether or not Hinton was responsible for Thayer and Eldridge's attention to Whitman, it is certain that they were, with Harriet Beecher Stowe always in the back of their minds, keenly interested in works and authors that might lend themselves to the far-reaching emotional effects which arguments like those developed in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* made, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of copies that were sold. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had demonstrated that a market for antislavery works existed and that such works could be extremely useful to the cause. Between the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the election of Lincoln in 1860, followed by the firing upon Fort Sumter, an enormous amount of antislavery literature was produced. The moral, religious, social, and economic movement against slavery during this period was sufficient to convince thousands of Northern citizens, who had previously been hostile or indifferent to abolition, of the injustice of slavery. Something more, though, was needed than mere conviction of injustice. The people needed to be moved to action and sentimental arguments proved to be an effective means to this end.

Thayer and Eldridge may have simply been attracted to Whitman for the level of sympathy selections of his poetry evoked from readers. While typically Whitman demonstrated little hostility toward the slaveholder, his lines about the runaway served to dramatize the need to actively aid fugitive slaves:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside,  
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,  
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy  
and weak.  

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And went where he sat on a log, and led him in and assured him,
And brought water, and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet,
And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave him some coarse clothes,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north,
I had him sit next me at table . . . . my firelock leaned in the corner.  

While Whitman encourages readers to consider how they might react if they themselves were to hear that “crackling” in the “woodpile,” he takes them to a much deeper level in this next passage:

The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
The mother condemned for a witch and burnt with dry wood, and her children gazing on;
The hounded slave that flags in the race and leans by the fence, blowing and covered with sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck,
The murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.
I am the hounded slave . . . . I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me . . . . crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence . . . . my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses and haul close,
They taunt my dizzy ears . . . . they beat me violently over the head with their whip-stocks.

This passage almost serves as an appeal, encouraging the reader to feel the plight of the slave, if only for a moment, and to feel the stings being inflicted in the course of that desperate flight, to hear and feel the hounds and sense the bullets as they whiz by, and the injuries inflicted by the fence, the stones, and the whip-stocks as they crash down upon
the runaway’s body. Other examples of Whitman’s work may have attracted the young publishers as well, including “A Boston Ballad, 1854,” which clearly serves as a satire against pro-slavery Bostonians. In any case, Thayer and Eldridge, sitting flush from the profits of Redpath’s book, were interested in Whitman and would shortly send him the letter that would lead to their partnership in bringing forth the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

Though Whitman was a stranger to us, we wrote to him, proposing that he come to Boston. I composed the letter, receiving the approval of Mr. Eldridge, my partner. It was so striking that Whitman, when visiting Ralph Waldo Emerson at Concord, Mass. gave it to him to read. The latter praised it, and said there was hope for freedom of thought and a free press when such a publishing house, as indicated, like Thayer and Eldridge had its home in Boston, and dared to take up the defense for the poet who had been so savagely criticized. Up to that time Fowler & Wells of New York had their imprint on the title page of “Leaves of Grass.” [Thayer was mistaken here: Fowler and Wells had not, in fact, placed their imprint on the title page of either edition.] But they could not endure the assaults of the critics, and some of the sentiments of the book were not acceptable to some readers. They notified Whitman of their intention to discontinue selling the book. My partner and myself were indignant, and by letter informed the “Good Grey Poet” that there was one free press at least, that one in Boston controlled by Thayer and Eldridge, which was freely offered to him. …Our motto was to stimulate home talent, and encourage young authors.

As they corresponded with Whitman to arrange details, Thayer and Eldridge were working to bring out Redpath’s second book dedicated to Brown, *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* (1860). Frightened by consequences of the Virginia raid and the Senate investigation, most of those who had been conspirators with John Brown had sought safety in flight. Among them was Sanborn who, having been perhaps put at risk by information revealed in Redpath’s biography, was forced to flee to Canada when the Senate committee issued a warrant for his arrest. In this tense climate, Thayer was startled one day when a “stout-built, grim faced man” suddenly walked into his office.
and, glancing around furtively and looking suspiciously at the young publisher asked, “Are you Mr. Thayer?” “Are you true blue?” It turned out that the visitor was Charles P. Tidd, the last of the Harpers Ferry raiders still at large. He had been given a letter by Higginson with instructions to seek out the offices of Thayer and Eldridge where he might find refuge from the authorities. The fugitive holed up in Thayer’s house for a week, sleeping with two revolvers under his pillow. Redpath, himself now under subpoena from the Senate committee, decided to lay low for a month in Ohio on the farm of John Brown, Jr. Whitman, eager to travel to Boston, was asked by Charles Eldridge to delay his departure for a week because Thayer had also left town. He had traveled to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to participate in a desperate attempt to rescue Aaron Stevens and Albert Hazlett, the two remaining Brown’s raiders being held in a Charleston, Virginia jail.

The specifics of the rescue plot were worked out in Thayer and Eldridge’s back offices with the firm financing the scheme. “By correspondence,” Higginson “engaged 15 men under the command of Capt. Jim Montgomery” and the group rendezvoused in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Thayer arrived with a bag of “burglar tools” and $800 sewn into his clothing, meant to provision the rescuers and to cover expenses for carrying Stevens and Hazlett to Canada. Pretending to be cattle-buyers, the group met at a tavern on the outskirts of town and waited until a reconnaissance of the jail in Charleston could be conducted. The scout returned to inform the group that the jail was well guarded and that their chances of success were bleak at best. Despite a vote among the men to go on anyway, Higginson appealed to the group to give up the plot as it was “sure death to go,” and he commanded the group to disperse. Stevens and Hazlett would hang. Thayer
headed home, stopping in Franklin County, Pennsylvania to spend “several hundred dollars” on the purchase of an oil well which, when Eldridge later complained about the expense, was sold at a loss. The well came in a gusher shortly afterward.36

Thayer returned from his trip to Pennsylvania just in time to greet Whitman and to set up an office for him at the Boston Stereotype Foundry, the well-known Rand and Avery shop whose presses had issued *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* eight years before. The poet arrived around March 15th with proofs provided by the Romes, his scribbled revisions, and additional manuscripts, and he would spend the next three months in the city, from March through May37 seeing his book “through the presses.” At the foundry, Thayer instructed the printers to follow Whitman’s instructions and to carry out his wishes. Whitman was delighted. For a writer of Whitman’s training and views on the “making” of his books, the opportunity to supervise the creation and production of his book inside and out with these tremendous resources at hand must have approximated his ideal notion of bookmaking.38 He spent about three hours a day correcting proof and exercising much of the authority of a publisher in matters of typography, decorations, paper, presswork, and binding. “Thayer and Eldridge,” he wrote to his brother Jeff, “treat me in a way I could not have wished better” and “think every thing I do is the right thing.”39

Taking a room in a local lodging house, Whitman quickly established a daily routine, including a morning wash, currying, walk, coffee, and then on to the foundry until noon when he would walk once again followed by dinner.40 Whitman was pleased with these arrangements and more pleased with Boston than he had anticipated. “It is,” he wrote in a letter to Abby M. Price, “full of life, and criss-cross streets. I am very glad I [have] come, if only to rub out of me [the] deficient notions I had of New England
character. I am getting to like it in every way—even the Yankee twang.”41 He found the city a bit too conformist in culture, dress, and manners, for his tastes, cramped by “respectability,” and “squeezed into the stereotypical mould.” If only “they would let themselves be, and only make that better and finer,” that “would beat the world.” “Everybody here is so like everybody else,” he wrote Abby Price, “and I am Walt Whitman!”42

Hearing of Whitman’s arrival in Boston, Ralph Waldo Emerson came to see him on March 17, and they spent all of that Saturday together. Emerson greeted him with courtesy and arranged for guest reading privileges for the poet at the Boston Athenaeum. Before dinner, the two men went out walking on Boston Commons and, for two hours, Emerson tried to persuade Whitman to leave out certain passages and poems from his book. It wasn’t the “Calamus” poems that troubled him, but rather the “Efans d’Adam” cluster. Several passages in this group of poems, Emerson argued, stretched conventional sensibilities beyond their limits and the times were simply not ready for such sexual frankness as found in passage 10 of poem No. 3:

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than
a helpless vapor -- all falls aside but myself
and it,

Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling
hands, all diffused -- mine too diffused,
Ebb stung by the flow, and flow stung by the ebb --
love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous,
quivering jelly of love, white-blown and delirious
juice,
Bridegroom—night of love, working surely and softly
into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-fleshed
day.43

Emerson tried to convince the poet to be practical and to give the book a chance to sell. If
Whitman would only cut judiciously, he might have a book that could well go through
many editions. Whitman understood the argument that he ran the risk of cutting himself
off from the audience he so desperately sought, but decided that he could not back off
and that the book would either stand or fall as is. “If I had cut sex out,” he later reflected,
“I might just as well have cut everything out.” “I said no, no...” and “I have not lived to
regret my Emerson no.” Leaves of Grass would have to remain intact. With this matter
settled, the pair strolled together to the American House in Hanover Square and had “a
bully dinner.”44

As noted above, Whitman had arrived in the midst of a flurry of antislavery
activism. Through his association with Thayer and Eldridge, Whitman came to befriend
most of their radical writers and fellow “Black Strings.”45 It was here that he met
Redpath, William D. O’Connor,46 Hinton, and Sanborn, all of whom would be helpful to
Whitman in the years to come. In April, Sanborn was finally captured and brought to trial
for aiding John Brown’s followers, and, in the midst of a courtroom packed with
spectators, he would later recall seeing the grey-bearded Whitman, seated on stool in the
rear of the room, sitting tall in his work clothes.47 He was there to see that justice was
done, Whitman later said, and to help Sanborn to escape if necessary. In the room that
day were Thayer and Eldridge, along with Redpath, Hinton, and probably O’Connor, who
would become an enduring friend of Whitman. This group had been ready, in the event of
a ruling against Sanborn, to seize the defendant by force if necessary and, with guns
drawn, rush him out of the courtroom and into an awaiting carriage for a quick get away.
Fortunately, the judge ruled in favor of Sanborn and bloodshed was averted.\textsuperscript{48}

As exciting as it must have been to have been involved with his new antislavery
friends, Whitman was not an abolitionist. He was far more moderate, and his real
excitement lay in the fact that his \textit{Leaves of Grass} was being "really published" at last.
"The book will be a handsome specimen of typography, paper, binding, &c.—and will
be, it seems to me, like relieving me of a great weight—or removing a great obstacle that
has been in my way for three years." Whitman took advantage of the authority Thayer
and Eldridge had provided him and he ordered typefaces and ornamentation for his book
that left the printers shaking their heads in disbelief at first, but which ultimately won
them over. In a letter to Jeff, he proudly wrote that the foreman at Rand and Avery had
declared it the freshest and handsomest piece of typography that had ever passed through
his mill.\textsuperscript{49}

Despite his unwillingness to bend to public notions of propriety and purity,
Whitman did make several efforts within the design of this edition to try to appeal to
mainstream readers and to make the work appear more respectable. The book was a thick
octavo volume of 456 pages, bound in grayish-greenish cloth and later in reddish-orange
and brown variations with a pebbly texture, looking somewhat like leather. Small
illustrations evoking nature themes decorated the cover and spine, and were repeated in
the text as tailpieces. The typeface was handsome, the font selection elegant, and many
decorative touches were applied throughout the book. As in previous editions, Whitman
did not include his name on the title-page and the publication date is given in his
distinctive manner as “Year 85 of the States (1860-61). But now instead of presenting himself on the frontispiece as a “rough” with hat cocked and arms akimbo, Whitman offered readers a more distinguished image of the poet wearing a Byronic collar and flowing tie, and looking, as Justin Kaplan points out in his _Walt Whitman, A Life_, “rather like Victor Hugo, Garibaldi, or an opera singer.” Whitman also chose to drop the prose prefaces, letters, and other materials he had included in his previous editions. He was content with the result: “Altogether, Jeff,” he wrote his brother in May, shortly before the first finished copies were ready at the bindery, “I am very, very much satisfied that the thing, in the permanent form it now is, looks as well and reads as well (to my notions) as I anticipated—because a good deal, after all, was an experiment—and now I am satisfied.” “I feel as if things had taken a turn with me, at last.” Unfortunately, some twists would accompany the turn.

Toward the end of April, Thayer and Eldridge sent out an announcement that _Leaves of Grass_ would be published within days and Henry Clapp provided a nice puff in the April 28th issue of _Saturday Press_. Several “large orders” had been received by the publishing firm already, he reported. On May 10, Whitman wrote to his brother Jeff that the book was finished and Henry Clapp acknowledged receiving copies two days later, though they must have been unbound copies because the frontispiece, an engraving by Stephen Alonzo Schoff from the portrait of the author by Charles Hine of New York, was still unfinished, and thus the binding had yet to occur. Whitman informed Jeff that Thayer and Eldridge were very happy with the edition and that they felt sure that it would prove “a valuable investment, increasing by months and years, not going off in a rocket way, (like Uncle Tom’s Cabin).” To launch an aggressive promotional campaign, the
publishers decided to distribute a 64-page brochure of reviews and criticisms of *Leaves of Grass*, entitled *Leaves of Grass Imprints*, which included twenty-five reviews of the first two editions, some favorable, some not, including Emerson’s letter as well as Whitman’s anonymous self-reviews. The pamphlet heralded, “WALT WHITMAN’S LEAVES OF GRASS. AN ELEGANT BOOK” and included a description of the work that emphasized the volume’s fine appearance: “The typography will be found to vie in elegance with anything ever issued from the American or English press.” “The book, as a whole, will be found to be an ornament to any bookshelf or table; and as such the publishers confidently claim for it a recognition as one of the finest specimens of modern book making.” At times, in their efforts to promote his work, even Whitman felt that Thayer and Eldridge were going a bit too far and, under the guise of making some slight revisions to their advertising copy, he delivered at least one of their “puffs” to his fire.54 Having spent nearly two months in Boston, Whitman was growing homesick and was ready to finish up the job. In his May 10 letter to his brother Jeff, Whitman made plans for his return to New York:

Should you write to me, in response to this, you must write so that I would get the letter not later than Wednesday morning next—as I feel the fit growing upon me stronger and stronger to move—and the fare is only $3 now from here to New York, cabin passage, in the boat,—Besides I could go deadhead if I was to apply.55

On the same day he wrote this letter, he received a letter from his old friend, Henry Clapp, who offered all kinds of practical advice on advertising the new edition, including a list of persons to whom he felt review copies should be sent.56 Clapp also requested that Whitman try to induce Thayer and Eldridge to advance $100 to the Press for future advertising, funds that Clapp needed very badly at that moment. While two
advertisements for *Leaves of Grass* did appear in the *Press* in June, Thayer and Eldridge were interested in the *Press* for more than advertising and countered with an offer to buy a share in the ownership of the paper, no doubt with the intent of developing their own radical journal (one of the firm’s inducements to O’Connor when they put him under contract was the possibility that he might edit a journal for the firm that “shall sustain with great ability radical views on the reformatory questions of the day, and combine these with the highest literary character”\(^5^7\)). They saw the possibility of journal publishing as an opportunity to follow the successful model presented by Ticknor and Fields in their *Atlantic Monthly*. Thayer and Eldridge already had associations with Redpath and Whitman, after all, and they were hopeful that they might manage to recruit such contributors as Emerson, Higginson, Lydia Maria Child, and Theodore Parker.\(^5^8\)

On May 13, with the review copies dispatched and advertising arranged for, Whitman headed home for Brooklyn. The first completed copies of the elegant new edition of *Leaves of Grass* issued forth from the press a few days later and Whitman received his author’s copies in the mail on May 25. Of all his editions thus far, this one had the most promising beginning. It was well advertised and, on May 19, the *Saturday Press* carried a long article announcing “a great Philosopher—perhaps a great Poet—in every way an original man.”\(^5^9\) Clapp wrote Whitman that his success was certain: “It is written all over the book. There is an aroma about it that goes right to the snow,” and he promised, “What I can do for it, in the way of bringing it before the public, over and over again, I shall do, and do thoroughly.”\(^6^0\) In addition to Clapp’s continued support, the edition was commented upon in other papers in New York, London, and even in New Orleans. Not all of the publicity was good however, and his poems were attacked by
several papers, including the Westminster Review. These attacks prompted the poet to write yet another anonymous defense of his work which was printed in the Brooklyn City News on October 10. Whitman’s poetry had still not been accepted nor had he received the recognition he believed he deserved. Despite all the promising conditions, the new edition had not achieved the results he had hoped for.

Meanwhile, back in Boston the presses were rolling out copies of Leaves of Grass. By mid-June the first printing of one thousand copies was almost exhausted, a second had been sent to the bindery, and Thayer and Eldridge were developing new marketing plans to counter what they called “considerable opposition among the trade… partly born of prejudice and partly of cowardice.” The pair pushed on, believing that, given time, they could create “an overwhelming demand” for Leaves of Grass “among the mass public, which shall sweep [the adverse critics] and their petty fears, on its resistless torrent.”61 By late July, as the inventory of the second printing dwindled and sales slowed, they proposed to bring the book out in both a cheaper and more expensive format. This they hoped would help to reach both elite and mass readerships. While they did raise the price from $1.25 to $1.50 on copies of the third printing, the cheap edition never appeared. By best estimates, the edition ultimately ended up selling about 4000 copies with Thayer and Eldridge announcing a second book “in preparation” by Whitman entitled, Banner at Day-Break,62 a book that would never materialize.

The rest of Thayer and Eldridge’s story is a bit anticlimactic. On May 25, as Whitman was receiving his copies in the mail, a notice appeared in the Liberator calling for the organization of a new antislavery political party. A meeting was to be held the following Tuesday and the notice was signed by fourteen of Boston’s leading activists,
including Thayer, Eldridge, Redpath, and Hinton. The project turned out to be a fiasco and came to nothing. Thayer and Eldridge brought out several more antislavery works, including O'Connor's *Harrington, a Story of True Love*, the plot of which focused on Solomon Northup's 1853 narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* and on the Anthony Burns case which O'Connor had witnessed first hand in Boston. Unfortunately, "the book was not a success."  

