

Poets on Whitman

WHITMAN'S METRO-POETIC LETTRISM: THE MANNAHATTA SKYLINE AS SENTENCE, SYNTAX, AND SPELL

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I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,
Whereupon, lo! Up sprang the aboriginal name!
I see that the word of my city is that word from of old,
Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bays, superb,
with tall and wonderful spires....
—"Mannahatta"¹

1

In his 1860 poem "Mannahatta," Walt Whitman hints at just how microscopic our academic practice of close reading could eventually become. Whitman's poem reads its own title word's letterscape as a skyline, with its vowels compared to saliva-storing "water-bays" and its consonants compared to ascending "spires." The poet finds meaning burrowed inside a borough's name, but also scrolled out along the surface of its spelling. This paper is a series of aphoristic riffs following his own example off the rooftops of its most extreme implications, treating this fleeting and oblique reference as a kind of high-rise Rosetta Stone or a runic cipher into Whitman's philological concerns.

Whitman, unlike thinkers from Plato to Saussure, believed in a sensual correspondence not only between objects and their names, but also between words and their component letters. The Native American

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word “Mannahatta” treated like a skyline is a case of signifier-become-signified, characters-become-content, and a horizon-made-hieroglyphic, proof indeed that “These States shall stand rooted in the ground in names.”²² David Carr refers to the Manhattan skyline and its hourglass undulation as a “sexy colossus in Reubenese recline,”²³ but Whitman sees the pre-colossal 1860 skyline as a spelling primer and a conjurer’s spell at once. While my reference is anachronistic, “Alphabet City” here is not a specific Lower East Side enclave but, for Whitman, the elongated entirety of Manhattan itself.

Clearly, Whitman’s background as a printer’s apprentice and a journeyman carpenter gives him a mechanical and architectural feeling for the humanly made shapes of characters and words. Whitman (who blurred between subject and object by writing his own nameless reviews for *Leaves of Grass*) is a word-carpenter and a self-made fetish constructed out of words at once. In “Song of the Broad-Axe,” one of his odes-to-tools, he uses the word “preparatory” to describe the “jointing, squaring, sawing, mortising”²⁴ of a building, just as his assembling-together of letters on a compositor’s stick was preparatory to the laying-down of words on a page, a process blueprinted by Whitman’s handwritten manuscripts. By implication, the cross-bars, ascenders, and serifs of letters are the beam, studs, tenons, and mortises of our words, and considering his abundant references to house-making tools (and the ways that exclamation points often cluster around those tool-references), Whitman’s mere pen seems often to envy the majestic blows of hammers and chisels and mallets.

2

“Mannahatta” imagines a word made out of iron, rivets, and cement, but the letters making up the words “Leaves of Grass” on that book’s first cover were entwined in vines, buds, and ivy-tendrils, in a biomorphic ensemble that announced its main vegetable motif, a *topos* that is rooted in a complex of Romance-language puns. The French word for book (*livre*) indeed derives (linguistically and organically) from a tree’s living portion (its *liber*). In one anthropological model, the initial letters stamped on clay tablets were symbolic of grasses like wheat,

barley and related mercantile produce—"grass" was among our earliest pictograms. Whitman is tapping into an organicist tradition here but also serving (by focusing on the architectonics of the alphabet) as a precursor to a more meta-discursive tradition to come, and hence serving as an inter-generational pivot and joist.

In Thoreau's "sandbank" scene from *Walden*, letters and words emerge in the shapes formed by the thawing clay of a railroad embankment, as items of organic *telos*, but Whitman sees letters and words as humanly formed constructions, both arbitrarily iconic and yet elementally essential at once. The alphabet is an engine of standardization but also a haphazard and cross-cultural amalgam of pictograms, and so Whitman's lettrism is a means to depict a city's "high growths of iron," most tellingly in a poem in which Manhattan is praised for its surging modern bloom and yet best labeled with its aboriginal name.

In "Poetry and Imagination," Whitman's sponsor and forebear Emerson complained directly to (and about) poets that "We want an architect, and they give us an upholsterer."⁵ Whitman plays architect and executor at once in his own verse, overseeing his books' layouts with a knowing eye, alert to his volumes not only as organic outcroppings but static artifacts. While he is generally, broadly read as a poet of connection and sensual motion, Angus Fletcher sees him obsessively avoiding the transitive and instead focusing on actions poised in mid-air, forcing us to remain "perpetually intransitive" to accurately read his verse.⁶ This state of intransitive-ness, of objects-unto-themselves, is emblemized by a poem about a skyline that can itself be read as a poem, in a reflexive, lyric loop. While generally regarding his own poetry as a tongue-driven song, chant, or yawp, Whitman is also a lettristic poet savoring a word's optical layout on its page. In his own custom-modified Kabbalah, letters are monuments to their own meanings and visual embodiments of their own vocal utterance.

Whitman is a neo-Orphic animator, seeking to summon or conjure objects into literary being by the merest, most uninflected mention, but also a kind of semantic taxidermist, posing and housing objects inside the framework of their appellations. If slang is "germinal,"⁷ so are Indian names, serving as genes allowing New York's overlaid urbanity to embody its aboriginal underoil.

Words not only “stand for things”⁸ but stand *as* things: if language is indeed as teleologically purposive as Whitman believes, was “Mannahatta” a primeval macro-molecule infused (to be later effused) in the stones of its making or in the sinews and tendons of its planners’ hands? Could the neural boundaries and kinetic ratios and dimensions evoked by a word somehow shape the proportions of its ensuing object in some subliminal manner?

Responding affirmatively to this self-imposed query, Whitman the seer who would eventually work as a clerk at the Bureau of Indian Affairs insists that his words are not “reminders of properties”⁹ but embodiments of those properties: to see a word in the material object it names is to suggest that names precede and produce their very targets. In a notebook he advised against naming infants until they exhibit the qualities their names should capture and commemorate: in a telling personal detail, Whitman’s brother Jeff (in 1860) named his first daughter “Manahatta” with a single “n,” as if in a personal concession to Anglicized “Manhattan.”