The publishers brought out a third book by Redpath, *A Guide to Hayti*, but by then their firm was in real trouble:

> We had good trade, our first year's profit being $17,000. Out of this we paid large sums for advertising, for stereotype plates of new books (Whitman's cost us $800.); for installments of purchase money to Wentworth, clerk hire and household expenses, so that our actual cash surplus was not sufficient to meet any unexpected contingency.  

This doesn't, of course, include the $800 that left the business to underwrite the Stevens and Hazlett escape plot and subsequent oil well investment. The firm was strapped, but it wasn't yet beaten and the pair still had an important project in the works.

When Harriet Jacobs completed her now famous *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* manuscript in 1859, she made arrangements with the Boston publishers Phillips and Sampson to bring out her book. The publishers, however, presented Jacobs with a significant condition in the terms of their acceptance of her work which required her to arrange for a preface to be authored by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Jacobs had met with Stowe a few years prior to this and had left the encounter feeling that she and her daughter had been insulted and that Stowe had acted condescendingly toward them. Before this condition could really become an issue, though, the two senior partners of the publishing firm died and the business folded. Upon hearing about her situation, the black
abolitionist, William C. Nell, who had been interested in Jacobs and her work for some
time, suggested that she contact Thayer and Eldridge. Thayer and Eldridge were very
interested in Jacob’s work, but they too requested a sponsoring preface. They suggested
that Jacobs contact Lydia Maria Child, a writer who, as we have seen, the firm was
interested in doing business with anyway. Jacobs was again hesitant to make such a
request, but Nell very easily arranged a meeting and the two women quickly came to
terms. A contract was struck and Thayer and Eldridge had a set of plates produced at a
cost of $800.

Given another month, the book would have appeared under the Thayer and
Eldridge imprint. Jacobs and her book, however, like Whitman, were swept away
on what Thayer called that “fatal day,” when the guns fired on Fort Sumter. This
was the signal of the end for Thayer and Eldridge and they were “caught with all
sails spread, without warning of the storm.”

Alice Fahs, in her “Northern and Southern Worlds of Print,” does a good job of
contextualizing the short-term crisis in publishing in the immediate wake of the Civil
War. “Authors and publishers,” she details, needed to “shift their plans as a result of the
war.”65 The public disruption of the war interrupted and “created havoc with literary
institutions and practices,” and book publishers saw their world change dramatically: “the
entire absorption of public interest by current events has cause nearly a complete
cessation in the demand for new books, and publishers, have in consequence discontinued
their usual business.”66 “Capital hid itself,” Thayer later recalled, “banks were distrustful”
and since books were considered a luxury, there was no demand:

All book firms were “shaky.” The strong houses were ready to topple over. Our
friends who had money felt that justice to themselves demanded that they should
husband their resources, for no one could predict the results of the war, whether
the North or the South would be victor. Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, Frank
Bird, George L. Stearns and other anti-slavery people were interested in keeping
us up, but they were forced to call in their funds and most reluctantly let us go down. We went into bankruptcy.67

Fortunately for Jacobs, she was able, with help from Wendell Phillips and from the Anti-Slavery Society’s Hovey Fund, to rescue the plates and the book finally did appear later that year.68

After nearly a year of effort, of making new friends, of publishing his book in a new form, of approaching the genuine national fame he had sought for so long, Whitman found himself back where he had started. The edition had moved from such promising beginnings to a sudden and disappointing end. When the firm collapsed in January 1861, the stereotype plates of Leaves of Grass were confiscated by Horace Wentworth, Thayer and Eldridge’s principal creditor and former employer, now, as Thayer referred to him, “my most bitter and relentless enemy.” Wentworth, Thayer later charged, wanted to get the business back cheap and so planted the rumor that the pair had “failed rich” and thereby encouraged the other creditors to “sell to him [Wentworth] directly,” rather than working out some type of compromise with Thayer and Eldridge. Wentworth later sold the plates off at auction and they were acquired by an unscrupulous New York publisher, Richard “Holy Dick” Worthington, who printed and sold an estimated 10,000 copies from which Whitman realized practically nothing.69

Although the firm survived only two years before collapsing in the financial contraction that accompanied the secession crisis, “Thayer and Eldridge, Publishers,” produced a significant list of both antislavery and literary materials. They published approximately fifty works, seventeen of those on their own, including three books by James Redpath and Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. The two young men became active
participants in the abolitionist movement, particularly in the failed attempt to rescue followers of John Brown imprisoned and awaiting execution in Charlestown, Virginia, and their offices served as a meeting place and haven for a small group of young radical activists. The excitement generated by this conspiratorial band was so compelling that it attracted lawyers, ministers, businessmen, and literary figures into its clandestine activities. Existing mediums, such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Liberator*, were unable to channel the impatient energy of this younger generation’s anger over slavery. Thayer and Eldridge, on the other hand, provided a new outlet for outrage, and their bold efforts represent an indictment of the restraint and moral compromise that hampered many antebellum reform movements.
Chapter Three

JAMES R. OSGOOD & COMPANY

William Dean Howells, in looking back over the time he spent in Boston, and reflecting upon the friends and associations he had formed there, once wrote that “In the end, James R. Osgood failed, though all his enterprises succeeded.” Howells explained this paradox by noting that Osgood’s enterprises “were greater than his powers and his means, and before they could reach their full fruition, they had to be enlarged to men of longer purse and longer patience.” The 1881-82 edition of Whitman’s Leaves of Grass is an excellent illustration of this observation.

Whitman’s first two commercial publishers for Leaves of Grass, Thayer and Eldridge, and James R. Osgood were both located in Boston, but neither of these publishing arrangements worked out. Thayer and Eldridge went bankrupt and Osgood’s edition was banned. In The Solitary Singer, Gay Wilson Allen does a good job at looking at the author-publisher relationship, but he doesn’t really probe the implications of these events for Whitman or for his Leaves. This chapter will explore Whitman’s dealings with the publishing culture in Boston by examining his relationship with James R. Osgood and the publication of the sixth edition of Leaves of Grass.

In his important History of Book Publishing, John Tebbel notes that James R. Osgood’s career as a publisher was brief, and in some respects inglorious, but never dull: “While it lasted, he illuminated the Boston publishing scene in the period from the end of
the Civil War to 1885, when he fled from the financial shambles of his business.”1 A fascinating array of factors brought Osgood and Whitman into convergence in 1881, and equally intriguing factors led to the subsequent dissolution of their relationship only a year later. Before studying that convergence, we need to consider Osgood’s development as a publisher beginning in the 1850s, with some side glances at Whitman and his literary positioning and relationships with publishers in these same years.

1855 was an important year for both Whitman and Osgood. For Whitman, of course, it marked the publication of his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. For Osgood, a nineteen-year old from Maine, it marked his entry into the world that would become the center of his life’s work, the publishing trade. Early in the year, Osgood had written a letter to Messrs. Ticknor and Fields of the successful publishing house, expressing his interest in the trade. It must have been a great letter, as the young man received a response inviting him to come to Boston to work for the firm. Upon his arrival in Boston, Osgood entered a new phase of his education, one carried out under the experienced eye of a master of the trade, James T. Fields. Osgood soon learned that it was Fields who had made the firm such a success. Prior to 1840, and Fields’s association with the company, Ticknor’s business had been relatively small, focusing on medical and educational books, though the firm gained its first substantial success when it published Tennyson’s *Poems* in 1842. Recognizing the profitability in bringing the works of English authors to American readers, Fields soon added Thomas DeQuincey, Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Hughes, Charles Reade, Thackeray, and others to the firm’s list of authors.2

Fields also focused on American authors and managed to acquire Longfellow from John Owen of Cambridge; Hawthorne from the American Stationers Company;
Whittier from Mussey, and Emerson from Simkins Munroe. In addition, Holmes and Lowell and, later, Bryant, Agassiz, and Stowe joined the Ticknor and Fields imprint. By the time Osgood arrived in Boston, Fields had virtually cornered the American literary market. In the words of Henry James, “Few were our native authors, and the friendly Boston house had gathered them in, almost all.”

Henry James understood why they had been “gathered” in. Osgood was to learn how it was done. Fields, James recognized, “was alone . . . among American publishers of the time” in possessing “a conception of possibilities of relation with his authors” and “his firm was all but alone in improving” on this “crude relation.” Osgood couldn’t have found himself in better hands. Fields would teach him a critical lesson in how to become a successful publisher: “First, find your author. Solicit his work. Then establish friendly and, if possible, cordial relations with him. This can best be done, not only by offering him generous terms, but also by showing a prompt sympathy with his aims and endeavors.” To Osgood’s credit, he learned this lesson and learned it well, and would one day extend such courtesies to Whitman.

The young clerk didn’t have to look far to see the lessons he was learning put into action, for 1855 was a very busy year for the house of Ticknor and Fields: Tennyson’s *Maud* appeared, Robert Browning was introduced to the American reading public, and Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* was published. Osgood watched as money rolled in to the pockets of the authors and the coffers of the firm. He could see, too, how Fields dealt with his authors when they showed up in his offices: “Longfellow would walk over from Cambridge, Bayard Taylor would come up from Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, or Emerson would ride in from Concord. Over and over again, the young apprentice would
hear of invitations to the home of Mr. Fields, and in time he came to be invited there, too. Thus he learned to understand why Henry James, in referring to Fields and his wife Annie, described them as being “addicted to every hospitality and every benevolence, addicted to the cultivation of talk and wit and to the ingenious multiplication of such ties as could link the upper half of the title-page with the lower.”

The hospitality of the Fields’s home/literary salon was not, however, extended to everyone. Initial reception of Whitman’s poetry by the Boston literati had been less than warm (with the exception of Edward Everett Hale’s January 1856 review of *Leaves of Grass* in the *North American Review*), and Whitman’s unauthorized publication of Emerson’s favorable letter in the *Tribune* had been seen by many as a terrible breach of propriety. What’s more, Whitman had clipped the letter out of the newspaper once it had been printed, inserted copies of it in his book, and then sent it to prominent literary figures as an endorsement of his work. (In time, Emerson would come to regret having ever penned the letter as protests poured in from friends, relatives, and strangers.) The genteel literary circle of the likes of Longfellow, Holmes, and Lowell would never find anything of value in *Leaves of Grass*. (Admittedly, Lowell, as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, printed Whitman’s “Bardic Symbols”—later entitled “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”—in his April 1861 edition, but it is likely that he did this at the request of Emerson and soon regretted it.) When Whitman came to Boston to oversee the publication of the third edition of his poetry, Emerson’s proposal to bring Whitman as his guest to the exclusive Saturday Club was quickly struck down. There was little desire among the Boston literati to meet the Brooklyn poet. It is within this society and culture that James Osgood was shaping his outlook on the world and his view of Whitman.
James T. Fields was not merely skillful in the arts of hospitality, affability, and benevolence. He was a shrewd business strategist as well. In the same year in which he employed Osgood and began coaching him in the mysteries of finding and capturing profitable authors, he engaged another clerk, John S. Clark, and trained him in handling the business matters of the firm. (Like Osgood, Clark proved an able young man and, in time, both were taken in as partners—Osgood in 1864, when William D. Ticknor died, and Clark in 1866.) The services of these two promising young men left Fields free to carry out his plan to enter the periodical business and, in 1859, he purchased the *Atlantic Monthly* from Phillips, Sampson, & Co., who had been its publishers for two years since the start of the magazine in 1857. “James Russell Lowell, its first editor, retained his position until May 1861, when he yielded his chair to Fields.”

In 1864, Fields added the *North American Review* to his periodical trade, installing Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton as editors. He inaugurated *Our Young Folks* in 1865 and brought young William Dean Howells, an acquaintance of Osgood’s, to Boston to serve as assistant editor of the *Atlantic*. Later that year, on Osgood’s suggestion, the firm set up a weekly magazine, *Every Saturday*, and Osgood, with Fields’ approval, recruited Thomas Bailey Aldrich for the editor’s chair.

As noted earlier, Lowell was no friend of Whitman or admirer of his work, and his new assistant, Howells, shared in this acrimony. In an 1860 review of *Leaves of Grass*, he had described Whitman as a foul-smelling horned “bull” who had brazenly plunged his head into the china-shop of polite society and letters, upsetting the delicate wares residing there. This is, perhaps, an appropriate description of how Whitman was generally viewed and received by many members of New England’s genteel literati.
Whitman’s poetry, with its prose-like rhythms and common language, and its lack of regard for convention or regularity, had burst onto the scene, presenting lawlessness. Howells recommended bolting the door, though recognizing that Whitman, and therefore his poetry, “remains yet,” standing “in front of the china-shop, with his mouth full of fresh leaves of grass, lilies, clover-heads, butter-cups, daisies, cockles, thistles, burrs, and hay, all mingled in a wisp together.”

Howells’s opinion of Whitman had largely been shaped during a trip to New York in the early summer of 1860 during which time he visited Whitman and his friend, Henry Clapp. Howells had just returned from a visit to New England where he had greatly enjoyed meeting and talking with Lowell, Emerson, and Hawthorne. While he had been charmed by his refined New England literary idols, he was taken aback by Clapp’s informality and outspokenness, his outright contempt for Boston and its ‘respectable’ writers, and by the unconventional atmosphere he observed at Pfaff’s. It was the china-shop and bull reversed. The young, impressionable journalist from Ohio suddenly found himself in a beer cellar, enveloped in an ambiance of noise, sweat, tobacco smoke, wurst, sauerkraut, beer and wine, and there, in the midst of the Bohemian revelry and din, taking all of this in, sat the bull himself: Walt Whitman. Though he instantly liked Whitman, Howells was disgusted with Clapp and his views, and would reflect upon his visit to Pfaff’s as having been obnoxious and distasteful. It would take Howells many years to reconcile the impressions that he took back with him to the *Atlantic* and to the offices of Ticknor and Fields. (Later, an article appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Literature as an Art,” suggested that “It is no discredit to Walt Whitman that he wrote *Leaves of Grass*, only that he did not burn it afterwards.”)
When the Civil War broke out, James Fields must have taken some quiet satisfaction in young Osgood's unfitness for military service. Although he was twenty-five years old, Osgood's small stature and his rheumatism attacks which sometimes laid him up for days, and at times even for weeks, made it impossible for him to take part in the fighting. He would serve at home and when William D. Ticknor died in April 1864, Fields took James Osgood into partnership with him. Osgood could have received no better stamp of approval of his nine-year apprenticeship, and a June 1 *American Publishers Circular* announced his promotion:

> Mr. Osgood has long been connected with the business operations of the firm. His extensive acquaintance with the trade throughout the whole country, and knowledge of his interests, together with his intelligence, liberality, energy, and uprightness of personal character constitute an additional assurance that the olden fame of the house, in which we are glad to see him now installed as a co-partner, will be kept, in the Websterian phrase, “full high advanced.”

Fields was obviously pleased with Osgood's performance as he turned more and more of control of the firm over to him. When Emerson's *Conduct of Life* was published, it was to Osgood rather than to Fields that Emerson directed his instructions for the sending out of 'author's copies' of the book (one went to Whitman; others to Carlyle and Harriet Martineau in London, and to Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes, and Norton in Cambridge and Boston).¹¹

The business was thriving and, having outgrown its space on Washington Street, relocated in 1865 to 124 Tremont Street. This wasn't the end of expansion, however. James Fields's business sense was sharp enough to make him aware of the fact that Boston presented certain disadvantages, in comparison to New York City, in terms of marketing and distributing books. In the spring of 1865, he purchased the publishing
house of Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington located at 823 Broadway. It was Fields’s intent to use this location as a depot for their books and magazines, and he placed the store in the charge of Benjamin Ticknor, the second son of the founder of the Boston firm.

As soon as Fields acquired the New York outlet, he began sending Osgood down from Boston on frequent business trips and the young man made the most of it. He came to know Joseph Harper and others in the offices of Harper & Brothers; he became acquainted with young Frederick Macmillan, nephew of Alexander Macmillan of London, who had been sent over to New York to learn about the business of the American branch of the parent London house. Before long, Osgood was just as much at home in New York as in Boston. “Everybody liked him. He carried friendliness and geniality with him wherever he went.”12 Thus, by the time that James Ripley Osgood had been a dozen years out of college, he found himself solidly established in a profitable business. He was junior partner in a highly esteemed firm with headquarters in Boston and offices in New York City. In 1866, the future looked very exciting for this thirty year-old from Maine.

Although Osgood was spending much of his time in New York and entertaining members of the literary community there, the name of Walt Whitman continued to be absent from the publishers’ lists of guests and appointments. Despite the fact that the poet had shown some willingness to make concessions to mainstream literary tastes, he remained an outsider.13 Reviews of Whitman’s 1865 Drum-Taps written by some the Fields’s most noteworthy allies demonstrate the problematic status the poet held in American mainstream literary circles. Henry James, for instance, complained that
Whitman’s verse was not poetry at all, but rather “arrant prose” (James later changed his opinion of Whitman). He advised the poet to “respect the public which you address; for it has taste, if you have not.” Similarly, Howells, though noting that he had found Drum-Taps to be an improvement over the “preponderant beastliness” of Leaves of Grass, argued that, ultimately, Whitman could not be considered a “true poet.” These reviews indicate that Whitman was not altogether ignored; but that the nation’s literary figures were not yet ready to include him in their ranks.

The war had forced James Fields to set aside a much coveted aspiration, the addition of Charles Dickens to the firm’s list of authors, and with its conclusion, he set about recruiting him. To this end, the canny publisher decided to send the affable Osgood to London. Accordingly, about the time of his 31st birthday, Osgood found himself on foreign soil charged with recruiting the greatest prize of the day. Osgood opened the campaign by delivering Dickens an unsolicited and unexpected royalty check for £1000 for the publication of the firm’s Diamond Edition of the Complete Works of Charles Dickens. Osgood then proposed that Dickens produce a minor work for serialization in the firm’s children’s magazine, Our Young Folks. He offered the author another £1000 and Dickens accepted. Osgood then explored the possibility of a visit by Dickens to the states to conduct a course of readings. Eventually, Dickens agreed. Without a doubt, Osgood’s trip was a complete success. Besides convincing the author to agree to an American reading tour, he eventually obtained Dickens’s agreement to recognize the house of Ticknor and Fields as his sole authorized publisher in the United States. He had landed the biggest name in the field.
While James Osgood’s recruiting efforts were proving successful, his developing talents as a publisher were also bearing fruit. No one can fully appreciate Osgood’s achievement until they have examined a shelf of Ticknor and Fields books produced before the influence of James R. Osgood began to show results, and a shelf of Osgood books produced after he got to work on the problem. Any reader who is interested in an object-lesson in this subject need only place side by side a dozen Ticknor and Fields books produced over a period of a dozen or fifteen years prior to Dickens’s visit. These books were all bound alike, in unrelieved, muddy brown cloth. When lined up, side by side, they are without distinction of any kind in shape, color, size, or lettering: they use the same cloth, the same paper, the same type, the same everything—all alike, and all drab.

In his *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields*, Michael Winship does an excellent job of detailing the binding history of Ticknor and Fields. In the 1840s, Winship points out,

Ticknor and Fields began to issue most of its general trade books in a standard binding of dark brown ribbed T grain cloth, decorated with an elaborate four-lobed arabesque design blind-stamped at the center of the sides and sober gold-stamped lettering on the spine in panels of blind-stamped double rules.¹⁷

Later, in 1856, the firm developed a second distinctive binding style for its books. Tennyson’s *The Poetical Works* was released in the “blue and gold” binding that become another of the firm’s hallmarks and a great success in designing a recognizable package for the company’s products. Up to this point in time, typical volumes were released in drab and unattractive bindings. The Harper’s Family Library, for example, was issued in a tan cloth binding with plain lettering printed in black and with without any gold-
stamped decorations. “Ticknor and Fields, on the other hand, was offering the complete works of one of its most popular living authors packaged in bright blue and gold.” The effect was “startling.”

Soon after October 1868, when the name Ticknor disappeared from the title-pages of the firm and the name Osgood appeared there for the first time, Osgood’s influence began to register as he broke away from the firm’s distinctive binding standards, color, size of page, lettering, decoration, type, and other aesthetic features. In each case, the cover, binding, and the decorations were designed to suit the contents of the book. Interestingly, this was an approach to bookmaking that Whitman would have enthusiastically endorsed. There wasn’t a muddy brown volume in the lot and the contrast with the Ticknor and Fields drabness did not pass unnoticed. On February 29, 1872, the Publisher’s Weekly singled Osgood’s books out for high praise and remarked: “the superb editions of Longfellow’s Dante, Bryant’s Homer, and Taylor’s Goethe’s Faust . . . have been among the greatest triumphs of the publisher’s art the world over.”

In a similar fashion, Osgood set to work to improve his magazines. He persuaded Fields to agree to a radical change in the character of Every Saturday. For four years (1866-1869 inclusive), this periodical had consisted chiefly of Aldrich’s scissoring from English magazines and there were no illustrations. But on January 1, 1870, Osgood announced: “It is the intention of the publishers to make Every Saturday the handsomest illustrated journal in America.” The magazine was increased from octavo to quarto size and copiously illustrated with wood engravings. The copying of extracts from English periodicals was gradually given up during 1870, and it soon became clear that Osgood was making a vigorous effort to rival Harper’s Weekly in New York, not only in the
energy of its commentary on politics, social life, arts and science, but also in the
abundance and variety of its illustrations. The sixteen pages in each issue were soon
expanded to twenty-four. Advertisements were added. Full-page portraits, cartoons, and
pictures of the Franco-Prussian War provided variety.

When Osgood discovered that his printers were not able to keep up with the pace
set by his soaring ambitions, he called on his inventive Boston friend, G. K. Snow for
help, and Snow in turn called on Cyrus Chambers, Jr., of the Philadelphia firm of
Chambers Brothers & Co. As a result, a new machine was built—"the only one of its
kind in the world"—which enabled the Osgood firm to trim the sheets of Every Saturday,
fold them, and paste them securely together, all in one operation. The machine worked so
rapidly that it could turn out thirty copies per minute or 1,800 copies an hour. The
invention of this machine—so the American Literary Gazette announced—"marks an era
in the publication of mammoth illustrated newspapers."21 Our weekly magazine now
"opens like a book," boasted Osgood. Of course, none of these steps were taken without
the investment of large sums of capital, and Osgood continued to push for expansion,
despite warnings and advice to the contrary.

In May 1870, Benjamin H. Ticknor was admitted to partnership in the firm, and
during the months that followed, the fast publishing pace set in 1869 was continued.
Among the authors published in 1869-1870 were Charles Francis Adams, Louis Agassiz,
Louisa May Alcott, T. B. Aldrich, W. C. Bryant, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., Emerson,
Horace Greeley, Edward Everett Hale, Bret Harte, Hawthorne, Thomas W. Higginson,
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Lucy Larcom, Longfellow, Lowell, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps,
John Parton, John G. Saxe, E. C. Stedman, R. H. Stoddard, Harriet Beecher Stowe,
Bayard Taylor, John T. Trowbridge, E. P. Whipple, John Greenfield Whittier; and among importations from across the ocean, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dickens, George Eliot, C. C. Fenton, John Forster, H. C. Robinson, Charles Reade, Sir Walter Scott, Alfred Tennyson, and W. M. Thackeray. There could be no doubt that James Ripley Osgood was on a roll and, at least for the time, Walt Whitman remained *persona non gratis* in Osgood's literary circle.

Before the end of the year 1870, several momentous decisions were reached in the office of Fields, Osgood and Co. After nearly forty years of active direction of the firm, Fields decided to retire. His three junior partners, Ogood, John Clark, and Ben Ticknor, shortly announced that they had purchased Fields's interest in the firm and that, as of January 2, 1871, the business would be carried on by James R. Osgood & Co. The announcement of the new firm stated that it "will retain all the authors whose fame is identified with the fortune of the old house, and will seek to extend the list by all honorable means." With the dawning of the New Year, Osgood's name as publisher was to stand alone on the title-pages of the books he published. He was not yet thirty-five years old.

The retirement of James T. Fields made a greater difference at 124 Tremont Street than Osgood could have easily anticipated. Later, in looking back over the past, the one-time junior partner was able to appreciate with clearer understanding just what the character, judgment, and temperament of his senior partner had meant to him. After Fields's death ten years later, Osgood paid public tribute to his "rare art of smoothing over the rough places." He recalled how Fields had "always considered the feelings of others" and declared that "his presence in moments of business anxiety and depression
served as a tonic." When James Fields was no longer available to smooth over the rough places, Osgood had to travel over them alone.

The new year was not slow in demonstrating just how tough running a publishing house could be. Dealing with authors and their complaints regarding the sending of review copies, the production of proofs, and the various rates and fees assigned to different works were now Osgood's responsibility. A good example involves Osgood's interactions with Bret Harte. Harte had burst upon the literary scene in the late 1860s with such stories as "The Luck of Roaring Camp," "The Outcast of Poker Flat," and "The Heathen Chinee." Prompt action had resulted in the publication by Fields of a book, *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches*, which managed to achieve a second edition before the end of 1870. But Osgood was not satisfied with garnering Harte's past products: he wished to capture future output as well and he therefore presented Harte with an astonishing offer, the generosity of which is a better tribute to the publisher's ambitions than to his business judgment. The offer, which was $10,000 for the exclusive publication of Harte's writings "(not to be less than twelve in number) for the space of one year," was quickly accepted by Harte and Osgood was doubtless filled with happy expectations of future "Lucks" and "Outcasts" filling the pages of the *Atlantic* or *Every Saturday*, stories that would eventually make their way into the pages of profitable books. He even hired an artist specifically to illustrate Harte's works. Osgood was destined to have a sad reckoning in this regard.

Osgood was also prone to extravagant entertaining. When in New York, he would give dinners at Delmonico's for business associates, his writers, and prospective writers. Early in 1872, for example, after declining Osgood's business proposal to publish a
volume of his sketches because of previous contracts, Samuel Clemens got invited to
dinner just the same. Osgood was always hosting a dinner or luncheon on one pretext or
another, and Clemens would later remark that “no man ever loved company more than
Osgood, or to play the part of host and pay for the enjoyment of others. His dinners were
elaborate affairs.”25 “Once,” Howells reported, “when Osgood could think of no other
occasion for a dinner, he gave himself a birthday dinner.” 26

All of this good cheer and laughter, however, changed to other sounds on
Saturday evening, November 9th, when a fire broke out in the business section of the city,
ultimately consuming the warehouse in which Osgood stored all the steel plates used for
printing the costly illustrations in his books. The heat was so intense that the plates were
all melted and rendered useless. The firm also lost several large printing presses. When
the smoke had cleared, James Osgood found his company in crisis.

Records show, however, that some of Osgood’s woes were not the result of
adverse fate but were of his own making. While Osgood benefited from many of the
lessons Ticknor and Fields had offered in exploiting the literary culture of the day, some
of the management and accounting practices that Osgood adopted from the firm worked
against him. Michael Winship, in his study of the business of Ticknor and Fields, points
out, for example, that

[a]s useful as cost books must have been in organizing information and recording
details as the firm’s numerous publications passed through various stages of
production, they remain a rudimentary and imperfect attempt at modern cost
accounting. The firm found no satisfactory way in the cost books of taking in its
initial investment costs (for example, stereotype plates or early sheets of foreign
works) into account when calculating unit production costs, nor were overhead
expenses (salaries, rent, advertising, insurance, and others) included in this
reckoning.27
Given these accounting methods, it would have been extremely difficult for Osgood to know what his actual profit margins were. Osgood was also careless in the control of his office and because of this, he found himself constantly writing authors in order to apologize for this matter or that, for being late on a due payment, for sending inaccurate bills, for overlooking a statement. No fire, no series of fires, could account for, or excuse, this obvious slackness. Add to this Osgood’s expansionist tendencies, extravagant entertaining, and his frequent intercontinental traveling, as well as the fragility of the economy during that period, and you have a recipe for disaster.

Another thing that complicated Osgood’s business affairs at this time was his extensive involvement with a new printing process called heliotype. (Interestingly, a 1882 review of Whitman’s prose work, Specimen Days and Collect, remarks upon a “strikingly good” “heliotype portrait” of the poet facing page 122.) When Osgood returned from a trip to Europe in the summer of 1872, he brought back with him the exclusive American rights to this process, which represented a more economical and very profitable way of printing illustrations. By it pictures were made directly from a gelatin film exposed under a negative and hardened with chrome alum. Osgood, upon observing the process, immediately saw it as an opportunity to reproduce one of the most valuable collections of engravings and pictures then in the country—the famous Gray Collection at Harvard. His application to the university authorities in Cambridge to make reproductions was met with an enthusiastic response. Osgood was granted exclusive rights to reproduce the collection. Within two months of the receipt of this permission, the heliotype staff assembled by Osgood had taken more than fifteen hundred impressions.

By the end of 1872, he had nearly two dozen presses devoted to heliotype work,
and the floor space at 124 Tremont Street began to prove seriously inadequate. It could simply not support that many presses and the number of personnel required to run them efficiently. Osgood decided to move to better, more expensive, quarters at 131 Franklin Street. There, he assured his friends, he proposed to create one of the “pleasantest places in Boston, or anywhere else . . . the abode of broad hospitality and sunshiny good feeling.” All of this, of course, required capital and ready money was not always available. Books did not always sell rapidly—sometimes did not sell at all, especially after big fires and financial panics. When ready money had to be found, there was, however, a way of finding it, namely by participating in the curious and misguided practice known as trade sales.

Trade shows were a very strange practice within the industry, and Osgood’s participation in them represents an incredible story of suicidal folly. Twice a year—usually in April and in September—publishers would auction off their books, large consignments of them, at Clinton Hall, New York City. Those publishers who used these sales to their advantage normally did so to liquidate and convert to cash or credit old stock, sleeping titles, or unsellable volumes that were taking up space in inventory. Occasionally included in these trade sales, however, were brand new books, deluxe items, fresh titles by popular authors, gift books in holiday bindings, illustrated poetry, and the like. These types of books, when they appeared, were usually offered by publishing houses that were either reorganizing or experiencing financial difficulties. In these cases, they were often sold in wholesale quantities—a thousand Tennysons, for example—and sold to the highest bidder, without reserve and no matter how low that bid might be.
The incredible aspect of this practice lies in the fact that the auction prices brought by many of these books were so low as to afford no margin of profit whatsoever for the publisher, let alone a royalty for the author. In some cases, it was tantamount to remaindering an edition within a week of publication, or remaindering a large part of an edition even before the date of publication. If a publisher were seeking to convert useless inventory into capital, then this practice made sense. In the case of Osgood, however, his persistence in taking part in the sales and the scale of his participation in them can have only one explanation—the publisher's extreme need for ready cash. Nothing but ignorance of their own expenditures can explain the willingness of the firm to let briskness of bidding at an auction conceal the fact that they were selling off their stock at prices below what they had paid for its production. Sooner or later, there had to be an accounting and, incredibly, the accounting seems to have confronted Osgood unexpectedly.

Days after one of the firm's largest trade sales in the fall of 1873, a financial panic broke upon Wall Street and some twenty-three important banking houses failed. Any sensible person in Boston in 1873 ought to have been able, without the benefit of business training, to read the weather signs in the book trade, when one of the cheap stores in that city advertised "the best books of Boston's largest publishing house [Osgood & Co.] at retail, at 40 percent discount from their prices, having been purchased at the last trade sale in New York." What chance had Osgood of selling any of his books to retail purchasers or to booksellers in Boston?

Osgood & Co. was collapsing financially, but the move from Tremont Street to the new quarters in Franklin Street had already been decided on; money had to be had
and when the trade sales did not prove adequate to the needs of the firm, Osgood turned to a more drastic method of raising capital. In November, 1873, he auctioned off three of his best-known and most profitable magazines. The Atlantic Monthly, Every Saturday, and Our Young Folks were sold to the highest bidders. Osgood might have conceivably survived both the fire of 1872 and the Panic of 1873 if the firm had been on a firm financial foundation. It is important to remember, however, that Osgood’s attempt to bring Every Saturday into the arena of its rival Harper’s Weekly had driven the house into an expansive mode, requiring capital investment that left it ill-prepared to weather the storms of the early 1870s. Money was simply flowing out faster than it was coming in.29

As the winter of 1875-1876 moved forward, the financial situation for Boston publishers on the whole became bleak. Numerous petitions for bankruptcy were filed and Osgood bore witness as several of his fellow publishers were forced through the door of insolvency. Osgood’s own situation became increasingly desperate and led him to attempt desperate remedies. Accordingly, on March 4, 1876, the firm announced an “Important Sale of Electrotype and Stereotype Plates, Engravings on Steel and Wood, and Remainders of Editions.” The announcement read:

Messrs. James R. Osgood & Co. announce to the trade, that, intending to devote themselves more closely to their specialties of American Literature, Standard Poetical Works, and their Heliotype Publications, they will offer for sale by auction, on Tuesday, March 28, 1876, and following days, at Clinton Hall, New York, Plates, Illustrations, and Stock on hand of a large number of important and valuable works. The sale will be without reserve, and ...will comprise ...more than 400 volumes [i.e., titles] including ...Dickens, Jules Verne, Scott, Kingsley, Thackeray, Charles Reade, DeQuincey, Jane Austen, ...Matthew Arnold, Clough, Julia Ward Howe, Patmore, Swinburne, and many others.30
After all the tumult and the shouting had died down and Osgood & Co. had returned to Boston, the partners found that they had disposed of a third of their authors. They still had 800 titles on their list, but the 400 they had disposed of included many of their best and Osgood would come to learn how difficult it is to replace such assets. Osgood was next forced to sell the *North American Review*, one of the few periodicals that had welcomed Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, and, as the year expired, so expired Osgood’s independence as a business man. On January 1, 1878, James R. Osgood & Co. went out of business and a new name, that of Henry O. Houghton, appeared upon the title pages of Osgood’s remaining authors. The reason for this change needs little explanation for the reader who followed the course of the preceding pages. Osgood had obviously scraped bottom financially and if the firm was to survive, new capital had to be found. Houghton had that capital. Hence, *exit* Ben Ticknor, *enter* Henry Oscar Houghton.

Osgood may have already been aware of the character and temperamental make-up of his new partner when they joined forces, but if not he soon learned. Osgood found himself harnessed to a very different mate from any he had previously been associated with. Easy-going William D. Ticknor, jolly and cheerful James T. Fields, affable and popular Benjamin H. Ticknor, were all cast from a different mold than the one that had fashioned Henry Oscar Houghton. The new partner abhorred slackness of any sort, and the office-conditions that had not only been tolerated by, but were, in a way, the result of the easy-going indifference of, Osgood’s previous partners were bound to meet with Houghton’s disapproval and, sooner or later, his impatient condemnation.
The travel and entertaining that Osgood considered part of doing business under his own firm were seen as frivolous expenditures by Houghton and the cautious senior partner clamped his hand firmly down upon the wheel of new ventures. By the autumn of 1879 it was apparent that things were not going smoothly between the pair. Houghton was as impatient about anything having to do with divided authority as he was of lack of order and method. He had always insisted upon such a system of reports at the Riverside Press as would imitate the red-tape methods of a government agency. He sometimes lost his temper and the rigorousness of his discipline was so great that many of his workmen chafed under it, but it was never relaxed. If one could not expect James R. Osgood, at the age of forty-three, to adjust himself easily to the demands of such a partner, neither could anyone expect Oscar Houghton, at the age of fifty-six, to change his habits or relax his demands. Throughout the time of his active control of the Riverside Press, he insisted that every specimen proof and every title page be submitted to him for approval, and to the very end it was a standing rule that he must have added his initials “H. O. H.” to the proofs before any book was put through the press.\footnote{31}

It might have been hoped that Oscar Houghton’s zealous attention to details would have made him appreciate the eye for aesthetic qualities possessed by James Osgood—the eye which had produced those improvements in the appearance of Osgood books which we have already noticed. But this was not the case and there can be little doubt that Osgood received scant praise from his senior partner. An early end of their partnership might have been foretold as inevitable. (One has to imagine how long a relationship between Whitman, who so sought to control the details associated with his
work, and Houghton would have lasted under the rigor of the publishers disciplined approach to bookmaking.)