3

Figuratively looking out on Manhattan’s skyline through the double *oo*’s of Brooklyn, Whitman sees a semantic silhouette and a profile made out of pictograms. The constructed city is both cajoled into verbal flux and immobilized in his catalogues, as a site made of tools calls attention to these tools in long lists of reflexive depictions. The plank being prepared for usage, the knife-sharpening wheel, the anvil showering sparks as it bends another implement into being, the murderer’s knife poised at “half-pulled scabbard”:¹⁰ such mid-point moments are among Whitman’s favorite scenes. The poet makes actions monumental by capturing gestures in his verb-less catalogues, and so actions become objects in his suspended atmospheres. This is accomplished by various grammatical means: in *Transcendental Wordplay*, Michael West lists the “deverbal nouns” in *Leaves of Grass*, “a sniff, a knit, a merge, a float, a suck, a sell, a pour, a dowse, a topple, a dangle, a soothe, a swash, a flaunt, a bask, a sidle, a blurt, and a yawp.”¹¹ In a city whose name is itself an object and an icon of itself, actions stopped

at a signature gesture become insignias as well.

This emblemizing is frequently accomplished by an excavation of aboriginal terms. In Whitman's assessment, "Names are magic"¹² and indeed like the vowel steeplechase "abracadabra," the internal rhymes of Indian place-names like Mannahatta and Mississippi and Ohio embody his assertion (in a conversation with Horace Traubel) that "a word is a poem of poems."¹³ In "Starting from Paumanok," a poem named for Long Island's native moniker, nature's elements speak to us in names like Okonee, Ottawa, Monongahela, Chattahooche and Oronoco¹⁴ because of these words' self-rhyming, cross-fibered acoustic patterns. Preferring the native Niagara to the usurping St. Lawrence, Whitman plays aboriginal's advocate in his *American Primer* and recommends driving out the saint-names of Catholicized California and resubmitting their Indian place-titles. Here, he is calling for a revival of Algonquin terminology over a half-century before the Algonquin Round Table enhanced Manhattan's literary reputation not as a Whitmanian kosmos but as an urbane cosmopolis.

West reads Whitman using Indian place-names as "placatory" tokens and refers to an onomastic "primal love of nomenclature" in which names are metaphoric "handles."¹⁵ In such names, what is "liquid" is "sane" and a well-rendered moniker is a "perpetual feast"¹⁶ to our ear, even if said feast is provided by an Indian landscape consumed by genocide and massacre. In "Mannahatta," a phrase like "up sprang the aboriginal name" proposes a return of the linguistically repressed, portraying Indian place-terms as trampled roots pressed under the temporary, passing boot-heels of European loanwords.

4

This notion of a word resembling the object it stands for appears elsewhere in Whitman. In *An American Primer*, "Mississippi" is a chute-winding word,¹⁷ its four s's like switch-back bends on a river's serpentine course: Charles Kraitsir, a formative shaper of Thoreau's sense of language, calls English a "Mississippi among human tongues, confluent of a Teutic branch and a Latin Missouri."¹⁸ This sense of

language as literally derivative, a river taking on more and more traffic and cargo, is reflected in Whitman's own milieu and verse. As Manhattan grew more polyglot with immigrant tongues, Whitman's diction grew into a more various stew of Latinate and Biblical locutions, Quakerisms and phrenological quackeries, zoological obscurities like *pismire* and botanical terms like *calamus*, suggesting an onomastic obsession with naming that was as much a matter of accounting as it was of Adamism.

This ever-broadening vocabulary did not undercut Whitman's belief in direct naming. Elsewhere in "Mannahatta," the phrase "Word of my city" instead of "Word for my city" is prepositionally telling, as *of* suggests internalized essence where *for* suggests random substitution. Similarly, the line "I see that word of my city is that word from of old" suitably uses the doubled preposition "from of" to further intensify a sense of rootedness and belongingness. This sense of belonging is also a matter of poetic time-travel and historical recasting: "Mannahatta" hits Rewind and Erase on New York and New Amsterdam as names along a colonial continuum. The poem was composed on the eve of Southern secession sundering the nation in two—as a conciliatory gesture it phonetically sutures the nation's metropolitan then-present and its aboriginal past.

Re-spelling the anglicized *Manhattan* into the Lenape *Mannahatta* also liberates the word's internal rhyme-scheme from a clipped and closed-off *n* to a feminine and open-ended *a*. In terms of scansion, MA-nna-HA-tta as trochaic dimeter leans forward like wind-blown grass, where Man-HAT-an as an amphibrach accents its middle syllable like the peaked tip of a skyscraper. This reversion to a native spelling likewise allows the term for the island to begin with *manna*, the divinely bestowed Old Testament ambrosia that fed the wandering Israelites, subliminally underscoring the word's service as a feast for ear and eye.

Mannahatta is Lenape for "island of many hills" and accordingly Whitman's own handwriting was a signature of many hills—a phrenological journal of the time saw a "tenderness in the sloping lines" of his autograph, a hilliness that was said to suggest "generosity" and "ardor."¹⁹ The very name Whit-man ends on the same morpheme

that jump-starts Man-hattan, suggesting an overlapped coupling between writer and written like the joinery between two subway cars, and Whitman understood well that his passage into enduring public consciousness was a matter of transit via the vehicle of print. He is supremely concerned with his own identity's eventual fate as an object of printed letters and so forges a reflexively aware semiotic self (like Prince Hamlet in his inky cloak) and performs a similar service for his host city as a place off/in print.

5

Whitman (a former printer's devil like Benjamin Franklin, William Blake, and Mark Twain) largely oversaw the typesetting of *Leaves of Grass*, and also worked meta-references to typography into his own labors: the word "composition" can apply to writing and to typesetting equally. For all of his emphasis on composed content, he also understood the commercial and aesthetic significance of a book's appearances and manifest embodiment: Barbara Henry has discussed how the numbered verses in the second edition gave the book a biblical look,²⁰ but one also notices that they gave the volume a visual similarity to the increasingly plotted and numbered landscape of Manhattan island.

The very act of setting type to achieve these appearances is itself the subject of several of Whitman's writings. An 1862 reminiscence for the *Brooklyn Standard* revels rhapsodic about the lavish joys of reaching into his *a*, *o*, and *i* boxes to arrange words,²¹ ironically focusing on the physical manual exertion of reaching for vowels which, by definition, require less vocal exertion than hard-edged consonants. In "Chants Democratic," Whitman extolls the virtues of the "four-double cylinder press, the hand press, the frisket and tympan":²² as a lover of nomenclatures, he hears a lyricism in tool-names as well as place-names.