An additional blow to James Osgood was to serve as the catalyst for his separation with Houghton. On the night of Sunday, December 28, 1879, a fire broke out in the paper warehouse of Rice, Kendall & Co. on Federal Street and quickly spread to the building occupied by Houghton, Osgood & Co. The fire raced through the building, meeting no more resistance than if it had been tinder. Nothing was saved except three account books and a few private papers. The workrooms and heliotype presses were totally lost. Fortunately, the fire was not as serious a tragedy as it might have been. The plates of the books published by the firm were kept at the Riverside Press in Cambridge and were safe, and fire insurance covered at least a part of the loss of the book stock on hand in Boston.

The replacement of the books was an easier task than replacing the building. It was decided that rented rooms at 47 Franklin Street would serve for the time being, but what of the long haul? The differing natures of the two partners led them to offer opposing responses to this question. Houghton's ingrained caution led him to wish to go slow and made him see in Osgood's optimistic expansiveness nothing but the naive dreams of an impractical visionary. To Osgood, on the other hand, Houghton's cautious conservatism looked like miserly penny-pinching and abject defeatism. Osgood wanted quarters where his Heliotype Printing Co. could be rebuilt and expanded. Houghton wanted to avoid all unnecessary risks. The two views could not be reconciled, and in early 1880, it was clear to the two men that the only solution of their differences lay in separation. One or the other would have to buy his partner out. In the end, Osgood was
the one who withdrew. Houghton retained the Riverside Press, in which Osgood had never played any essential part, and Osgood retained the Heliotype Company in which Houghton had never had any real role. The two men agreed that Osgood should retain the right to sell the books, bound and unbound, but that Houghton should retain the authors—i.e., the rights to publish. After twenty-eight months of being yoked to Oscar Houghton, Osgood was again free to run his own business, but when he stepped out of Houghton’s offices he found himself drained of the life-blood vital to a publishing firm: its authors. The authors that he had inherited from Ticknor and Fields, those that he himself had attracted under their banner, and those that he had recruited under his own imprint were gone now. He would have to rebuild the firm from scratch.

In October, Osgood re-established James R. Osgood & Co. and brought Ben Ticknor back into the fold. The Editor of Publisher’s Weekly greeted the reappearance of the firm by remarking that “Osgood’s new house . . . with the ability, pluck, and popularity of its head, is sure to succeed.” Despite this optimism, Osgood’s situation was in truth quite desperate. A letter to the Editor appeared in Publisher’s Weekly on May 15 which came close to sizing up the situation:

We could ill afford to let Mr. Osgood drop out of the trade. He was the legitimate successor . . . of Ticknor & Fields, and his sagacious enterprise and industry served to broaden the foundations and enlarge the structure which they began. To have lost him from the trade would have been a calamity to American literature, for who has been more ready than he to take up the new American author and foster and enlarge the sphere of the old? Who among us was ever more ready to invest in seeming doubtful ventures, which whatever the result to himself, were of service to the trade and all the arts?

As Ticknor & Fields’s successor, Osgood had inherited the most significant list of American and continental authors ever assembled. Though he was central in expanding
the firm’s fortunes, he was also responsible for its subsequent demise under his leadership. His authors were sold to other firms or simply lost as his investments in “doubtful ventures” delivered the firm into bankruptcy. Now, he was beginning over again, though this time without a list of authors whose works were in constant and popular demand.

Osgood spent the second half of the year 1880 in a sincere and energetic attempt to find new authors. This involved planning, writing, traveling, and conferring over an extended period. It was impossible to replace in a few months the wealth, now lost, that had been the result of years and years of Ticknor’s and Fields’s and Osgood’s earlier accumulations. Osgood was too experienced a publisher not to be well aware of the fact that what he most needed to sell his books was names. He needed authors with well-established reputations. He thought of the various desirable names that were then available and applied himself to capturing them. He landed at least three of them—Mark Twain, George Washington Cable, and Walt Whitman. For the purposes of this study, we will focus on Osgood’s dealings with Whitman and how, in the end, this venture was also unsuccessful.

In April 1881, following his return from Boston where he had presented a lecture on Lincoln, Whitman received a letter from John O’Reilly, co-editor of the Boston Pilot, informing him that the prominent Boston publisher, James R. Osgood, was interested in seeing the materials for his book.\(^\text{34}\) For the second time, Whitman had received an unsolicited inquiry from a Boston publisher. He responded directly on the verso of O’Reilly’s letter:

431 Stevens Street / Camden New Jersey May 8 ’81
My dear Mr[.] Osgood,

I write in answer to the note on the other side from my dear friend O'Reilly—My plan is to have all my poems, down to date, comprised in one 12 mo: Volume, under the name "Leaves of Grass"—I think it will have to be in brevier (or bourgeois) solid—and I want as fine a (plain) specimen in type, paper, ink, binding, &c. as bookmaking can produce—not for luxury however, but solid wear, use, reading, (to carry in the pocket, valise &c)—a book of about 400 pages to sell at $3—The text will be about the same as hitherto, occasional slight revisions, simplifications in punctuation &c—the main thing a more satisfactory consecutive order—a better ensemble, to suit me—some new pieces, perhaps 30 pages—Fair warning on one point—the old pieces, the sexuality ones, about which the original row was started & kept up so long, are all retained, & must go in the same as ever—Should you, upon this outline, wish to see the copy, I will place it in your hands with pleasure—

Walt Whitman

Significantly, Whitman at this early stage in his relationship with Osgood & Co., gave "fair warning" regarding any attempts to censor his work. Whitman's was a name that Osgood had some misgivings about. The publisher had little ground for thinking that Whitman could be persuaded to omit any of his poems, or even lines of certain poems. In fact, Whitman made it clear that he would resist any such effort. Whitman's recent visit to Boston in 1879 and his appearance as a Lincoln lecturer had, however, passed without stirring up any ruckus, and the poet had made some concessions to mainstream literary tastes over the previous twenty-five years. Despite the take-it-all-or-nothing position expressed in Whitman's letter, Osgood decided to gamble with him. As previously indicated, the future of Osgood & Co. hinged upon attracting new authors to the fold. Perhaps this imperative explains Osgood's decision—a decision that would come back to haunt him since he was not prepared to take on the authorities.
Osgood responded to Whitman’s letter, asking that a copy of *Leaves of Grass* be sent to the firm as soon as possible for review. The copy was sent by mail on May 27th, followed by a letter from Whitman requesting that Osgood honor his wishes regarding the design of the book, that it be a “handy . . . unexceptionable . . . plain and simple even to Quakerness . . . all through . . . no sensationalism about it, no ‘luxury’—a book for honest wear and use…” “The book,” Whitman offered, “has not hitherto been really published at all—all these previous doings have been reconnoisances[sic]—printings in proof for zealous friends.”

Whitman did not have to wait long for a reply. Osgood promptly responded on May 31st indicating that the firm would “be glad to publish the book.” Osgood proposed standard terms, offering to “assume all the risk” and pay the author “the usual royalty of ten per cent of the retail price on all copies sold.” The publisher responded to Whitman’s proposal that the retail price of the book be set at $3.00 by suggesting that $2.00 or $2.50 might yield “a better return.” Osgood also solicited the poet’s views regarding a possible English edition and whether or not Whitman felt that he could in some way control the old Thayer and Eldridge plates so as to stop any further issue from them by Worthington.

Not one to act passively in matters regarding money or his book, Whitman countered, stating that his terms were “25 cents on every copy sold if the retail price is put at $2—30 cents on every copy sold if the price is put at $2.50. If Osgood would agree to terms, Whitman wrote, “he [Osgood] shall be fully fortified as sole publisher & with all legal authority & you can act accordingly in England.” Interestingly, Whitman casually added that if the terms did not suit the publisher, then “no harm done—the thing
is off but with perfect good feelings on both sides.” Osgood accepted Whitman’s counterproposal at once.

With their agreement settled, Whitman wasted no time in immersing himself in the details of the book:

Yours of 3d rec’d which settles the engagement. I shall forward the copy soon. The name will be Walt Whitman’s Poems with the sub-title Leaves of Grass in its place or places inside. I suggest a 400 page book in size, thickness, general appearance &c closely like Houghton & Mifflin’s 1880 edition of Owen Meredith’s Poems, only better paper and print—I think solid bourgeois of long primer (only to be new type) page same size as the Owen Meredith, with the same rather narrow margin, (which I prefer)—in the making up everything the reverse of spacing out or free leading though of course not crowding close either but compacting the matter (for there is quite a good deal to go in the 400 pages) pale green muslin binding costing say 14 to 15 cents no gilt edges—a handsome stately plain book--) I shall get a new copyright here for this forthcoming edition)—I shall probably write you in London about the English sale. Can I get a British Copyright by going to Canada? If so I will go. How would the enclosed picture do for a frontispiece? It is made by Gutekunst 712 Arch St. Philadelphia.

The author followed this letter up by requesting that the firm have sample pages set up in various types for his review. The house dutifully followed Whitman’s directions, forwarding sample pages of the different types and sizes Whitman had specified. The firm indulged Whitman’s detailed requests and endured his subtle chastisements. But the firm faced an interesting quandary when the controversial Whitman announced: “I have … decided to come on to Boston & see it [Leaves of Grass] through” the presses. No other author, even those that lived in or nearby Boston, had ever come to Osgood’s office to read proofs. They had left publishing up to the publisher. Walt Whitman, on the other hand, was so accustomed to running his own show and running it his way that he felt that his presence in Boston was simply required. Moreover, Whitman had never forgotten the interest and sensation that he had aroused on the streets of that city. He liked to recall
how he had walked and talked with Emerson on “a bright sharp February mid-day” in 1860, and he looked forward to the opportunity to relive some of those experiences. For James Osgood, Whitman’s visit presented a double-edged sword: on one hand, such a visit was bound to generate publicity about the soon-to-be-released volume of poetry, but, on the other hand, Whitman’s presence could work to rekindle some of the earlier criticisms surrounding the poet’s controversial writings. Osgood was, however, as mentioned previously, in a dire situation. He needed to strengthen the firm’s list of books and, therefore, convinced himself that the good gray poet was “safe.” So, things were set. Osgood & Co. would publish *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman would oversee its initial setting up.

Preparations for the visit were made and a final agreement was drawn up for the poet’s signature, but it would not be as easy as that. Whitman’s detailed involvement in the making of his book extended to his rights as its author as well and negotiations over copyright would require further discussion before an agreement could actually be reached. By this time, Osgood had turned his attention to other matters. William Dean Howells had resigned his editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly* under Houghton’s control, and was now free to return to Osgood, providing the publisher with at least one author whose growing reputation he could rely on. Osgood now focused his efforts on recruiting Mark Twain, even traveling to Canada when Clemens proposed that a *sojourn* there was necessary to insure his English copyright for *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Osgood was driving himself hard and was badly in need of a break. In June, the publisher left for Liverpool, a trip he needed to take as much as for business purposes as for needed rest. The management of Walt Whitman and his book was placed in the hands
of Ben Ticknor, who, as we have seen, did not have the keenest business sense and was no match for the tenacity of Whitman: "The press work...& binding...are...to be prepared for immediately; and the plate printing to be at once put in hand. ...I am not in favor of wide margins. I have no objection to any specific time for the contract to continue... I think of calling Friday noon 16th at your place." While Osgood was away, a final contract was struck: the price of the edition was to be $2, the royalty was twenty-five cents on every copy sold, the copyright was to remain in the poet's hands, and Osgood & Co. was to be the sole publisher for ten years.

Whitman wrote to Osgood & Co. on the 23rd: "Copy is all ready--Shall come on personally with it soon as you are prepared to begin the type-setting--Please make the arrangements, & write me forthwith." Again, with Osgood away, Ben Ticknor was left to deal with Whitman and Ticknor's halfhearted attempts to dissuade Whitman from coming to Boston, or to at least limit his visit to a short stay, were futile. The poet's course would not be altered: "How will it do to have this definite arrangement--that I come on by (or just before) 1st of September to Boston--& we make a clear start with it at once then?" The detail to which Whitman intended to be involved in the production of this edition becomes apparent in a letter he wrote to Sylvester Baxter, an acquaintance in Boston whom Whitman tasked with locating him temporary quarters near the publishing firm's offices: "Osgood & Co. are going to publish a complete & new volume of my poems, & I am coming on to see to & oversee it, every page--will take six or eight weeks. I want quarters near, or eligible to get at, their printing office, so I can be there two or three hours every day, handy...."
Whitman's coming to Boston was his own decision. One cannot but help wonder what might have become of his second Boston edition of *Leaves of Grass* had he not traveled to the city and had instead simply stayed home in Camden. As it was, his arrival in Boston on August 20th was promptly greeted by the press. The *Herald* announced on the 21st that the author of *Leaves of Grass* “arrived in Boston yesterday and will stop here for a short time overseeing the composition and proof-reading of the new and complete one-volume edition of his poems to be issued by James R. Osgood this fall.” And then came an ominous additional remark: “We understand that the poet has not seen his way clear to leave out any of his former pieces, but that all are to be included in this edition.”

In insisting on coming to Boston, Whitman probably sought to relive the type of “immense sensation” he had created on Washington Street back in 1860, though in doing so, he set the stage for a public debate regarding his poetry that would have significant ramifications regarding his relationship with Osgood and the publication of the edition.

Osgood arrived back from London just in time to welcome Whitman who settled in at the Hotel Waterston, “a kind of half hotel half boarding house” run by a Mrs. Moffitt,49 and, in his fashion, set right to work. On the day of his arrival, he wrote to his friend, Harry Stafford, to tell him that he was settling in and “seeing to the setting up & stereotyping of my book in a big printing office, (Rand & Avery),” the same shop in which Whitman had overseen the typesetting of the 1860 edition.50 A notebook entry from the 22nd recorded that he spent the morning at the printing office: “outlining matters of type, size of page, and other details—the superintendent Mr [Henry H.] Clark [is] very kind & thoughtful—[it] appears as though I...have things all my own way--I have a table & nook, in part [of] a little room, all to myself, to read proof, write, &c.”51
entry, "Aug 20 to 30," Whitman noted: "the book well under way—I am at the printing office some hours every day."52

As indicated, Whitman sought to be involved in every aspect of the production of his books, but his notes reveal more than mere attention to detail. For Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* was not simply a book of poems, but rather a grand composition with each element in its creation—type, paper, ornamentation, size, layout, binding, etc.—an integral part of the whole. Whitman saw the making of books as a blend of craftsmanship and artistry—a hybrid combining the arts of printing and poetry—and the compositor in him had always been a vital part of the composer of his poems. This was, in part, due to necessity, his troubled relations with publishers had required him to be more involved in printerly considerations than convention required, but it was also a formula that he was quite comfortable with. As we have seen, Whitman deeply enjoyed the atmosphere of the printing office and the camaraderie he experienced with the workmen. We can sense the level of respect he held for these men in the notes he jotted down while in his "nook" at Rand and Avery:

Aug. 24, '81. The first batch of page-proofs of the new volume, to-day. We are compacting the space, no white lines or padding or dashes or leads—all solid matter—all run in. I like the type, long primer.

I have the good luck here in the printing-office to fall in the hands of Henry C. Clark for putting my "copy" though all the steps and stages that result at last in the finished, and bound, book, ready for all purchasers, at so much a copy. Mr. C. is quite a veteran at making books—not the mental or spiritual but the concrete, the typography of them I mean—which is much more important than generally supposed.

......

All this is not only my obligation to Henry Clark, but in some sort to all proof-readers everywhere, as sort of a tribute to a class of men, seldom mentioned, but to whom all the hundreds of writers, and all the millions of readers, are
unspeakably indebted. More than one literary reputation, if not made is certainly
saved by no less a person than a good proof-reader. The public that sees these neat
and consecutive, fair-printed books on the centre-tables, little knows the mass of
chaos, bad spelling and grammar, frightful (corrected) excesses or balks, and
frequent masses of illegibility and tautology of which they have been extricated.53

There was an important strategic advantage in this arrangement for Whitman as it
enabled him to exercise a considerable degree of control over the design and manner of
presentation of his work. As Ezra Greenspan notes in his Walt Whitman and the
American Reader, Whitman’s involvement in the crafting of his book “allowed him to
place his highly personalized poetry before the public in a more personalized manner
than would have otherwise been possible.”54

Though thoroughly involved in the making of his book, Whitman still had time
left for re-exploring Boston, for granting interviews, and socializing.55 He took delight in
riding the horse cars out to Cambridge, along the long stretch of Back Bay, enjoying “the
sniffs of salt and sedge from the bay, the half-rural dwellings, the plentiful shrubbery and
fine elms, the fine old mansions of Cambridge and the College buildings.” He found time
for strolling on the Commons, riding streetcars, and meeting with old friends. A survey of
the calling cards he brought back with him to Camden—many with invitations and
directions as to how to reach the homes of the would-be hosts—suggests that the poet did
not suffer from a lack of entertainment.

On September 17th, Frank Sanborn, the abolitionist whose trial Whitman had
attended while in Boston in 1860, visited Whitman and brought him by coach to
Sanborn’s home in Concord for the week. While in Concord, Whitman enjoyed a “long
and blessed evening” with Emerson and his family. Whitman’s notebook reveals how
flattered he was by Emerson’s invitation: “I doubt whether there is anything more
affecting or emphatic in Emerson's whole career...than driving over to Frank Sanborn's to deliberately pay those ‘respects’ for which he had obligated himself twenty-five years before” (the story goes that Emerson, whose memory was rapidly failing, had to be told who Whitman was).

During his final three weeks in Boston, Whitman spent his mid-days strolling about the Common, perhaps reminiscing about his visit there twenty-one years ago when Emerson had made such eloquent arguments against including the “Children of Adam” poems. The poet must have felt that those objections were long behind him and, as he prepared to return home to Camden, his notes reflect his feeling that *Leaves of Grass*, now properly finished, would soon be recognized at home as it has been by many distinguished critics abroad, and that he would soon win the respect that he had been seeking for so long.