This love of technological jargons has its own implications, and can be teased out to demonstrate manifold similarities and resonances between the appearance of a book and the appearance of a city. Quadrates are wide space-blocks used in typesetting that resemble

city blocks, *justified* can have a double meaning here (in terms of margin-placement and moral rectitude), and the hairline serifs and stout stems of Whitman's favored fonts play on his love of polarities and contradictions. Particularly in the early editions, important or recurring keywords are placed in all-capitals, elbowing forward for extra attention out of the demotic mob of their surrounding words.

These words limn a Manhattan that is a brand-name commodity of mass manufacture but also an artisanal masterwork of stonemasons, metallurgists, and engineers. Whitman makes a fetish of the solitary artisan, the person of specialized object competence, but also often reduces person to commodity. *Leaves of Grass* depicts a matrix of bustling exchange, and Andrew Lawson notices the denizens of the book receding into "exchangeable units of labor—selling, nodding, rolling, traveling, marking."²³ Manhattan described as "million-footed" is not so much personified as horde-ified, compared to (or emblemized by) a crowd rather than an archetypal individual, "unpent"²⁴ by being penned-down in Whitman's own syllabically eccentric poetic gait.

6

"New York City" is both an object and a name for an object: "This is the city"²⁵ Whitman writes, but of course "This is the city" are mere words on a page, just as Magritte's pipe is paint on a canvas. During Whitman's life, New York City *was* Manhattan Island, and so a more geologically self-contained entity, lending itself more easily and immediately to poetic depiction. This objectification (in which disparate hordes and elements cohere into a verbal and urban whole) is frequently achieved via the much-noted, much-cited catalogues, often dispensing entirely with descriptive, discursive rhetoric, populated by nouns with no apparent need for an activating verb or attributive modifier, as if reveling in their own objecthood.

By comparing the towering consonants of Mannahatta to the masts of the ships that deliver goods onto his title island, Whitman illustrates how a word's connotations and associations are themselves both importers and exporters of meaning. Hearing Mannahatta as a speakable skyline propped up by the tall buildings of its consonants

also suggests that human-made spires are able to vocally in-spire. In terms of muscular pronunciation, all phonemes are figurative spires when spoken upward from the grooved rifle-bore of a throat's vertical chamber. If a letter is a mast, its sail is presumably its phonetic pronunciation billowed out by the breeze of a human voice.

As spoken, the word "Mannahatta" is "liquid, sane, unruly, musical, self-sufficient," an odd and seemingly unrelated quintet of adjectives that plays a kind of leapfrog across characteristics. The name's liquidity is not so much in its phonemic makeup, perhaps, as in its fungible status, its spendable and expendable possibilities as an iconic site of striving and accomplishment. Whitman asserts its sanity next to its unruliness as a kind of thumbnail manifesto for free verse's deregulated vitality, and asserts its musicality next to its self-sufficiency to call attention, perhaps, to the melodicism of its own four-beat vowel-driven cadence.

7

The vowels in the word "Mannahatta" are said to be "nested in nests of water-bays," and of course all words are nested in a series of etymological derivations. The root-word "nest" expressed as a verbal adjective and a plural noun in such close proximity is both an unneeded duplication and a grammatical demonstration of all words' protean potential and convertibility as currency. This plasticity is the consequence of written language's own composition by recombinant letters that have been compared to undergirding atoms for the molecules of words since Epicurus.

In an implied pun prefiguring Joyce, *letters* are vertical *ladders* ascended from the rubble of pre-linguistic *litter*. Likewise, the very word *font* proposes a watery, gushing quality to print itself—in "A Font of Type," Whitman refers to letters as "ocean waves arousable to fury."²⁶ This lettrism can also be applied to the writer's own moniker in several manners. Whitman's alliterating initials W.W. evoke a pictogram of the rippling waves surrounding Manhattan or an oscillating voiceprint of words being spoken. The upper-case *W* alliterated in Whitman's name is fittingly the widest of all letters in most fonts—*W*'s arms are

opened outward in beseeching prayer in David Sacks' abecedarian account.²⁷ As a written character, *W* is a stepchild of *U*—in Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary*, "double u" is our most greedy, oppressive letter, presumably because doubled attention to "you" means half-attention to "me" as too-narrow "I." Bierce's joke suitably turns Whitman's monogram (which is actually a duogram) into a token of narcissism.

W is a voiced, bilabial semivowel, democratically enlisting our lips, vocal cords and an open gullet at once—Richard Rhodes (in "Sound Symbols") links *wh*- words (from *whisper* to *whirl* and presumably *Whitman*) to "sounds which arise (via) air turbulence."²⁸ *W* as a semivowel is a glide, balanced on a brink between vocally open and consonantly closed, and so is a fitting abbreviation for Whitman the open-hearted enigma, posturing as eternally present from behind the barrier of print. *W*, when enunciated, tends to round subsequent vowels in its wake, infecting its proximate sound into orotund shapes, just as Whitman, as writer, aimed an orbital language that emphasized the roundness of elemental circularities.

8

The single word that Whitman is perhaps most associated with (excepting perhaps the *grass* that rapidly urbanizing Manhattan was endangering and eclipsing during his day) is his *I*, a vertical crossbeam of an icon and a deictic pronoun at once, able to apply to all despite its status as our smallest (or at least narrowest) of words. This *I* (*iota*) was originally a pictogram of an outreaching arm-and-hand and so is a suitable emblem for a writer. This *I* (a "columnar Self" in Emily Dickinson, a "perpendicular pronoun" in Henry Adams) is a phoneme and morpheme and grapheme all at once, and so a "folded inward" parcel of public and personal history in Whitman's *American Primer*.

The very name *Whitman* lays a possessive, consuming claim on the word *man* every time it is spoken and is by now a kind of brand name. Whitman dreamed of a line of popcorn and other products being named for himself, and James Russell Lowell compared *Leaves of Grass* (as a book and as a title) to a shingle over a grocery-store, an advert of "common goods,"²⁹ a sales-catalogue of its own catalogues,

a self-reflexive billboard. Whitman (as a writer as well as a synecdoche for a corpus of verse) endeavored to put a person fully on record (his avowed aim from the outset) by decoding and offloading his essence, somehow intact, into the reduction that is print. The impossibility of this project (even as a humbly titled “language experiment”) is a large part of Whitman’s humor and *agon*.

Another means for this transfer into the public eye was via carefully selected portraiture. The iconography of the well-known stippled frontispiece engraving of Whitman is itself a form of metropolitan mapping. His rakishly titled planter’s hat is a skewed rooftop, his then-plunging neckline is a well-designed affront to borders of parlor decency, the crotch of his pants an intersection of editorial and censorial traffic over the years. The angle of the poet’s hand on his hip is like a dogleg turnaround to a West Village side-street, and overall the poet stands like a self-aware monument: John Burroughs detected a “elemental look” like a “granite rock” to Whitman’s countenance,³⁰ as if his mien and his gaze out onto the world were themselves chthonic products to be used in acts of architectonic self-promotion.

9

The ironies and paradoxes incurred by trying to translate a person into print do not prevent Whitman from building (and evoking) a city made of words. The letter *M* is a pictogram for a mountain in certain alphabets, and the island of Manhattan read from north to south indeed initiates with the towering bluffs, cliffs and palisades of Fort Tryon and the Cloisters. This onset *M* is also the first phoneme spoken by most infants—Whitman puts the maternal prefix *mater* back into word *metropolitan* in his inverted and slant-rhymed phrase “of Manhattan the son,”³¹ intertwining his print-portrayed persona with the lettered landscape that is his poetic environment.

The maritime icon *M* is alternately a pictogram of ocean waves, and forms the word *Mannahatta*’s visually western border just as a rippling river forms the island of Manhattan’s western shore. *M* is also Whitman’s monogram *W* inverted—*M* is visually cartwheeled upside down into *W* on the retina, making the poet’s initial and his

home turf's initial a pair of neurological doppelgangers. (Whitman plays with this inverted monogram in one of his iconic illustrations for the 1860 edition, when he barely disguises his upside-down initials as waves at the bottom of his engraved image of the sun rising [or setting] over the water [see Figure 1].)

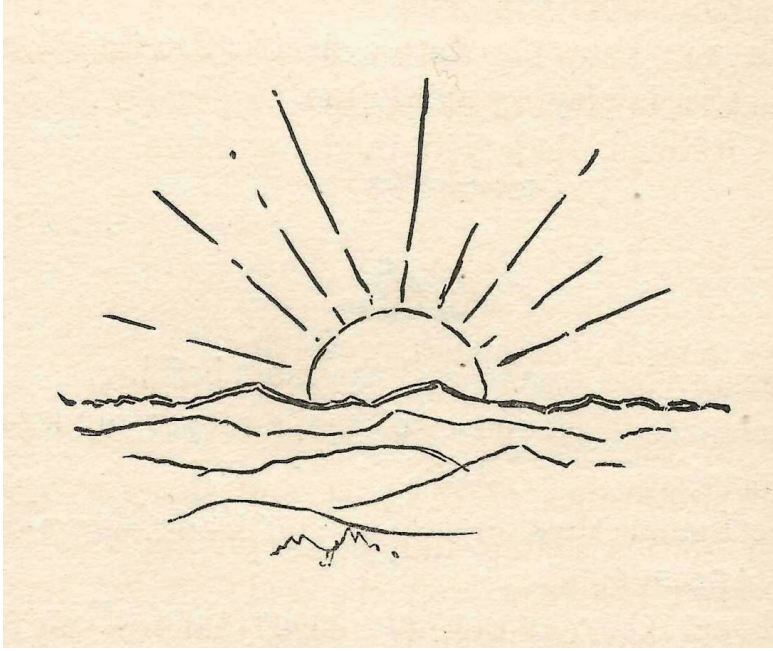


Figure 1. Illustration from *LG1860*, 378.

It is the *m* in *Whitman* that blooms with grass-tendrils on the cover of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, depicting the poet's febrile masculinity as the source of his verbal vegetation. These lettristic interactions, whether hints or happenstance, are encouraged by Whitman's insistence on a language of sensual, tangible presence. Orally, the phoneme *m* is a bilabial press treating the lips like twin horizons, kinetically mirroring the two rivers girdling the narrow isle of Manhattan. Even more kinetically, artist Erik Freer's Nude Walt Whitman typeface spells out the alphabet in human bodies contorted into erotic postures, with *M* being the most acrobatic of letters because of its demanding vertical zig-zag. This connects to Whitman's clear

resonance with the Adam Kadmon vision of the human form as a map of kabalistic allegories.³² Jon Rosenblatt has explored Whitman's notion of our "human body as a language,"³³ a language prone to cross-sensual puns and parables. In "Carols of Words," it is asserted that "Human bodies are words, myriads of words"³⁴—Whitman's detection of a lettristic undergirding to city and body also poetically foreshadows the alphabetic aspect to genes and proteins and the use of digital imaging by urban planners in the century to come.

10

These lettristic associations resonate acoustically as well as visually. Vocally, the four *a*'s of *Mannahatta*, like the four *i*'s of *Mississippi*, form a vowel-propelled self-rhyme and an open-throated, ululating chant. Perhaps Whitman's love of trilling operatic aria inspired him to appreciate these plum-shaped *a*'s, with their suggestion of a sustained vocal climax and humming self-satisfaction at once. Visually as well as vocally, *Mannahatta*'s repeating *a*'s are like liquid waves lapping up with a lunar recurrence on the consonant coastline of the word. The *A* that Hawthorne associated with the anguish of adulteration is also the Adamic *ah* of discovery repeated four times here in a kind of orgasmic stammer.

More iconically, if written in all-capital letters (as it was in its original appearance in 1860, as well as in later reprintings [see Figure 2]), the four *A*'s of *MANNAHATTA* resemble the tribal teepees that were vanquished by ascending urban skylines. These four *A*'s are based on an old Phoenician icon for an ox's head, historically ironic since Broadway (Whitman's favorite promenade) was once a thriving cattle-driving lane. Visually, the four loopholes formed by *Mannahatta*'s four lower-case *a*'s can be radially reassembled into a cloverleaf that prefigures a Robert Moses traffic interchange a century before the fact (Figure 3). Considering Whitman's love of *apex* and *acme*, it is suitable that dictionary-fronting, skyward-pointing *A* is the only vowel allowed into *Mannahatta*.