Prior to his departure, Whitman held an open house at Mrs. Moffitt's boarding house for local pressmen and friends. According to the report, undoubtedly written by Whitman, in the Boston *Daily Advertiser* on October 17, there were at least two hundred visitors in attendance. With his book ready for issue, Whitman returned home and throughout the winter enjoyed a measure of relative success, as Ben Ticknor reported on November the 14th: “The books starts well and is already receiving the correct mingling of voices in the chorus that is arising over it... The first edition is all gone & we are binding up the second.” Complimentary copies were sent to leading journals and magazines, as well as to Whitman’s personal friends. For the first time, he had secured a publisher of national reputation and his book was selling. In response to an inquiry made by J. H. Johnston (a supporter of Whitman) about the sale of the book, Osgood replied,
It has had a fair success so far. We have printed three editions, 2000 copies in all, and it is selling steadily. It is not a ‘boom’ nor can it be regarded likely to produce any very large results to author or publisher. At the same time, it seems likely to be the source of a steady though moderate income.

The “mingling of voices” which began to appear by the 19th of November in the form of reviews, however, made it immediately clear to Osgood that he and the book were in for trouble. On the 19th, the New York Tribune reviewed Leaves of Grass and described it as a “slop-bucket.” Whitman believed this review had been written by “Weeping Willie”—his nickname for William Winter because of the lachrymose obituaries that Winter often wrote—or by some other member of the Century Club, a club which Whitman had only contempt for, a club in which James Osgood was a member, and a club in which Osgood often enjoyed the company of “Weeping Willie.”

It wasn’t long before Boston critics began to echo the Tribune’s view and, thereafter, the New England Society for the Suppression of Vice persuaded the district attorney, Oliver Stevens, to take action against the book. Stevens contacted Osgood and suggested that if the firm wanted to avoid legal action, it had better suppress the book. Quotations from the book had been supplied to Stevens and he indicated that, in his opinion, Osgood would lose if the issue ever reached trial. Before December was through, Osgood heard the rumbling of thunder in more distant skies as Trubner & Co., his publisher in London, declined to publish an English edition of the book and were even unwilling to act as British agent for the Boston edition.

The rumbling continued to grow during the first months of 1882 and then, in March, Osgood received the following letter from the district attorney:

Commonwealth of Massachusetts
District Attorney's Office, Boston
24 Court House, March 1st, 1882.

Messrs. Jas. R. Osgood & Co.:

Gentlemen; Our attention has been officially directed to a certain book entitled "Leaves of Grass: Walt Whitman" published by you. We are of the opinion that the book is such a book as brings it within the provisions of the Public Statutes respecting obscene literature, and suggest the propriety of withdrawing the same from circulation and suppressing the editions thereof. Otherwise the complaints which are proposed to be made will have to be entertained.

I am yours truly,
Oliver Stevens,
Dist. Att'y.

On March 3rd, Osgood sent a copy of this letter to Whitman along with the following comments:

We are not at present informed what portions of the book are objected to. We are, however naturally reluctant to be identified with any legal proceedings in a matter of this nature. We are given to understand that if certain parts of the book should be withdrawn, its further circulation would not be objected to. Will you advise us to whether you would consent to the withdrawal of the present edition and the substitution of an edition lacking the obnoxious features?

This was a strong warning to Whitman, making it clear that Osgood was reluctant to "be identified with any legal proceedings in a matter of this nature." Osgood judged that the firm simply couldn't afford to be pulled into a scandal at this time. The publisher had gambled and lost. His recourse was to get Whitman to agree to modify his work, a notion that Whitman had objected to from the very beginning.

Whitman either didn't realize the extent of what Osgood was threatening, or believed that very few changes would satisfy the officials involved. In the ensuing exchanges with Whitman, the poet offers the only known instance in his career in which he showed the slightest disposition to modify his writings for external reasons:
I am not afraid of the District Attorney’s threat—it quite certainly could not amount to anything—but I want you to be satisfied, to continue as publishers of the book, (I had already thought favorably of some such brief cancellation.) Yes, under the circumstances I am willing to make a revision and cancellation in the pages alluded to—wouldn’t be more than half a dozen any how—perhaps indeed about ten lines to be left out & a half dozen words or phrases.

Let this whole matter be kept quiet in the house—not talk or information that may lead to newspaper items—the change to be just silently made—the book, & at casual view all its pages, to look just the same—only those minutely looking detecting the difference. Inform the official people at once confidentially that the cancellation is to be made for future editions.

Write me at once and definitely, if all this suits.60

This letter was sent on March 7th. Having not received a reply back from Osgood by the 19th, Whitman naturally became anxious about the future of his book and sent a follow-up note to the publisher asking to be informed of any developments and reaffirming his willingness to make the revisions he suggested in his earlier letter.

Osgood was evidently consulting with the District Attorney in order to identify the extent of his objections, hoping that a possible arrangement or compromise might be struck that would allow for the continued circulation of the book. About this time, one of Whitman’s closet friends, Dr. Maurice Bucke, wrote to Osgood proposing that Osgood & Co. publish his Life of Whitman, which he had recently finished writing. Osgood wrote to Whitman, stating that he did not yet know if Bucke’s book would appeal to the firm commercially, but that he wanted to first find out if it met with Whitman’s approval before committing to look at the book. Osgood added in the final line of the note that the firm was still awaiting an official indication in the matter of the revisions for Leaves of Grass. In a very interesting reply, Whitman gave his positive opinion of Dr. Bucke and his projected book, and then proposed that Osgood & Co. should undertake the
publication of Whitman’s prose works. He made it clear that he still regarded the District Attorney business a small matter that would soon be “blowing over.”

Osgood’s next letter to Whitman showed that the matter was not “blowing over,” but rather that the District Attorney meant business. The D.A.’s office had provided Osgood with “a memorandum of the passages and lines” which were to be “expunged.” Osgood forwarded this to Whitman, asking him to “please look it through and advise us at your earliest convenience whether the suggestions meet your approval.” At this point, Osgood felt that some sort of compromise could be reached. If Whitman would simply agree to the revisions (he had, after all, indicated that he would be willing to make some changes), then they could move on to addressing the “mechanical difficulties” involved in making the changes. These “mechanical difficulties” would, of course, be expensive and Osgood recognized this. It was a bad situation for the publisher, but he was still hopeful that the project could be salvaged. Whitman’s response would dash that hope.

Whitman called the D.A.’s list “curious” and stated that the “list whole and several is rejected by me, and will not be thought of under any circumstance.” Whitman had decided for himself which lines of his work should be “expunged” and he had marked up a copy of *Leaves of Grass* to reflect these changes, which he sent to Osgood as his response to the D.A.’s complaints. He proposed that Osgood simply make the changes the poet had identified and that they “go on with the regular issue of the book.” If there were any further action on the part of the District Attorney’s office, Whitman suggested, then so be it: “they will only bum their own fingers, & very badly.”

While Osgood’s reply to Whitman’s letter makes it clear that he felt that the poet’s concessions were wholly insufficient, he suggests a compromise:
We do not think that official mind will be satisfied with the changes you propose. They seem to think it necessary that the two poems, *A Woman Waits for Me* and *Ode to a Common Prostitute*, should be omitted altogether. If you consent to this we think the matter can be arranged without any other serious changes.

It boiled down to Whitman’s willingness to omit two poems. He had finally found an established house willing to publish and circulate his work; his current edition was in its second printing, surpassing 2000 copies: Bucke’s biography and *Specimen Days* awaited in the wings; royalties were coming in; but Whitman’s answer to the firm was clear and unyielding: “No, I cannot consent to leave out the two pieces. I am only willing to carry out my letter of March 23rd.” Osgood’s reply brought with it surrender and abandonment:

> We have laid before the District Attorney the alterations proposed by you. They are not satisfactory.
> The argument is as follows: If there is a case against the book in its existing form it is not removed or weakened by the changes you propose. If there is no case there is no need of making these changes.
> We do not attempt to express an opinion on the point of whether there is a case against the original book. But we certainly do think that if there is such a case it would lie with almost equal force against the book after the modifications proposed by you have been made.
> As we said at the outset, we do not wish to go into Court in connection with this case. Therefore, as your views seem to be irreconcilable with those of the official authorities, there seems no alternative for us but to decline to further circulate the book. We should be open to any reasonable arrangement for turning the plates over to you.

If Osgood thought Whitman would reconsider when faced with the seriousness of the situation, he was mistaken. Whitman would not bend and, in his reply, placed the responsibility for ending the relationship with Osgood: “If you desire to cease to be the publishers of *Leaves of Grass*, unless I make the excisions required by the District Attorney—if this is to be your settled decision—I see no other way…” In a letter sent to Whitman on April 13th, the matter seems to be settled as Osgood presented figures for total royalties due and opened up preliminary negotiations for the delivery of the plates.

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In his letter, though, Osgood, perhaps hopeful that Whitman might still reconsider his position, indicated that he was not content to let the responsibility for ending the relationship lie with his firm:

It is perhaps not an important matter, but as your letter seems to imply that this possible change is the result of a 'settled decision' on our part, we feel it right to say that it is not we who have fixed inflexible conditions under which this matter could be decided. These conditions have been fixed by yourself, and they appear to be such as to obviate the possibility of compromise.

Whitman did not hurry with his reply and on May 4th, Osgood found himself forced to "beg" for a response from the poet. Whitman was resolved: there would be no compromise. This would be the final correspondence between James Osgood and Whitman. On May 17th, Ben Ticknor arrived in Camden and the final severance was signed. The settlement was faithfully carried out, money was paid, plates were delivered, and the business between Walt Whitman and Osgood & Co. was closed.

While most accounts describe the ending of the relationship between Osgood and Whitman as amicable, my examination of the record leads me to a somewhat different conclusion. Ben Ticknor did indeed later write to Whitman expressing his sadness over the way things had worked out and of his hope of retaining the poet's goodwill, but no further communications between Whitman and Osgood have been discovered. Osgood, in fact, had invested significant time, effort, and capital in *Leaves of Grass* and promoting its author, and then found himself forced to cancel the project when Whitman refused to accept the compromise the publisher had painstakingly engineered. From Osgood's perspective, this conclusion represented another business failure and must have been immensely disappointing, particularly given the precarious situation of his newly reformed house. We are left to wonder whether or not things might have worked out
differently for Osgood had he stood up against censorship. It is possible that he would have profited financially from the publicity surrounding such a scandal and controversy.

"I do not myself," Whitman wrote to O'Connor, "feel any resentment towards Osgood and Company for anything done me or the book—They have acted with reference to conventional business and other circumstances." If Whitman remained unruffled, however, this attitude did not spread to his friends who were furious, denouncing both the District Attorney and the publisher. This notion of Whitman's indifference in the affair is contradicted, however, by the ensuing publicity campaign that occurred after the cancellation of the Osgood edition. It seems probable that soon after the first intimation of his difficulties he began the composition of "A Memorandum at a Venture," his defense of sexuality in art, which he sent to the *North American Review*. At any rate, he sent the manuscript to the *Review* on April 8 and the Philadelphia *Post* the same day. Furthermore, on May 22, *A Defense of Walt Whitman* appeared in the *Philadelphia Press* and the Sunday *Tribune*. According to *The Commonplace-Book*, Walt Whitman sent similar letters to the editors of the Boston *Herald*, the Boston *Globe*, the Boston *Post*, and to Crosley Stuart Noyes, an old friend and the editor of the Washington *Evening Star*.

The publicity, whether calculated or not, was very effective. Most of the newspapers that commented on the issue, with very few exceptions, were outspoken in their condemnation of the actions of the Massachusetts authorities. The Postmaster of Boston who, on the basis of the controversy had directed the exclusion of *Leaves of Grass* from the mails, was ordered by government officials in Washington to revoke his order. This proved to be the final attempt at such censorship and for the remaining years...
of his life, Whitman received notably greater kindness and respect from the press and the public. In the process, Whitman was approached by Rees, Welsh & Co. in Philadelphia who promptly advertised the book in a new edition printed from the Osgood plates. This arrangement yielded Whitman thirteen hundred dollars, more money than he had probably ever earned for anything he had written. This is a story, however, best left for the following chapter.

Osgood’s project had succeeded, only not in his house. He would face other defeats in the following years. He managed to sign several American authors, including Bellamy, Cable, Harris, Hearn, James, Twain, and others, but the seasoned publisher knew perfectly well that a dozen or so authors would not get the job done. He needed no editorial such as the one in the May 12, 1883 *Publisher’s Weekly* to point out that “one half of the books published each year in the United States fail to return their cost.” In fact, as far back as September 11, 1875, an editorial in the *Weekly* had warned that “Some day there must be an accounting, and that day comes without warning.” Unfortunately for James Osgood, this day arrived without warning on the second day of May, 1885. Late in the afternoon of that day, a promissory note of the Osgood house was presented at the National Bank of Commerce and Osgood was unable to meet the terms of the obligation. There had been a steady deterioration of the financial standing of the firm and its indebtedness had mounted and mounted until its total liabilities exceeded two hundred thousand dollars. The partners had reached the end of their rope and they suspended business on May 12, 1885. This act marked the end of James Osgood’s career as a Boston publisher.
Chapter Four

DAVID MCKAY

From 1882 to the end of his life, Whitman settled in with his final publisher, David McKay. Although Gay Wilson Allen, in *Solitary Singer*, briefly discusses McKay’s financial dealings with Whitman, and David Reynolds, in his *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*, describes McKay as “supportive,” neither biographer really probes the author-publisher relationship. These and other biographies also do not address McKay’s apparent abandonment of Whitman’s final wishes regarding future revisions to his text. In his “Deathbed Edition” of *Leaves of Grass* (1891-92), Whitman clearly called for fidelity to his final version:

> As there are now several editions of L. of G., different texts and dates, I wish to say that I prefer and recommend this present one, complete, for future printing, if there should be any; a copy and facsimile, indeed, of the text of these 438 pages.

Despite this fact, McKay made significant modifications to the work in subsequent printings following Whitman’s death. This chapter will explore the relationship between Whitman and McKay, trying to determine why it seemed to work for both parties and what factors might have led McKay to make posthumous revisions contrary to Whitman’s specific instructions.

Although Osgood’s capitulation to the Boston authorities had caught Whitman off guard, he accepted the outcome. Rather than protesting against the action, he decided to let others fight the battle on his behalf. As soon it became public knowledge that Steven
had suppressed his book, a firestorm broke out in the newspapers over the issue of freedom of thought and Whitman’s faithful friend, William O’Connor, was there leading the charge. O’Connor sent letter after letter to the New York Tribune railing against the actions of the District Attorney. The Reverend Morrow, a Methodist minister in Philadelphia, also supported the poet with enthusiasm. George Chainey, a former Baptist minister, devoted a lecture and an entire number of his journal, This World, to the defense of Whitman, quoting “To a Common Prostitute” in its entirety.

As the suppression controversy raged, Whitman consoled himself by writing “I tickle myself with the thought how it may be said years hence that at any rate no book on earth had such a history.” For Whitman, the important thing was that his Leaves of Grass get published. If he could not find a publisher willing to stand up for him, he would simply publish the work himself. Whitman’s close friends were surprised that he seemed to hold little animosity toward Osgood, but Whitman had become tempered in his dealings with the publishing world.

Now, sixty-three years old and having spent over thirty years of his life as a professional author and publisher, the Good Grey Poet had come to relish his image as a neglected martyr. As a reporter wrote in the Boston Herald in April 1881:

Walt Whitman has in times past been perhaps more ignorantly than willfully misunderstood, but time brings about its revenges, and his present position goes just to prove that, let a man be true to himself, however he defies the world, the world will come at last to respect him for his loyalty.

Whitman had gained pretty nearly everything that he might have asked for—public demonstrations of love and support; international prominence; a more benign climate of
appreciation; sales for his book; a home; a steady stream of visitors; and gifts and donations. He would not let the Osgood flap upset him.

Having received the plates of the Boston edition from Osgood on May 17th, Whitman contented himself with making arrangements to bring out a new printing. On the 19th, he ordered “new titles” for 225 copies from Rand, Avery.\(^2\) Henry Clark of the firm sent a proof of the title page to Whitman on the 22\(^{nd}\) which Whitman marked up and instructed Rand to print 250 copies, noting, “I have 225 copies here in sheets to be bound & these titles are for them.” On June 8\(^{th}\) he sent the corrected proof back to Rand and ordered 1000 new copies of *Leaves of Grass* printed. Perhaps because of fear of legal action, Rand declined, but did send over the corrected title pages. Whitman bound some of the remaining Osgood sheets and issued a small number of copies with the new title page. But this work proved very burdensome for the aging poet. Physical complaints were common—gastric and liver troubles, dizziness, lethargy, and lameness—and he had difficulty selling the books himself. Fortunately, just as he needed assistance, he was approached by David McKay of the Philadelphia publishing house of Rees Welsh & Company. The firm, primarily a used book distributor and small publisher of law books, was interested in expanding its offerings and wrote to Whitman on June 5\(^{th}\) offering to print his book. Eager to capitalize on the publicity still surrounding the Osgood edition, the firm wrote again on June 16\(^{th}\) expressing their desire to proceed “at once” (the book had sold over 1500 copies before Osgood withdrew it). Whitman responded with his terms, including desk space “without charge” at Rees Welsh and Company for the length of the contract, and the firm quickly agreed.\(^3\)
The association got off to a rocky start. Rees Welsh & Company initially printed advertisements which offended some of Whitman’s admirers. An ad the firm placed in the Philadelphia Press, for example, read: “Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman is not an agricultural book in the haymaker’s parlance, but it is a daisy, and don’t you forget it.” A critic from the Springfield Republican lamented: “It is to be regretted that Whitman had not the patience to wait for some firm of consequence to take up the task Osgood so feebly laid down.” In addition, Whitman’s new publisher suddenly found himself faced with threats of suppression similar to those that had been served to Osgood & Co. Nevertheless, the publicity surrounding the Attorney-General’s suppression attempt drove sales of Leaves of Grass and, for the next year, the book sold better than ever before. Several printings were rapidly sold and for a while it looked as if Whitman would benefit substantially from the “banning” of his book. The first printing appeared on July 18, 1882 and an entire thousand copy run reportedly sold out in a single day. By August 13, a second printing of a thousand was nearly gone and, on October 8, Whitman bragged that “they [Rees Welsh & Company] are now in the fifth” printing.