As well as an icon for vertical aspiration, the word can also serve as a study in more horizontal symmetries. *Mannahatta*'s double *n*'s

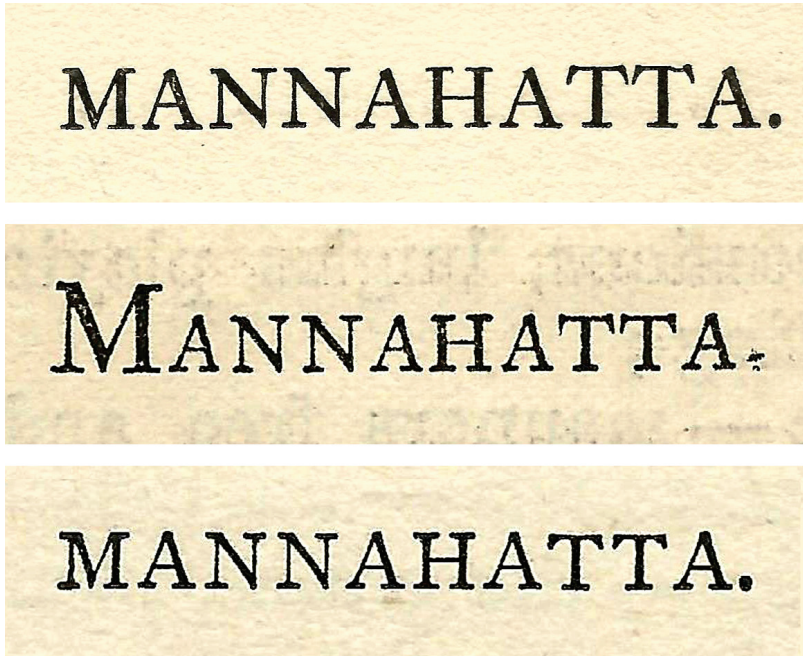


Figure 2. “Mannahatta”-titles, top to bottom: LG1860, 404, LG1867 (New York: W.E. Chapin & Co.), 257, and LG1892, 360.

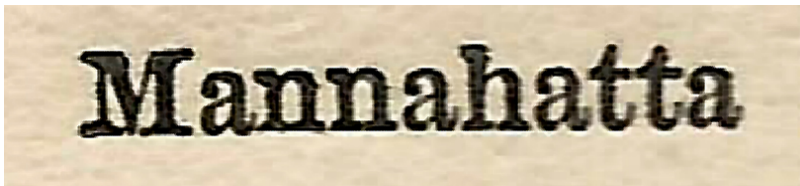


Figure 3. “Mannahatta” in the Table of Contents to the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* (iv).

and *t*'s form a binary eye-rhyme, undergirding the name's appearance of elemental balance by resembling twin pontoons keeping the boat of the word afloat on the waters of its own connotations. These doubled *n*'s also visually evoke Iroquois burial mounds, a lettristic memorial to the funereal grounds the island is constructed atop. These *n*'s are arched humpbacks, as is the foundation of its single *h*, prophetically simulating the trio of suspension bridges now connecting Whitman's

former haunts in Manhattan and Brooklyn. They likewise resemble so-called Mohawk haircuts and the various faux-Parisian triumph-arches scattered across Manhattan, again subliminally mirroring New York's aboriginal and European inputs. "Mannahatta"'s doubled *n*'s are like swellings of tamped-down seed, followed by paired, cruciform *t*'s like surveyor's stakes punched into its semiotic turf. The updated "Manhattan," conversely, ends on the letter that is the initiating monogram for *noun*, *name*, and *number*, hence forming a beltway loop of self-reference.

In reverting from "Manhattan" to "Mannahatta," the second nasal *n* in the word migrates from its last syllable to its first syllable like a hard-nosed subway commuter passing between cars toward the head of a train. Less anachronistically, "Mannahatta"'s aspirant *h* is a huffing, panting letter whose contour mimics the pot-bellied smokestack that powered the ferryboat that Whitman rode into the city. In Whitman's usage, letters frequently rebel from their constituent service into a more performative function. His untrammelled verse's seriality is a kind of verbal warfare committed against the rapidly increasing stratification of New York society, his free-verse a flouting of traditional poetic craft that ironically fetishizes the urban craftsman laboring at his work.

In a bit of formative meta-poetry like "The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case, / He turns his quid of tobacco, while his eyes blur with the manuscript," a printer working in black-and-white print finds himself with "gray head,"³⁵ a blurred embodiment of the interaction of black ink and white page. The word "case" here refers to the printer's tray of letters, but of course "case" (like "set") is a swarm of connotations, referring to a text at several layers of application. The word "Mannahatta" is a "case" (instance or example) of natively nostalgic city-naming pursued by intermittent poetic argument (a lyric litigation filed and waged as a figurative civil suit) enclosed in the cased contents of several editions of a book formed from the metal case of a printer's alphabet, casing (surveying) the outline of said city.

These concerns with printed appearance are never fully divorced from the ensuing sounds implied by (and recorded in) such print. In *An American Primer*, Whitman professes to “like limber, lashing—fierce words”.³⁶ even in his semi-scholarly prose, writing about language frequently causes him to alliterate on liquid *l*’s, retroflexing his tongue like a shot-launching pulley. This idea of words as “limber” subliminally rhymes with implications of vocal “timber” (and language as bluntly present as fresh-cut lumber) and alliterates next to “liminal” (and language as an evanescent and mediated product of vibrating air). The word “Mannahatta”’s *t*’s are phonetically formed by a tongue-slap to the back of the teeth, a kind of miniature axe-chop reminding us of the precarious *t* inherent in “towering,” “tall,” and “timber.” These paired *t*’s are also ominously placed at the same position on their host word as the eventual Twin Towers would be placed on their host island, particularly if we regard its terminal *a* as the looped belt of pathway forming the Battery at the bottom end of the borough.

From Inwood to the Battery, from the Hudson to the East River, Manhattan is incorporated as an act of ink. Whitman’s verse, for all of its characteristically expressionist effusions, is also very self-alert to its own status as an artifact made from printer’s impressions pressed onto a page “How the crowd rolls along !”³⁷ is written by ink-rollers and pages rolling off a press, as Whitman uses presswork to portray the pressing-on of a city’s swarming mob. The poet as flaneur walks across a cityscape as his pen moves across a page, transcribing foot-falls into phrases.

Manhattan’s population was increasing by over 50% every ten years through most of Whitman’s life, with its own kind of reliable meter and cadence, and so its “Numberless crowded streets” would not remain unnumbered for very long. The word “layout” is used by printers as well as city planners: the city’s fabled (and once feuded-over) grid system has itself been called a visionary poem of sorts, with its Cartesian lattice of streets and avenues, its spatially rhyming corners and intersections, and the caesurae provided by the greenspace of its parks. Still, Whitman, editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle* in the formative

days of the grid, joined figures from Olmstead and Toqueville in criticizing the plan for its recurrent tedium and its “perpetual dead flat.”³⁸

Perhaps partially enflamed by this resentment for the grid’s trampling of the natural swell and curve of the island’s topography, Whitman took his revenge by bursting free from the grid of metered verse. Manhattan’s numbered mapping claimed to assist with what the Commissioner’s Plan of 1811 called the “free and abundant circulation of air,”³⁹ but Whitman conversely used the irregular anti-confines of free verse to liberate the bardic breath. In a similar gesture of mistrust of excess standardization, the only appearance of “Walt Whitman” on a *Leaves of Grass* title page was as a signature made into print, as if Whitman were wary of submitting his own name to the rectilinear regularities of print. Manhattan’s iconic gridiron was an act of rationalizing the city’s irregular landscape, but Whitman’s poetics (particularly on the issues of linguistics and the city) are frequently a liminal blurring between what is rationally superimposed and what is organically emergent.

12

The installments of Whitman’s career book also demonstrate a waging of conceptual combat between the rationalized and the organic. *A Life Illustrated* review of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* asserted that it was “shaped like a small atlas,”⁴⁰ and it is indeed as much a chart of a specific place as it is a “language experiment”⁴¹ and a secular scripture, and so several analogies can be drawn between the book and the place that produced it. The title *Leaves of Grass* when turned into an acronym is “LoG,” a word for a book but also for a parcel of wood waiting to be sawed into a plank by a carpenter and used for building. The Emerson blurb placed without permission on the spine of the second edition was as vulgar a gesture as an ill-considered Times Square billboard, and Whitman in the latter half of his career fluctuated between green- and red-covered books that prophesied the traffic lights that would eventually punctuate the traffic-grammar of Manhattan island. Charles Eliot Norton, in *Putnam’s Monthly*, called

Leaves of Grass “gross yet elevated” and “superficial yet profound” and “preposterous yet somehow fascinating,”⁴² all pairs of conflicted modifiers that could be aimed at Manhattan itself.

“Mannahatta” is shot at a medium distance, as M. Wynn Thomas has noticed,⁴³ in order to take in its full scope and sprawl. This sense of a city blossoming skyward in a kind of Promethean efflorescence is depicted in a language that is itself a Babelian riot. Whitman’s polyglot, ever-assimilating verbal textures (his butchered French and Spanish in particular) keep us alert to words as widely-traveled amalgams, and demonstrate a New York that is a magnet as well as a breeder of dialects. The last name of the first printer of *Leaves of Grass* was Rome, but instead of an Eternal City of classical proportion, Whitman’s multi-lingual Manhattan is a city praised for its uneven, jostling, aspiring growth, even when it is being tactically frozen into a freestanding, reflexive emblem of itself.

In “Chants Democratic,” on the topic of cities, Whitman claims that “They stand for realities,”⁴⁴ and indeed his treatment of New York is iconic as well as pictorial, a savoring of its appearance as an emblem in which the tidal currents lapping against its contours are converted into verbal currency, in which freely wielded exclamation points visually echo and prophesy the vertical towers to come. New York City is named (at least indirectly) for a walled city in England and yet Whitman’s New York studies are frequently exercises in wall-toppling, tactically blurring the divisions between city-as-space and city-as-grammatical-unit. When referring to a pavement capable of “blabbing,”⁴⁵ Whitman is issuing a second-person, animistic address to a geophysical address. In “Mannahatta,” the island city is its own muse, in a praise-song aimed at its futurism but also elegiac toward its aboriginal past. The poem is an amulet and an attractor of vertically planted exclamation points, an ode to skyward expansion expressed in long-limbed horizontal lines, forming a figurative chiasmus.

13

These crossovers between an object and its name both intersect with and depart from earlier Transcendental accounts. Philip F. Gura

describes an Emerson who clings to a neo-Platonic, tripartite separation between words and things and the Spirit,⁴⁶ but Whitman is a self-professed poet of “inseparable cities”⁴⁷ and their inseparable names and realities, not only a bard of that paradoxical sub-genre the urban pastoral, but also an elegiac futurist and a nostalgic neophile.

Particularly in those poems of enumeration, nomenclature, and catalogue like “A Song for Occupations” and “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” Whitman in his Adamic mode is a compulsive namer, or at least noun-er, while in his less-noticed atomic mode he is a dissector of components, including the towering, nesting ligatures of letters themselves. Toward the more occult edges of American linguistics, the likes of Charles Kraitsir and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody had preceded Whitman in asserting that names and words resonate with the objects they refer to as part of a universal currency. Whitman asserted a near-gnostic belief in a “Real Dictionary” and a “Real Grammar” underlying the passing custom of human usage: “Words are not original and arbitrary,” but rather “Words are a result”⁴⁸ in “The Primer of Words,” demonstrating an anti-Conventionalist, neo-Naturalist view of how words arise, a view that dates back to at least Plato’s *Cratylus*.⁴⁹ In the *Notes and Fragments* eventually published by Dr. Richard M. Bucke, Whitman rails in favor of the avoidance of similes in favor of “perfect likelihoods of nature,”⁵⁰ denying the liminal gap between words and their objects just as he did in a poem about a city residing at the liminal border between the North American continent and the Atlantic Ocean.