Whitman moved quickly to capitalize on this good fortune. When James R. Osgood had expressed an interest in Leaves of Grass in 1881, Whitman had proposed that they publish another book, Specimen Days & Thoughts. Osgood declined committing to this proposal and when the censorship controversy occurred, nothing more was said about the book. Now, in 1882, Whitman wrote Rees Welsh with a similar proposal, offering to make them exclusive publishers of the work for five years. David McKay responded immediately, asking to see the manuscript. A few days later, a contract was signed and the book was ready for sale by September 30th. Again, printings sold quickly. By
December 1, 1,000 copies had been printed and 925 sold. About this time, David McKay “formally bo’t out & assumed” the business of Rees Welsh & Company (*Publisher’s Weekly*, October 7, 1882).

David McKay was born in the town of Dysart, Scotland, on June 24th, 1860. In 1871, his family emigrated to the United States. Known as “Dave” by his friends, McKay went to work for J. B. Lippincott & Company in 1873, one of the best training schools for young booksellers during this period. In 1881, Rees Welsh induced McKay to take charge of his old book business in order that he might devote his entire time to the law book business. McKay, by this time a thorough bookseller, conducted Welsh’s business for about sixteen months when a better position was offered to him. Welsh, when confronted with the announcement that he was about to lose his able lieutenant, proposed that McKay take the business off his hands. After much deliberation, the deal was finally struck and, in 1882, with a few hundred dollars of his own and about $2,500 borrowed money and notes, David McKay bought a seven thousand dollar stock and entered the ranks of the book trade on his own account at 23 South 9th Street, Philadelphia. The next three years, until his notes had been redeemed and the borrowed money repaid, were perhaps the most uncomfortable McKay ever lived through because he didn’t want “the other fellow to walk the floor o’ nights” for fear he couldn’t meet his notes.

*Leaves of Grass* was the first new book brought out by McKay. As noted previously, he followed this up by publishing Whitman’s *Specimen Days & Collect*. Despite these early efforts at publishing, McKay’s primary business for the next several years remained bookselling. During this time, McKay was a frequent visitor to 328 Mickle Street, Whitman’s Camden, N. J. residence. The distance between McKay’s
offices and Whitman’s home was a matter of a few miles, just across the Delaware, and so McKay fell into the habit of delivering Whitman’s royalty checks personally and simply dropping by when business matters warranted. The resulting relationship lasted until the poet’s death. Whitman would never forget how McKay had appeared in his moment of need: “Dave at that time rescued us, whatever else is to be said—he appeared just in the nick of our trouble. That is not to be forgotten—we must not forget it!”

This admonishment by Whitman, particularly its subordinate clause, suggests that a problematic relationship may have existed between the poet and his publisher. A close examination of this relationship is critical to understanding why the publisher eventually abandoned the author’s wishes regarding future revisions to his text. An excellent place to explore this issue is Horace Traubel’s *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (hereafter referred to as *WWWC*). In reading through the nine volumes of this work, one is struck by how often McKay came to visit Whitman. Although McKay’s Philadelphia office was a short distance from Whitman’s home in Camden, the trip required the publisher to travel by ferry, sometimes a tedious affair. Regardless of how close or how difficult the trip was, it is unusual to find a publisher visiting one of his authors as often as McKay visited Whitman, and often regarding matters of minor importance. In many instances, for example, over the course of ten years, McKay would cross the river to deliver royalties to Whitman, even when these payments did not exceed more than a few dollars. Perhaps McKay was merely being considerate of Whitman’s age and physical condition, but a messenger might have carried out these errands efficiently and spared the publisher many of his trips to Camden. The evidence suggests, rather, that McKay may have been seeking to establish the type of publisher/writer relationship of cordiality modeled by
James T. Fields and James R. Osgood. More likely, McKay enjoyed Whitman’s company and sought the poet’s friendship. There was something about Whitman’s and McKay’s relationship, however, that seems to have prevented a real friendship from ever forming.

The pages of *WWWC* reveal an interesting dynamic between Whitman and McKay. From the outset, Whitman framed his relationship with the publisher as almost adversarial: “I have suffered a good deal from publishers...damn ‘em!,” but then, establishing a pattern that occurs throughout the work, Whitman works to temper this sense of opposition: “God bless ‘em!” Following a visit from the publisher, in a passage that in some ways foreshadows McKay’s eventual publication of an edition of *Leaves of Grass* that went against Whitman’s specific wishes, Whitman relates to Traubel how McKay intended to publish “an early Emerson” on which the copyright was about to expire: “What a cute—devilishly cute—lot the publishing wolves are. There they are, the whole hungry herd—a dozen sets of eyes straining for a chance to pounce on these things the first minute of freedom.” Later in volume one, Whitman continues: “the whole author business [is] twisted into all sorts of devilish business tangles. The author needs to be rescued from the publisher,” but “I don’t blame Dave...for standing out for all he can get. That is business. It’s not pretty in him or in me—it’s business.” Whitman, at times, can’t seem to make up his mind about McKay: “The publishers have us in their hands,” he said, “and I trust Dave”—then after a pause: “But I don’t know—I don’t know.”

This ambiguity stemmed, in part, from McKay’s tough-nosed negotiating with Whitman regarding some of the poet’s various business proposals. Following the publication of *Specimen Days*, for example, Whitman decided that he’d like to get his
hands on the plates: “I do not own the plates of Specimen Days: I ought to, but I don’t: they belong to Dave McKay.” Toward this end, he dispatched Traubel:

I want you to go to McKay and make him an offer of one hundred and fifty dollars spot cash for the plates. ... I don’t believe Dave will accept the offer—no business man could resist the temptation to put more on an article some one was eager for. But try him, anyway. If he says no then I guess it must be no: I don’t think I am eager enough for the plates to increase my bid.18

McKay’s response was blunt: “That’s nonsense,” he said. “The plates originally cost six hundred forty-six dollars. It costs thirty-five or forty dollars to print one thousand copies—press work.” Whitman was not happy with McKay’s answer: “It’s nonsense, is it? Well let it remain nonsense and then done with it. I would not for a moment consider Dave’s alternative.”19 Despite this initial impasse, the two would eventually come to terms over the plates, a give-and-take process that would be repeated throughout their professional dealings:

McKay came over to see me yesterday...and conceded a point or two. For instance, he said I might use the Specimen Days plates in the complete book [Complete Poems & Prose (1888)]. He wanted to renew his expired contract—asked for five years more: said that after that time he would sell me the Specimen Days plates at my own figure—one hundred and fifty dollars.20

Although McKay’s resistance to some of Whitman’s proposals often presented obstacles to the poet’s designs, Whitman came to respect the young publisher as a businessman: “Dave is shrewd, canny, but honest: crude, almost crusty sometimes—but square. I like Dave.”21 Whitman appreciated the fact that the two of them had been able to collaborate on several projects on “the most amiable terms.” In fact, the poet had developed a “real admiration” for what he considered Dave’s “Napoleonic directness of purpose,” his “immense energy” and the way in which he had “made himself strong by self-discipline”:
He is young-blooded, careful, wide-awake, vital—has a shrewd eye, a steady hand. I should predict for Dave (you know he is greatly extending, greatly, all the time) that a few years of success will show him up as a big gun among publishers. Dave never shuffles his papers—he keeps his contracts.22

Whitman’s prediction regarding McKay’s future began to prove accurate as early as 1885 when the publisher celebrated the final payment of his debt to Rees Welsh by bringing forth a collection of Shakespeare’s works. In 1888, McKay took over the business of H. C. Watts & Co., increasing and strengthening his reprints of standard authors and special books suggested by the needs of his book shop. He published a number of discovery narratives, a genre that was among the most popular of the time, and reprinted Longfellow’s Hyperion: A Romance, Charles Brockden Brown’s Novels, as well as Emerson’s Essays. He expanded his stock to include text books, dictionaries, even self-improvement books. While he continued to produce almost yearly printings of Leaves of Grass, he also began to publish secondary work devoted to Whitman, including William Sloane Kennedy’s The Poet As a Craftsman (1886) which included a section on Whitman; 23 Horace Traubel’s, Thomas Harned’s, Thomas Biggs’ and others’ Camden’s Compliments to Walt Whitman, May 31, 1889: Notes, Addresses, Letters, Telegrams, as well as Elizabeth Porter Gould’s Gems from Walt Whitman (1889). During the 1890s, McKay also began a number of juvenile series including the clothbound Boys of Liberty Library and, later, The Newberry Classics and The Golden Books for Children. In subsequent years, the list included children’s books by Beatrice Potter and Lois Lenski.

Despite McKay’s development as a publisher, Whitman’s admiration for him was not necessarily shared by the poet’s inner-circle of friends.24 In volume one of WWWC, for example, Whitman declares that he had been advised by some of his friends to
“Watch Dave.” “I do watch him,” he tells Traubel, but have found him to be “at all times scrupulous.” This suspicion on the part of Whitman’s close friends seems to have persisted despite Whitman’s ongoing attempts to temper the sense of opposition he himself had helped to establish:

Several of my friends have been to me lately and said: ‘You’ll have to watch McKay—he’s foxy—he’ll do you up.’ I asked them: ‘Why do you suspect Dave more than others—pick him out for criticism?’ They said: ‘We don’t—he is a publisher: that is enough: all publishers do it.’

As demonstrated in previous chapters, Whitman had experienced problems with and was critical of publishers throughout his career. Although successful in having his work appear early in his career in magazines such as the Democratic Review and the American Whig Review, and later in the Atlantic Monthly and Harper’s, he had not managed to generate interest among publishers of comparable prestige for his Leaves of Grass. In addition, he had sought to maintain individual control over the production and integrity of his work. As a result, he had spent much of his career trying to publish and distribute his books on his own. The only two relationships that he was able to form with publishers had not worked out well for any of the parties. Thayer and Eldridge had gone bankrupt and, consequently, allowed the 1860-61 plates of Leaves of Grass to fall into the hands of an unauthorized and unscrupulous publisher. Later, James Osgood and Co. had turned its back on the poet rather than confront the controversy surrounding certain poems and passages in his book. Osgood “deserted us,” Whitman told his friends.

Considering this history and given the critical comments that Whitman often directed toward publishers, usually in front of his friends, it is not surprising that his followers did not come to trust David McKay. When Whitman was preparing to bring out
November Boughs (1888) and negotiating with McKay over the terms, for example, William O’Connor wrote Whitman, expressing his hope that David McKay would do better with it [November Boughs] than he had done with the poet’s earlier books. “I long for you to have a good publisher,” he ended.27 When Traubel read O’Connor’s letter, he asked Whitman whether or not he shared O’Connor’s feelings about McKay. “No—I do not: and yet William is right, too,” replied Whitman. “The point is that I have had no choice of publishers: the big fellows whom O’Connor wants do not want me.”28 Again, Whitman is unable or unwilling to commit to McKay, to fully trust him as his publisher, and this sentiment was passed on to the poet’s close supporters. In a fateful discussion with Thomas Harned, Whitman’s lawyer and member of his inner-circle, Whitman indicated that he was “disinclined” to renew his Leaves of Grass contract with McKay for a five-year term:

My spark’ll go out any day now: I don’t want to tie you fellows up: you may find reasons for going to another publisher. I wouldn’t advise you to go but I wouldn’t put my corpse in your way if you were disposed to make a change. ...I am willing to rely upon you to sustain the integrity of my book.29

Regardless of his persistent ambivalence toward his publisher, Whitman’s relationship with McKay was a productive one. As mentioned previously, it was the 1881 Osgood edition of Leaves of Grass that brought the two together. Despite the fact that, over the course of a year, this edition carried the title page of Osgood, Rees Welsh, the Author, and finally, David McKay, it turned out to be Whitman’s greatest success financially. On October 8, 1882, just three months after the release of the book, four printings had been issued and sold out, and a fifth printing was selling quickly. McKay’s royalty statement to Whitman dated December 1, 1882 shows 4,900 copies printed and
3,118 sold. Whitman’s royalty for *Leaves of Grass* in 1882 was $1,091.30. All told, over 6000 copies of *Leaves of Grass* were sold between 1881-1882. Additionally, 1000 copies of *Specimen Days* were printed and 925 sold. Whitman’s return on *Specimen Days* was $203.50—bringing the total of his royalties for that period to $1,294.80. Although the relationship between Whitman and Rees Welsh had gotten off to a bumpy start, Whitman’s association with David McKay was looking pretty good to the poet. Over the course of ten years, the pair would bring the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass* through twelve printings. In addition to *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days*, the pair brought forth *November Boughs* (1888), *The Complete Poems and Prose* (1888), *Good-Bye My Fancy* (1891), and Whitman’s final work, *Complete Prose Works* (1892).

While this list appears impressive, it is important to place the sales of Whitman’s works in perspective. While he did sell several thousand copies of these books collectively, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* sold over 43,000 copies in a single year. Similarly, Fanny Fern’s collection of articles written for weekly newspapers, entitled *Fern Leaves from Fanny’s Port-folio*, sold over 70,000 copies during its first year of publication. In March 1852, a Boston publisher decided to issue *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a book and it sold over three hundred thousand copies within its first year, and about 2,000,000 copies were sold worldwide by 1857. For one three month period, Stowe reportedly received $10,000 in royalties. Many books did very well. Others, like Whitman’s, simply did not.

With the exception of the title page changes that have already been noted and a few minor alterations across the different printings, *Leaves of Grass* remained fairly stable between 1881-1888 with the 1881 plates used for printings in 1882, 1883, 1884,
and 1888. In 1888, Whitman added the annex 'Sands at Seventy' and issued the *Complete Poems & Prose of Walt Whitman, 1855-1888* (this has often been incorrectly referred to as the eighth edition). The *Prose* section contains all of the previously published *Specimen Days and Collect* and *November Boughs*. In preparation for an 1889 printing, Whitman made what would be his final alterations to the 1881 plates. Just over a year later, with his health failing, Whitman "created" his final "edition’ of *Leaves of Grass* by using sheets from the 1888 printing. He bound them with cancel title and contents leaves and with the annexes, including *Good-Bye My Fancy*, appended at the back. Whitman knew that he had little time left and that this would be his last printing. The book appeared for sale early in 1892, and Whitman died in his Camden, New Jersey home on March 26 of that year.

McKay had grown fond of the Good Grey Poet over the years. Upon Whitman’s death, the publisher worked closely with Whitman’s literary executors to help settle the poet’s affairs, including serving as a pall-bearer at Whitman’s funeral. Overall, critics and biographers have treated McKay kindly, as one of Whitman’s friends. Perhaps this is why McKay’s 1900 publication of a new edition of *Leaves* has puzzled scholars for years. Why would McKay, a friend, betray the poet’s specific call for fidelity to his work? Whitman had certainly made his intentions regarding future publications of his work clear:

> This, of course, is the edition [1891-92] I swear by . . . the only authentic and perfect.

> . . . .

> This is now my own personal, authenticated volume. . . . It is my ultimate, my final word and touch, to go forth now, for good or bad, into the world of the future.

> . . . .

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The point is, to substitute this for all other editions—to make of it my final, conclusive utterance and message—a declaration of my realized intentions.  

McKay’s 1900 production is based upon an edition published by Whitman in 1871. There is no question that McKay was free to republish the 1871 edition if he so wished. It was, after all, out of copyright. What is troubling is that using anything other than the 1891-92 printing violates Whitman’s explicit final instructions. What makes matters worse is that McKay took liberties with the 1871 text, shifting the placement of poems and omitting others. The 1900 edition, therefore, presents an arrangement that reflects neither Whitman’s wishes in 1871, nor his final wishes in 1892. In fact, it presents a text different in arrangement than anything Whitman ever produced. McKay certainly would have been aware of Whitman’s desire to keep and protect his life’s work from revision. Although the publisher’s records offer little details regarding his decision to alter and republish this text, an examination of the edition itself offers suggestive clues regarding McKay’s motives.

In the preface of the 1900 edition, McKay informs the reader that “[t]his edition of Leaves of Grass, presenting, as it does, many new features, requires a word of explanation.” In an effort to establish that “early editions” of Leaves of Grass are in some way superior to newer editions, McKay points out that earlier editions had almost entirely disappeared from the market and that this was due to “their contents rather than their imprint.” He then suggests that no other author “was given more to change than Walt Whitman” and that many of his poems or parts of poems were either altered or discarded for a time only to reappear in a new forms in later editions. Some, he adds, ultimately disappeared altogether. Next he argues that Whitman’s poems appeal more to
"the student," rather than the "casual reader" and that he [McKay], had therefore prepared the 1900 edition with this in mind: "[i]t aims to give the growing as well as the grown Whitman." Finally, he notes that under the heading of "Gathered Leaves" that he had collected various poems that have been dropped from one edition to the next.

In this manner, McKay develops his case for reconstructing *Leaves of Grass*. The 1900 edition, he argues, recognizes the value of earlier editions, it honors Whitman’s custom of rearranging and revising his poems, it serves the needs of the student by offering variorum readings, and it brings together many poems that may have disappeared or been excluded from various editions. This edition, McKay declares, recognizes a necessity brought about by his [the publisher’s] long association with *Leaves of Grass*. All "lovers of Whitman," he adds, will readily understand this necessity and appreciate the edition.

The preface is important in that it offers McKay’s rationale for the changes he made to Whitman’s text. More significant, however, is the way in which it further discloses the fundamental conflict that shaped the relationship between McKay and Whitman. The two were simply never able to reconcile their personal interest in one another with their business concerns. Although McKay refers to himself, perhaps legitimately, as Whitman’s “most successful publisher,” Whitman left no provision stating that his executors need renew any contracts with McKay. Despite his long-time association and dealings with Whitman, copyright issues stymied McKay’s attempts to produce further printings of *Leaves of Grass* after 1895.