If, in the Transcendental account, external Nature is Spirit made symbolically manifest, a skyline seen as an embodiment of an underlying Word is also a claim that human labor is as imbricated in this process as the labor of beavers and bumblebees. Emerson’s “One must be an inventor to read well”⁵¹ is updated-though-unstated in Whitman to something like “One must be a builder and printer to write with full cognizance.” By regarding his writing as complicit with the building of a post-native city and yet also a revivalist of native claims, he implicates and exonerates himself with a single gesture. Whitman defined his much-used keyword “Ensemble” as a “noble word with immense vista,”⁵² and when one considers that “noble” is often a Rousseauvian

condescension toward so-called savages and “vista” often another word for “skyline,” we have a recipe for one of Whitman’s more problematic cultural presumptions, in which his search for a prelapsarian nomenclature veers into primitivism.

14

Whitman foresaw English becoming “a sort of universal absorber, combiner, and conqueror,”⁵³ and yet uses Indian names as evidence of a spiritual (or least linguistic) resistance to such absorption and conquest. Despite his self-avowed personal resistance to the “elder modes” of accumulated language,⁵⁴ he views Native words as elemental objects that are fated to supersede their imposed successors. These vacillations have played out in several historical ironies: a twentieth-century Manhattan skyline that would eventually be assembled at its uppermost heights by many an Iroquois iron-worker, Indian waters eerily renamed “kills” (from the Dutch word for riverbed), and a subway system that is a scrambled alphabet that frequently mimics the footpaths and corridors of a more native landscape.

Part of Whitman’s preference for “Mannahatta” was his historical hatred of James II, Duke of York, a despicable despot in his view. As well, his Quakerism that substituted month-numbers for month-names may have also led to him to prefer numbered streets to streets whose names reeked of conquest or feudalism, according to Leon Howard.⁵⁵ Whitman favors “Yankeeisms” in his “Rules of Composition,”⁵⁶ but also advocates for the overturning of such Yankeeisms. He was a self-declared disciple of Josiah Clark Nott’s evolutionary view that “every idiom is an organism,”⁵⁷ but clearly sees Mannahatta as a commemorative fossil as much as a living specimen and at times seems to want at once to revel in Manifest Destiny and efface its named evidence.

This ambivalence underscores the signature irony of “Mannahatta,” one that Whitman pursued across his entire, ensuing career: words as humanly constructed and words as organically essential, as natively belonging and politically imposed. Harold Bloom has discussed the importance of the word “tally” and the image of the tally-stick for Whitman,⁵⁸ and indeed the Manhattan skyline can be likened to a

linear series of imperialist tallies notched onto the aboriginal bark of Mannahatta. Whitman claims that the very word “Indian” is a “mistake perpetuated in a word,”⁵⁹ though this is problematic as the word “India” derives from a Sanskrit word for “river” and has only a questionable connection to the Romance word *indio* for “native.” Still, this etymological tangle is indicative of Whitman’s own rhetorical rootedness, and its knotting-together of the indigenous and the arriviste.

“Mannahatta” could be considered to be Whitman’s “A Passage to a Different Kind of India,” a longing for primeval perfection bred by an Adamism that is a denial of the past but also a self-appointed ambassadorship to aboriginal inputs. If British English is indeed brawny enough to take in American expression, Whitman encourages an American dialect limber enough to absorb more native tongues. Whitman as a reader of “red aborigines” tramples into all manner of racial presumption and projection (a tragic tendency perhaps most incisively skewered by D.H. Lawrence), but contends that said natives have been “charging the water and land with names,”⁶⁰ in a recurring pun on the word “charge” as accusation and as polarization.

This sense of language as a chthonic element also plays out across Whitman’s career: In “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” words cannot be reduced to mere “curves, angles, dots,”⁶¹ but inhere in the soil, air, and water. James Perrin Warren points toward his “vocabulary of pure presence or substance,”⁶² and, while Whitman at his most boisterous seems temperamentally unsuited for his inherited Quakerism’s smallness and stillness of voice, his belief in a language before language is telling. In a cross-generational communique like “To the Sayers of Words,” he contends that “print cannot touch” our planet’s “unspoken meanings,” but perhaps a building’s monumental dimensions can more closely mimic a planet’s epic “intent”⁶³ and words “never in any print”⁶⁴ are best incarnated at the epochal scale of a skyline instead of a penned-down/pent-up page.

Heidegger, deploying a complex intersection of Germanic roots, would eventually associate writing with a form of dwelling, an association that Whitman foreshadowed in his semiotic environments, in which words are refuges and havens as well as frontiers and provoca-

tions. Whitman eventually began to refer to the accumulating additions to the later editions of *Leaves of Grass* as “annexes,” add-on galleries to the main structure of his oeuvre: to “annex” is to subsume or to colonize as well as to extend. Suitably, a mall, a high school, a park, a library, a summer camp, and a bridge spanning the Delaware river would come to bear Whitman’s moniker, as if marked by the stamp of his writing/building conflations.

15

“Mannahatta” turns a preliterate term into fixed print, and if a poem’s title is its own page-heading skyline, “Mannahatta” is a word-for-place, word-for-poem, and word-on-page all at once. As such, it is a ripe seedbed for further riffing. Following on Whitman’s city-silhouette-as-sentence premise, if “Mannahatta” is anagrammed into the half-Spanish “Manana That,” it translates suitably into Push It Forward into Tomorrow. If MANNAHATTA is spelled in all upper-case letters and held up to a mirror, only its N’s are not bilaterally symmetrical enough to survive the reversal intact, and so nearly the entire word is self-rhyming on a visual scale as well. If the capital M is given its own master suite (and joined by the aspirant H), its remaining letters are a quartet of identical vowels and two sets of twinned consonants, forming paired squares like city blocks.

More orally, if “Mannahatta” is a mouth-map, it moves from bilabial to nasal to aspirant to dental, democratically enlisting all of the human head’s tongue-assisting speech organs into a cranial concerto. In “Chants Democratic and Native American,” over two dozen lines begin with an orbital, orotund “O,” a sigil of awe and a dilator of lips, as if assonance were not only an auditory occurrence between two sounds but a kinetic occurrence between a sound and the mouth that formed it. If Wall St.’s stock firms now rate investment bonds up to triple-A, Whitman’s quadruple-A, assonating title word is itself a form of poetic re-investment in native roots. If Manhattan’s skyline were a dental record or a bite-mark, in 1860

its predatory canines would have been its Catholic cathedrals and its grinding molars would have been its factories and sweatshops.

As well, abundant overlaps between Whitman's evolving book-forms and New York City's surging growth can also be found (and forged). Manhattan's architecture features vernacular postmodern structures abutting Greco-Roman neo-classicism, just as Whitman's vocabulary abuts free-soil hectoring, Bowery slang, Quakerisms, and Latinate locutions. The first *Leaves of Grass* was published on large, legal-sized sheets (quartos that resembled four-way traffic intersections) even as its language came close to breaking the law, while its most ornate edition's gilded page-edges embodied and reflected America's own Gilded Age. *Two Rivulets* (a limited-run companion volume to the 1876 *Leaves of Grass*) isn't named for the Hudson and East Rivers that bracket Manhattan, but rather for the twin forces of poetry and prose: Whitman's vacillations over how broad or narrow to make his margins reflect Manhattan's waterfront being ever-changed by landfill, erosion, and the like. The title *Rambles Among Words* (an anthology of etymologies to which Whitman contributed two key chapters) suggests language as a landscape and reading and writing as forms of walking. Whitman eventually complained of a rapidly developing city's "interminable rows" (which could cruelly apply to some of the overstuffed later versions of his ever-accumulating career book), seeming to prefer the vertical growth of Manhattan to its horizontal expansion. Still, the various overhauled editions of *Leaves of Grass* themselves reflect Manhattan's fabled self-reinventions: Whitman reportedly didn't like much empty space in his printed texts, in some sense presaging Manhattan's own assault on open space.

Ultimately, the city's vertical outline is the chart of what Whitman referred to as "the ecstatic fever of dreams" and the EKG of what he called "the pulse of the continent." This poet, born in the vaguely W-shaped hamlet of Huntington on "fish-shaped" Long Island, would suitably die in Camden, the nation's leading alphabet-soup manufacturer, amid a swirling compost of old letters and papers, as if being swallowed up and reclaimed by the very materials by which he had made his name.

Whitman partook of a generation-spanning letteristic American lineage: Emerson seeing the character “U” as a pictogram for the scooped tongue’s retroflex needed to pronounce “U,” Wallace Stevens seeing the letter “C” as an icon for ascorbic acid but also an icon of a bitten-into citrus fruit, e. e. cummings scattering the letters of “grasshopper” into a line-hopping arc. This letterism is clearly a more micro-attentive aspect to the American Adamism optimistically intent on forging a national literature out of resistant circumstances. Henry James once referred to Manhattan’s grid system as America’s “primal topographic curse,” but Whitman clearly sees the city’s skyline as its post-primal profile, a code-word arranged out of housing-code, and a brand-name made of buildings.

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NOTES

- 1 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 404-405. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org). All quotes in this essay, unless otherwise noted, are from this version of the poem.
- 2 Whitman, *An American Primer*, ed. Horace Traubel (G.P. Putnam’s Sons: London, 1904), 33. Hereafter: *Primer*.
- 3 David Carr, “View Interrupted: The Spoiling of Manhattan’s Skyline,” *The New York Times* (May 31, 2014), SR6.
- 4 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892), 128. Hereafter: LG1892. Available on the *Whitman Archive*.
- 5 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Poetry and Imagination,” *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: G. Bell & Sons, 1904), 199.
- 6 Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 108.
- 7 Whitman “Slang in America,” *Complete Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891), 404.
- 8 Whitman “Slang,” 404.
- 9 LG1892, 48.

- 10 LG1860, 279.
- 11 Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Romance of Language* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), 389.
- 12 Whitman, *American Primer*, 18.
- 13 *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Horace Traubel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 6:132. Available on the *Whitman Archive*.
- 14 LG1892, 20.
- 15 West, 370.
- 16 *Primer*, 34.
- 17 *Primer*, 44.
- 18 Charles Kraitsir, *Glossology: Being a Treatise on the Nature of Language, and on the Language of Nature* (New York: George Putnam, 1852), 17.
- 19 George W. James, "Indications of Character in Handwriting—No. 8," *The Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* 83.5 (1886), 243
- 20 Barbara Henry, *Walt Whitman's Faces: A Typographic Reading* (Jersey City: Harsimus Press, 2012), 35.
- 21 Whitman, "Brooklyniana, No. 6," *Brooklyn Standard* (January 11, 1862), also in Emory Holloway, ed. *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1921), 245–249.
- 22 LG1860, 154.
- 23 Andrew Lawson, *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 14.
- 24 LG1892, 193.
- 25 LG1860, 90.
- 26 LG1892, 368.
- 27 David Sacks, *Language Visible: Unraveling the Mystery of the Alphabet from A to Z* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 330–337.
- 28 Richard Rhodes, "Aural Images," in *Sound Symbolism*, ed. Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols, and John J. Ohala (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 276–292.
- 29 Cited in Rufus A. Coleman's "Trowbridge and Whitman," *PMLA* 63 (1948), 263.
- 30 John Burroughs, *Whitman, A Study* (Boston, New York City: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1896), 62.
- 31 LG1892, 48.
- 32 Harold Bloom makes this connection in his discussion of Whitman as an

“intuitive Kabbalist” in *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 58.

33 Rosenblatt reads Whitman as a kind of inflation ad absurdum of Romantic/Emersonian organicism in positing his “kosmo words” as living anatomies, frequently to comic and grotesque ends (“Whitman’s Body, Whitman’s Language,” in *Walt Whitman Here and Now*, ed. Joann P. Krieg [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985], 103-104).

34 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: W.E. Chapin & Co, 1867), 232. Available on the *Whitman Archive*. The poem would ultimately be titled “A Song of the Rolling Earth.”

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36 *Primer*, 21.

37 Whitman, “Life in a New York Market,” a March 16th 1842 *Aurora* editorial in *Whitman’s Selected Journalism*, ed. Douglas A. Noverr and Jason Stacy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 189.

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39 Cited in Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4220.

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45 LG1860, 225.

46 Philip F. Gura, “Henry Thoreau and the Wisdom of Words,” *The New England Quarterly* 52 (1979), 38-54.

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48 *Primer*, 6-8.

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57 Josiah Clark Nott, *Indigenous Races of the Earth Or, New Chapter of Ethnological Enquiry* (J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1857), 32.

58 Harold Bloom, “Whitman’s Image of Voice: To the Tally of My Soul,” in *The American Renaissance* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004), 127-146.

59 Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 5:1664.

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63 LG1892, 159.

64 *Primer*, 6.