In the Library of Congress, there is a copy of the 1900 edition that had been owned by Thomas Harned. On the inside cover Harned has written: “When D. McKay
was refused a renewal of his contract, he printed this edition of *Leaves of Grass*, using all matter where the copyright had expired. The preface appears to confirm Harned’s comments as McKay accepts “all responsibility” for “errors of commission,” but notes that “those of omission (and there are a few),” were caused by conditions outside of his control (presumably imposed by Whitman’s literary executors). Those conditions, he adds, would ultimately be remedied over the course of time (the eventual release of copyright and free use of the different editions).

Whitman’s literary executors, who as we have seen were never close to McKay, denied him renewal of Whitman’s copyrighted works, including all printings relating to the 1891-1892 *Leaves of Grass*. Unable to use the text of any of the editions he had worked so closely with Whitman to bring forth during the poet’s lifetime, McKay was forced to make a decision. Either he could honor Whitman’s final wishes regarding his text and simply walk away, or he could develop an alternative strategy. As previously mentioned, McKay elected to rely on one of the “early editions” he mentions in the preface. Supported by a rationale based on “necessity,” he began building with the base text from the 1871 edition and then added other materials: poems not found in these earlier editions; footnotes giving variant readings of words and phrases as they appeared in pre-1871 editions; and personal mementos of his relationship with Whitman.

In printing “Song of Myself” in the 1900 edition, for example, McKay renders the first verse as

I celebrate myself;
And what I assume you shall assume;
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.
As David Levy rightfully points out in *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in a Digital Age*, these lines were actually reproduced from the 1855 edition and while revisions have been made (semicolons have been substituted for commas at the end of the first two lines, and a comma has been added in the middle of the third line), McKay fails to acknowledge any of these changes, despite his claim in the preface to have carefully documented any transformations. McKay also fails to acknowledge the later addition of the phrase “and sing myself,” a change that he would have certainly been familiar with. As Levy suggests, to do so with a footnote “would have either constituted a violation of copyright or would have forced him to make explicit his strategy for dodging it.” Additionally, when McKay renders the title of the poem as “Walt Whitman,” he fails to note that the poem was untitled in the first edition, or that it had other titles in earlier and later editions. Again, this is curious, since in the preface McKay says: “As Walt Whitman’s publisher, I was frequently called upon to give information concerning poems whose headings had been changed. These have been noted, and in the alphabetical list at the end of the volume all such titles appear, with reference to the present title.”

In reviewing the 1900 edition, Levy notes that “these are just a few examples of the idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies” in the work. This text represents “a nightmare to modern scholars trained to produce painstakingly precise critical editions and is seen not just as bad scholarship, but as evidence of a moral lapse on McKay’s part.” While all of this is disturbing, there is another aspect of this text that Levy touches on in his review and which is perhaps more important to this study. Although it is not unusual to come away from *Leaves of Grass* with a strong sense of the poet, the interesting thing about

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McKay's edition is that you come away from that text with a strong sense of McKay as well.

McKay intended the 1900 edition to serve as a tribute to Whitman, as he makes clear in the preface:

Walt Whitman was an [sic] unique character. As his most successful publisher I saw much of him, and learned to love his sweet kindly nature. No one could enter the charmed circle of his friendship without feeling the mastery of his personality. This book, the work of my own hands [my emphasis], I give as a token of those never-to-be-forgotten days. To have met Whitman was a privilege, to have been his friend was an honor.

But the illustrations that McKay chose to include in the volume make it all the clearer that this book represents both a labor of love and of ego that work to celebrate and advertise not just the poet, but also the publisher's relationship with the poet (or, perhaps more precisely, the publisher's perception of his relationship with the poet). Included in the text are photographs of Whitman at different ages, bearing personal inscriptions to the publisher. One of them shows an elderly, white-haired Whitman sitting in an ornate straight-backed chair, holding a cane in his right hand, his left hand resting inside his jacket pocket. The inscription reads, "David McKay/ from his friend/ Walt Whitman."

More important than the inscription, however, is the placement of the photograph. It appears on the left-hand page facing the title page, the same position in which, forty-five years earlier, an engraving of the yet unnamed author appeared in the first edition. Like Whitman's engraving, the inscription and the placement of this image "are involved" in what the work is presenting. Subtly and perhaps unconsciously, McKay seems to be claiming a greater part in the production of Whitman's work. Additionally, at the midpoint of the volume, there on facing pages, are a personal note that Whitman had
written to McKay and another inscribed photograph of the poet. At the center of this McKay-constructed version of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* then, we find poet and publisher metaphorically embracing. Finally, a profile image of a bust of Whitman, dated 1888 and inscribed to “his friend David McKay,” is placed toward the end of the text, seemingly looking back over the preceding work as if posthumously approving McKay’s production.

Whether McKay’s decision to bring out the 1900 edition was the product of business pressures, the result of a squabble over copyright between McKay and Whitman’s literary executors, McKay’s own effort to frame himself and his relationship with Whitman more firmly within the history of the poet and his work, or some combination of these, McKay served as Whitman’s longest running commercial publisher and works that may have not been brought forth were published because of McKay’s interest. Whitman ultimately did not want his supporters to ever forget the fact that Dave had “rescued” him during his moment of need: “Dave’s early payments put me in this house.” “I do not mean that Dave was my publisher from affection” but “money or no money no other publisher at that time would touch me. I shall never forget Dave’s good will—nor [sic] his good sense, either, for it was good sense for a young business man to take up the *Leaves* while it was getting such a heap of gratuitous advertising.” As he approached the end of his career and his life, Whitman felt it important to leave things straight regarding McKay and, toward that end, he specifically charged Traubel with bearing testimony concerning “Dave McKay’s fair dealing and general good will” toward the poet. “I believe Dave is friendly to me—not friendly alone as a publisher but
as a man—treats me squarely. By and by that will come up and I want you to speak up for me on that point."

As mentioned previously, Dave McKay considered himself to be Whitman’s “most successful publisher.” Certainly this can be said in terms of Whitman’s commercial publishers. After all, Thayer and Eldridge went bankrupt the year they released *Leaves of Grass* and James Osgood abandoned the book under threat by the Massachusetts Attorney General. Each of these associations, however, deserves to be examined to see what they tell us about the conditions that effected Whitman’s work and for how they inform us about authorship in mid-nineteenth century America. Added together with Whitman’s own self-publishing history, they present the publication story behind *Leaves of Grass*. While this work helps to fill in some of the gaps, it also offers possible answers to some of the larger questions surrounding Whitman and his work that have been driving this study: Were Whitman’s ambitions for his *Leaves* fulfilled? Did he ever reach his intended audience?

In terms of economics, Whitman was obviously never able to sell enough of his books to make a living. In the last half of 1885, for example, his royalties amounted to a mere twenty dollars. Whitman was forced, particularly toward the end of his life when he was not able to work in any real fashion, to depend upon the goodwill of friends and supporters. William Michael Rossetti, for example, launched a campaign in England that raised over five hundred dollars for the aging poet. Whitman’s American friends were also very active on his behalf. In 1885, they gave him a horse and buggy that the poet, despite his infirmity, was able to ride about in and enjoy the sights of Camden. His friends also used Whitman’s yearly lecture on the death of Lincoln as opportunity to
solicit support. In 1887, he spoke at New York in the Madison Square Theater to an audience of over three hundred. The lecture netted him six hundred dollars. Contributions of this sort enabled Whitman to live a peaceful existence in his old age without any real financial concerns.

Up until his death, Whitman remained concerned about the public’s reception of his poetry. Throughout his life, he lamented the fact that he was still largely unread by the masses. Despite his efforts to remake his art through an unceasing process of revision, from the Brooklyn “rough” to the “good, gray poet” of Mickle Street, reworking each edition, Whitman’s attempts to recast himself and his work in such a way that would connect his poetry with a broad audience repeatedly proved largely unsuccessful. The national and even international recognition that he did ultimately come to achieve during his lifetime was fostered, by and large, by self-promotion and the tireless efforts of his friends and loyal band of followers.

Throughout his career, Whitman had sought to reach out to the nation through his newspapers in the 1840s and, later, as his thinking and writing matured, his poetry. Unfortunately, his unconventional writing ultimately placed unrealistic demands upon his readers. There were signs of this even within his innermost circle of friends as John Burroughs often pointed out: “Whitman always aimed to make his reader an active partner with him in his poetic enterprise... He makes extraordinary demands upon the reader, undoubtedly; he tries him as no other modern poet does or dares.” Whitman himself would tell Traubel in one of his numerous remarks on this subject, “All my poems require to be read again and again—three, four, five, six times—before they enter into the reader, are grasped—filter their way to the undersoil.”
Undoubtedly, Whitman recognized that his *Leaves of Grass* had not been successful. Scattered sales, frequently hostile reviews, attempts to ban his book, all were proof before his eyes. Yet, throughout it all, the poet remained true to his ambition “to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book.” As we have seen throughout this study, Whitman, beginning with the 1855 edition and continuing throughout his career, remained uncompromising in terms of control and unity of his work and its message.

Whitman came to be resigned to the fact that his work would not initiate a revolution in American poetry during his time, though he looked with confidence to future generations for broader acceptance. If we look beyond Whitman’s life, *Leaves of Grass* has certainly had a profound impact on American poetry and American culture. Walt Whitman “is America,” according to Ezra Pound. In his recent *To Walt Whitman, America*, Kenneth M. Price details this sweeping statement as he points out how, more than a century after his death, Whitman continues to appear regularly in American literature, culture, and landscape, and how Whitman’s “ubiquity and his extraordinarily malleable identity have contributed to the ongoing process of shaping the character of the United States.” Given this fact, it is safe to say that Whitman’s ambitions for his work were ultimately fulfilled and more. His poetry did, over time, reach his intended audience and it continues to shape American literature and culture today.
Prologue

1 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 1 (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1906), 194. This volume and its eight accompanying volumes will hereafter be referred to as *WWWC*.


3 191.


Chapter One

1 WWWC. 2:480.


7 Henry R. Stiles, A History of the City of Brooklyn: Including the Old Town and Village of Brooklyn, the Town of Bushwick, and the Village and City of Williamsburgh, vol. 1 (City of Brooklyn, Brooklyn, NY, 1867), 162.

8 History of the City of Brooklyn, 8.

9 History of the City of Brooklyn, 9-10.


11 Literary Publishing in America, 55.
12 Literary Publishing in America, 57.

13 WWWW, 1:194.

14 WWWW, 2:21.

15 CWWW, 1:287.

16 Leaves of Grass (1855), xii.


18 Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora, 4.


20 Walt Whitman, Aurora (April 6, 1842): 2.

21 Walt Whitman of the New York Aurora, 115.

22 Walt Whitman, Aurora (April 6, 1842): 12.


24 UPP, 1:5-7.

25 Walt Whitman’s America, 84.


27 Solitary Singer, 66.


32 UPP, 118-121.

33 Walt Whitman, Brooklyn Eagle (March 12, 1846): 2.

34 Organized in Buffalo, New York, in 1848, the Free Soil Party was founded on the principle of opposing the extension of slavery into western territories. The Party was a significant force in American politics from 1848 until the birth of the Republican party in 1854 for the way in which it popularized antislavery sentiment and compelled the major parties to debate slavery as a national issue. Walt Whitman was an active member of the party representing his local party at the inaugural convention and editing a Free Soil newspaper. See Martin Klammer, “Free Soil Party,” Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia, ed. Donald Kummings (New York: Garland, 1998), 237.

35 During the 1840s, a schism developed within the New York Democratic party over the issues of the day. The conservative Hunkers (so-named by their antagonists because they were alleged to “hunger,” “hanker,” or “hunker” for office) favored state-supported internal improvements and opposed antislavery agitation, while their chief opponents, the more radical Barnburners (alluding to the farmer who burned down his barn to get rid of the rats) opposed the extension of slavery into the new territories. Whitman was a member of the Barnburners.

37 Allen, 106.

38 *WWWC*, 2:503.

39 Susan Belasco, Unpublished manuscript, 9-10.

40 Unpublished manuscript, 10.

41 May 31, 1856 (quoted in Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 310.)

42 *Literary Publishing in America*, 56.


46 *WWWC*, 2:506.


48 *Literary Publishing in America*, 85.


51 *Bookways*, 22.

52 *Norton’s Literary Gazette and Publisher’s Circular*, 1 (April 15, 1854): 193.
Chapter Two

1 The firm conducted business from late 1859 to January 1861.

2 The state of the publishing industry is noted in a June 22, 1861 edition of The American Publisher’s Circular and Literary Gazette: “After the next number of this
Journal, and until the revival of the Book Trade, we shall issue but one edition per month. The entire absorption of public interest by current events has caused a nearly complete cessation in the demand for new books…”

3 This examination relies heavily on William Wilde Thayer’s (1829-1896) autobiography, an unpublished biographical sketch by his daughter Laurel Thayer, and an Indianapolis newspaper obituary for details of his life. The only noteworthy discrepancy among those accounts is that Laurel Thayer describes her father's religious affiliation during his Boston residence as Unitarian rather than spiritualist. William W. Thayer Autobiography, 1892, and William W. Thayer Papers, 1860-1938, Massachusetts Historical Society; Indianapolis News, June 3, 1911.

1 Thayer, 11.

2 In his Autobiography, Thayer names Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, George Luther Stearns, and Frank Bird as parties interested in the success of the firm.

Wentworth, Hewes & Co. (formerly the firm of Dayton & Wentworth). Following the firm’s return to Boston, Wentworth hired Charles Wesley Eldridge as a clerk in 1857 and took on Milton Hewes as a new partner the following year. The firm had its store at 116 Washington St. when Thayer and Eldridge purchased it in 1859. Boston Directory for the Year 1855 (Boston, 1855), 87, 294; Boston Directory for the Year 1856 (Boston, 1856), 955, 350; Boston Directory for the Year 1857 (Boston, 1857), 119, 366; Boston Directory for the Year 1858 (Boston, 1858), 1233, 380; Boston Directory for the Year Commencing July 1, 1859 (Boston, 1859), 137, 419; Boston Directory for the Year Commencing July 1, 1860 (Boston, 1860), 150, 418.


Tebbel, 1: 264-65.

Tebbel, 1: 399-401.

American Publisher’s Circular and Literary Gazette 2:16 (April 19, 1856): 233-234.


Quoted from Frank Luther Mott’s, Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 71.

Tebbel, 221.

Tebbel, 211-13.

When William H. Seward (1801–1872) was passed over for the Republican nomination in 1860 in favor of Abraham Lincoln, many people felt it was the “sacrifice of commanding ability in favor of respectable mediocrity.” Having served as governor of New York and later as a United States senator, he was by far the better-known and more-seasoned politician. But Seward’s belief that the struggle between the slave and free states was “an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces” had made him some implacable enemies.

English-born journalist Richard Josiah Hinton (1830-1901) also reported on the sectional turmoil in Kansas for the eastern press. Working in New York, he was sent to Boston in 1854 to cover the trial of fugitive slave Anthony Burns where he joined with abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson in an armed assault on the Court House where Burns was being held. A close friend of James Redpath, the two men were involved in violent, interventionist activities associated with John Brown. News of Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in October, 1859, found Hinton on the road to join the conspirators. Hinton served first as lieutenant colonel and then as colonel of the First Kansas Colored Infantry Regiment in the Civil War. He returned to journalism and also wrote biographies of Abraham Lincoln, William T. Sherman, and John Brown. William E. Connelley, "Col. Richard J. Hinton," Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society, 7 (1901-1902), 486-493; Oscar Fay Adams, Dictionary of American Authors, 4th ed. (Boston, 1901), 476.


18 Eddy, Rev. Daniel, *Angel Whispers; or, the Echo of Spirit Voices, Designed to comfort the mourning husband, wife, father, mother, son and daughter* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1859); *The Three Mrs. Judsons, and other Daughters of the Cross* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860); *The Young Man's Friend, Containing admonitions for the erring; counsel for the tempted, encouragement for the desponding; hope for the fallen ...* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860); and *A Young Woman's Friend, or, The Duties, Trials, Loves, and Hopes of Women* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860).

19 In his *History of Book Publishing, 1:207*, Tebbel notes that “America’s drive toward universal literacy . . . produced in the 1840s the largest reading audience anyone had ever seen. This audience virtually demanded books, and its appetite for novels was particularly insatiable.”


21 Scottish-born journalist James Redpath (1833-1891) had covered the guerrilla warfare between pro- and antislavery forces in Kansas for the *New York Tribune* and other eastern newspapers. There he met John Brown and was enlisted to recruit northern abolitionist support for his intended raid on the South. Immediately after the Harper's Ferry raid, Redpath published a series of newspaper articles in the *Boston Atlas and Bee* defending Brown's action. After the Civil War, Redpath organized the first national booking agency for lectures and helped to professionalize the American entertainment industry. Charles F. Horner, *The Life of James Redpath and the Development of the Modern Lyceum* (New York: Barse & Hopkins, 1976); *D.A.B.*

22 Redpath later wrote that he accepted Thayer and Eldridge's offer to publish a John Brown biography over that of other publishers because "they believed John Brown; they wished to do him justice; and they desired to aid his destitute family." James Redpath,
The Public Life of Captain John Brown (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 8; James Redpath to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Nov. 8, 1860, Thomas Wentworth Higginson Papers, Boston Public Library.

23 Harvard graduate Franklin Benjamin Sanborn (1831-1917) operated a school in Concord and was a minor figure in that community’s famous literary circle. He met Brown in 1857 and became an active member of the “Secret Six” (see note #27). Sanborn initially fled to Canada out of fear of being arrested for his role in the Harper’s Ferry plot but soon returned to his Concord home. [f(ranklin] B[enjamin] Sanborn, Recollections of Seventy Years (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1909); Stephen B. Oates, To Purge this Land, (New York: NY: Harper & Row, 1970), 181-187, 314-316; D.A.B.


26 Von Frank, p. 8.

27 Hinton claimed to have called the attention of Thayer and Eldridge to Leaves of Grass. See W. S. Kennedy, The Fight of a Book for the World (West Yarmouth, Massachusetts: Stonecroft Press, 1926), 242.

28 Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass (Brooklyn, New York: privately published, 1855), 19.

The Brooklyn firm of Fowler and Wells had originally marketed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 and then a second edition in 1856. Although praised by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the collection was dismissed as eccentric by most literary critics, condemned as too explicitly sexual by some moralists, and generally ignored by the reading public. See Zweig, *Walt Whitman*, 315-316; Kaplan, *Walt Whitman*, 250-252.


As eager as they were, Thayer and Eldridge were cautious to promise only to publish works contained in the plates of the 1855 and 1856 editions. They were willing to consider new poems as well, but they wanted to read them first. They were, however, thrilled by everything that Whitman presented to them and they quickly agreed on a contract giving Whitman 10 percent of net sales. Letter from Thayer and Eldridge to Whitman, February 10, 1860 (LOC).

Thayer, 19-20.

Redpath returned to Boston in April and finished his work on *Echoes*.

Thayer’s account is corroborated by Hinton’s account, presented in *John Brown and His Men*, 520-26.

Reynolds, 382.
Whitman once reported to Horace Traubel that “My theory is that the author might be the maker even of the body of his book – set the type, print the book on a press, put a cover on it, all with his own hands.” *WWWC*, 2:480.


Whitman’s lodgings ran him two dollars a week and he took his meals in a restaurant—“7 cent for a cup of coffee, and 19 cts for a beefsteak,” he complained to his brother Jeff in a letter, “and me so fond of beefsteak.” *Corr*, 1:53.

Corr, 1:49.

Corr, 1:50.

Whitman would revise this poem and entitle it “I Sing the Body Electric” in 1867.


“The few fighting Abolitionists in Boston formed a little society in the back part of our store where we had concealed, but ready for use, pistols and ammunition, knives, and bludgeons. Our members wore around the neck under the collar a narrow black ribbon, as a distinguishing mark. We knew each other as ‘Black Strings’” (Thayer, “Autobiography”).

William Douglas O’Connor (1832-1889) had lost his journalist position at the Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post in 1859 for his favorable reporting on John Brown. Thayer and Eldridge then paid him a monthly salary while he wrote a vivid abolitionist novel, *Harrington: A Story of True Love*, which they published in November 1860. Through Thayer and Eldridge, O’Connor first met Walt Whitman, whom he thereafter championed in numerous writings. During and after the Civil War, O’Connor held clerk...

47 Sanborn, 1:8-12.


49 *Corr*, 1:52.

50 *Corr*, 250.

51 *Corr*, 50-51.

52 Allen, 242; and *WWWC*, 4:195.


54 In a letter to his brother Jeff dated May 10, 1860, Whitman wrote: "I make Thayer and Eldridge crack on the elegant workmanship of the book, its material, &c. but I won't allow them to puff the poetry--though I had quite a hard struggle--as they had prepared several tremendous puff advertisements--altogether ahead of Ned Buntline and the "Ledger"--I persuaded them to give me the copy to make some little corrections--which I did effectually by going straight to my lodgings, and putting the whole stuff in the fire" (Whitman, *Corr*, 1:52-53).

55 *Corr*, 1:54.

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Although it was in constant financial straits, Clapp’s *Saturday Press* (1858-1860) had a large circulation and good reputation. For Clapp’s request for advertising revenue and Thayer and Eldridge’s bid to take over his journal, see his letters of March 27 and May 14, 1860, in *WWWC* (1905; rept. New York: Rowman and Littelfield, 1961), 1:236-37 and 2:375-76, Whitman’s letter to Thayer and Eldridge and Thayer and Eldridge’s response, *Corr*, 1:55.


*WWWC*, 4:195.

Thayer and Eldridge to Whitman, letter of June 14, 1860; Feinberg.


Thayer, 16.

Thayer, 17.


*American Publisher’s Circular* (1861): 229.

Thayer, 22.

69 von Frank, 19.

Chapter Three


2 Allen’s principle contribution to our knowledge about Osgood and his relationship with Whitman centers on the Boston District Attorney’s attempt to censor *Leaves of Grass* and both Whitman’s and William Douglas O’Connor’s reaction to the controversy.

1 *HBP*, 2: 262.

2 Osgood’s introduction to the publishing trade is discussed in *Publisher’s Weekly*, 19 (April 30, 1881): 482; and in the *American Literary Gazette* (August 15, 1871): 87.


5 Weber, 62.

6 Whitman called upon Emerson again in December 1868 to act as a liaison for him with the *Atlantic Monthly* in order to propose the publication of the poem, “Proud Music of the Storm.” Fields agreed to publish the poem and Whitman was paid $100 (a good price at that time).
The Saturday Club met from 1855 on the fourth Saturday of each month, at the Parker House hotel, on Tremont Street, Boston. The club was originally formed from those around the Atlantic Monthly magazine, of which Holmes and James T. Fields were original editors. A literary club by the same name still meets, at the Boston Athenaeum, nearby.

Weber, 63.


Weber, 66.

Weber, 70.

In a letter to O'Connor in January 1865, Whitman indicated that in terms of future issues of Leaves of Grass, "there are a few things that I shall carefully eliminate..." In The Solitary Singer, Gay Wilson Allen suggests that some of Whitman's poems in Drum-Taps border on the "trite" in their "more frequent inversions, less realistic language, and more conventional diction," and should have reconciled many of his contemporary readers to his poetic form," but this was not the case.13

Nation (November 15, 1865).

Round Table (November 11, 1865).

The novelist had previously sold the publishing rights to several titles to various New York houses, but many publishers in those days relied on the absence of an international copyright law and proceeded without the benefit of approval, or compensation, of the author.
17 *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995), 123.


19 *American Literary Publishing*, 127.

20 Weber, 111.

21 *American Literary Gazette* (June 1, 1871): 87.

22 The original document, now in the Library of Congress, is written in Osgood’s hand.

23 Weber, 118.

24 Weber, 120.


28 Osgood’s participation in these trade shows is discussed in Weber, 139-143.

29 “We asked him,” wrote Howells, “how he [Osgood] could feel so gay when he was no longer paying our salaries,” “Literary Boston Thirty Years Ago,” in *Harper’s Magazine* (November 1895), 871-872.

30 *Publishers’ Weekly*, (April 1, 1876) 456.

31 Weber discusses the partnership between Osgood and Houghton in *The Rise and Fall*, 161-175.

32 When Houghton, Osgood dissolved in 1880, Osgood formed his second company at 211 Tremont Street.
33 May 8, 1880.

34 John Boyle O'Reilly (1844-1890) was a fervent Irish patriot who joined the British Army in order to sabotage it. He was arrested and sentenced to be hanged in 1866. Later the decree was altered, and O'Reilly was sent to Australia, where he escaped on an American whaler in 1869. In 1876 he became co-editor of the Boston Pilot, a position which he held until his death in 1890.

35 Letter from Walt Whitman to James R. Osgood, Corr, 5:3, 224.

36 “Please send on the copy as soon as you can we will make careful estimates as to its size, style, etc., and give you our views. So far as I understand it this proposed new edition will supersede all other previously published volumes—am I correct? And please tell me if the plates of the original Leaves of Grass as published by Thayer and Eldridge so many years ago are still in existence. I am sorry I was absent from Boston during your visit: I should have been glad to renew the acquaintance I had with you in the old Pfaff days” Corr, 3:225-226.

37 Corr, 3:226.

38 ibid.


40 The publisher accepted Whitman’s terms on June 3 (WWWC, 8:279-80).

41 Corr, 3:228.

42 These quotations are from a June 16th Whitman letter to Osgood & Co. (Corr, 3:230).

Whitman insisted on reserving to “the fullest degree all my own rights & the means to maintain them...”

44 Corr, 3:243.
Ticknor wrote, "It will hardly pay you to stay here the whole time, as it will take some weeks, and proofs can as well go to you in Camden as elsewhere." \(\text{Corr}, 3:234-235.\)

Baxter (1850-1927) was on the staff of the Boston \textit{Herald}. Apparently he met Walt Whitman for the first time when he delivered his Lincoln address in Boston in April, 1881. Baxter wrote many newspaper columns in praise of Walt Whitman's writings, and in 1886 attempted to obtain a pension for the poet. \(\text{Corr}, 3:236.\)

Walt Whitman paid $8 a week for his board to Mrs. Eva E. Moffit (\(\text{Corr}, 3:238.\)).

This firm had printed the third edition.


Whitman wrote Osgood about this time that his mail should be sent over to the Rand & Avery office every morning (\(\text{Corr}, 3:238.\)).

\textit{DBN}, 1:254.

\textit{Walt Whitman and the American Reader}, 85.

The first announcement of Walt Whitman's Osgood edition appeared in \textit{The Critic} on August 13, page 27: "Walt Whitman's poems will soon have the recognition of a well-known publishing house. James R. Osgood & Co. will publish 'Leaves of Grass' without any expurgations, the author having made that a condition of his contract. The book will contain many new poems, and will for the first time, fulfill what Mr. Whitman says has been for years his main object in relation to the publication of his works--namely, 'completeness and relative proportion.'"
In addition, a lengthy interview with Walt Whitman, entitled "The Good Gray Poet," appeared in the Boston *Globe* on August 24, page 32 in which the poet discussed the architectural structure of *Leaves of Grass*; averred that "the large magazines are still shy of me," citing a recent rejection by *Harper's Monthly* ("A Summer's Invocation"); praised Emerson as the most important American poet and termed Tennyson "in every respect the poet of our times."

56 The following note is in *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier. (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 3: 1131 (This work is hereafter referred to as *NUPM*).

Leaves of Grass Finished. Boston, Oct 22, -81, 8:30 A.M. I am penciling this in the N.E. and N.Y. depot, foot of Summer street, waiting to start west in the 9 o'clock train. Have been in Boston the last two months seeing to the "materialization" of my completed "Leaves of Grass" – first deciding on the kind of type, size of page, head-lines, consecutive arrangement of pieces, etc.; then the composition, proof-reading, electrotyping, etc., which all went on smoothly and with sufficient rapidity. Indeed, I quite enjoyed the work (have felt the last few days that I should like to shoulder a similar job once or twice every year). The printing-office (Rand and Avery's [corner Franklin and Federal streets]) is a fine one, and I had the very genial and competent aid throughout of Henry H. Clark, principal proof-reader and book-superintendent of the concern. And so I have put those completed poems in permanent type-form at last.

57 From the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, October 17, 1881, page 44: "A Poet's Supper to his Printers and Proof-Readers":

Mrs. Moffitt's Hotel, 8 Bullfinch place was the scene of a very pleasant and animated gathering on Saturday night. Walt Whitman invited around him his printers, proof-readers, pressmen (from Rand & Avery's establishment where the new "Leaves of Grass" has just been set-up and electrotyped), and with other friends added gave them an informal reception, with a fraternal hand-shake and hearty word of welcome for each. Several ladies called, and a number of "outsiders," and all were received with due empressment [sic]. There were over two hundred visitors in the course of the evening, some from England. At ten o'clock Mrs. Moffitt furnished the old poet and his special printer friends (over eighty of them) with a fine champagne supper. All was bountiful, but unconventional. Mr. Whitman gave some items of his printer life, as a young man and his working in different cities from New York to New Orleans, inclusive,
followed, in answer to queries by brief opinions on the political situation. He held that there is really no first-class problem in our government now demanding solutions; that we are nationally doing well enough; that the process of fraternizing, the main thing, is being surely and silently fulfilled in all the States; that great tolerance and forbearance should be observed toward President Arthur, who has, in some respects, the most perplexing part to play of any President since Washington. In the course of the evening various little speeches were made, and Mr. Whitman recited "John Anderson, my Joy John."

The poet departs tomorrow, after a sojourn in Boston of which, to use his own words, he "could not wish for a more beautiful and comforting two months."

58 The people behind the attack on Leaves of Grass who first complained to State Attorney General George Marston, who then turned to Boston District Attorney Oliver Stevens, are not definitely known. William Douglass O'Connor, coming back into friendly relations with Whitman after their ten years' estrangement, first suggested Anthony Comstock (1844-1915), Secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Vice in New York, then Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson (1825-1911), the author, reformer, and editor who was always hostile toward Whitman. Thomas B. Harned, WWWC, 3: 299, says "the real power--or man--back of the whole business will never be known." William Sloane Kennedy, The Fight of a Book for the World (West Yarmouth, Massachusetts: Stonecroft Press, 1926), 248, says it was the "secretary of the [Boston] vice society, the Rev. Baylies Allen, who instigated the movement. Allen admitted it to me in his own parlor." Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer, 589, n. 185, says the person "was never definitely identified . . . . but some of Whitman's friends in Boston thought that it was a narrow-minded preacher."

59 WWWW, 8:289-290

60 ibid.

61 This copy has unfortunately been lost.
O’Connor was “thunderstruck” by Osgood whom he called a “cowardly fool” and “infernal dog” and “jackass.” In a letter that O’Connor wrote to John Burroughs, he expressed his “outrage” over the subject, stating his wish to “crush the District Attorney” and “annul [his] action by fulmin.” “I am trembling with fury,” he wrote.” In a May 20th letter to Whitman, O’Connor approved of Walt Whitman’s "magnanimous" attitude toward Osgood & Co., though he stated that "my part, and the part of all your friends, is to whale them" (WWWC 2: 13-14, 3:351-53).

Whitman was supported, not without reservations in some instances, by the following newspapers: the Philadelphia Times on May 23, the Chicago Inter Ocean on May 22 and 23, the Chicago Herald on May 23, the New York Home Journal on May 24, the Boston Liberty and the Cambridge (Mass.) Chronicle on May 27, the Boston Globe on May 28, the Audubon County (Iowa) Sentinel on May 31, and the Woodstown (N. J.) Register on June 6. He was attacked, often with hysteria, by the following: the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin on May 23, the Boston Daily Advertiser on May 24, the Cincinnati Ohio on May 24, The Christian Intelligencer (quoted in the New York Tribune on June 4), and the Philadelphia Times on July 17.

Chapter Four


2 Corr, 3:280.

3 Rees Welsh & Co., Booksellers and Publishers, no. 23 Ninth St., Philadelphia, agreed to Whitman’s terms on June 21 with two stipulations: they were unwilling to accept Specimen Days until they had seen the manuscript, and they wanted to know about
the copyright of Richard Maurice Bucke's book *Walt Whitman*. (In 1883, Walt Whitman
arranged with McKay to print Bucke's book. The poet personally supervised publication,
including proofreading). The agreement to publish *Leaves of Grass* and *Specimen Days*
was signed on June 28. Whitman was to receive 35 cents on a $2.00 retail price if his
plates were used; Rees Welsh would purchase the plates from Whitman for $400 and,
thereafter, the royalty would be reduced to 25 cents. The contract was to last for two
years and two months. The contract also gave Whitman the right to "personally sell and
dispose of" the 1876 *Centennial Edition* and the 1882 *Author's Edition* of *Leaves of
Grass*. Finally, the contract obligated Rees Welsh to "furnish desk room for Walt
Whitman personally in their store without charge so long as they publish his books"


5 See New York *Tribune*, July 15: "Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* – Movement in
Philadelphia to suppress the work,” and Philadelphia *Press*, same date: “Walt Whitman’s
Work – The Society for the Prevention of Vice to stop the sale."

7 *Corr*, 2:309.

7 *Corr*, 3:269.

8 *Corr*, 3:292.


10 The following partial letter from J. B. Lippincott & Co. to David McKay is located
in the Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the University of Pennsylvania:

Dir Sir,

After a continuous engagement of over eight years it gives us sincere pleasure
to state that we have always found you prompt and particularly efficient in all the
duties required in the various positions you have been called upon to fill.
We learned with Regret of your intention of leaving our employ, and trust that in your new position you may meet with the good success that your energy, and ability, will doubtless deserve.

11 Publisher's Weekly, November 30, 1918, p. 1799.

12 WWC, 5:359.

13 WWC, 1:194.

14 WWC, 2:176.

15 WWC, 2:318.

16 WWC, 1:392.

17 WWC, 1:460.

18 WWC, 1:194.

19 ibid.

20 WWC, 1:205.

21 WWC, 1:206.

22 WWC, 2:176.

23 William Sloane Kennedy (1850-1929), biographer, editor and critic, was one of Whitman’s most devoted friends and admirers. He was a frequent correspondent and visitor to Whitman’s home as well as a constant contributor of small gifts. Kennedy also contributed several essays to newspapers in praise of Whitman. In 1896, Kennedy published Reminiscences of Walt Whitman with Extracts from His Letters and Remarks on His Writing. He also edited Walt Whitman’s Diary in Canada (1904) and published The Fight of a Book for the Year: A Companion Volume to “Leaves of Grass” (1926), which he considered to be his most important work.

24 Thomas Harned and William O’Connor were particularly critical of McKay and often encouraged Whitman to seek out a more established publisher.
Recognizing that his contract with Whitman was expiring in 1895, McKay produced three printings of *Leaves of Grass* with the final printing numbering 3000 copies.

U. S. copyright law during this period protected an author’s work for twenty-eight years, with the possibility of a fourteen-year extension.

"The engraving appeared in the 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, then again in the 1876 and 1881-1882 (and following) editions... In reprinting it in the 1881 edition, Whitman insisted on its facing ‘Song of Myself’ because the portrait ‘is involved as part of the poem.’". (Steel engraving by Samuel Hollyer. *The Walt Whitman Archive*. )
In 1904, McKay moved to larger quarters at 610 Washington Square and, after his death in 1918, his sons Alexander and James took over the company. They established the firm’s famous series of chess books and published Christopher Morley’s *Travels in Philadelphia* (1920); the first American edition of A. A. Milne’s *A Gallery of Children* (1925); Sir James and Lady Frazer’s book of juvenile poetry, *Pasha the Pom* (1937); and Walt Disney’s *Mickey Mouse* books. The company was bought out in 1950 by a small group of investors led by Kennett Rawson who assumed the presidency and moved the firm’s headquarters to 225 Park Avenue, New York. In 1968, Rawson sold the firm to Maxwell Geffen. In 1973, the firm merged with the Henry Z. Walck Company. The same year, Geffen sold McKay to Morgan-Grampion, Incorporated, a subsidiary of a British firm. Since 1979, the firm has been located at 2 Park Avenue, New York.

41 *WWWC*, 2:461.

42 *WWWC*, 2:392.

43 *CWWW*, 2:714.


45 *WWWC*, 6:408.

46 *CWWW*, 2:714.
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