

## Whitman's Frames

IT IS STILL EXTRAORDINARILY difficult for critics to hear Whitman's prefaces.<sup>1</sup> Because of the extreme compression and convoluted syntax, his prose has been denigrated as dense and "inconsistent."<sup>2</sup> We are misled, however, if we apply these appellations to Whitman's style and his overlooked rhetorical strategies.

First, however, the question of style in Whitman's poems must be addressed. It is usually and understandably identified with his poems, especially poems from the editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Harold Bloom's controversial claim in 1994 for "Walt Whitman as Center of the American Canon"<sup>3</sup> rests primarily with an analysis of his style in the poems from these editions, and a steady and diverse following continues to discover in Whitman's style justifications for Philip Fisher's description of Whitman as "a grounding fact for all later American culture, as Homer was for Greek culture, or as Shakespeare became for England."<sup>4</sup> Such identifications of

<sup>1</sup> Remarkably few essays dwell on the prefaces; two that do are by C. Hosek: "The Rhetoric of Whitman's 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*," *Walt Whitman Review* 25 (1979): 163-73; and "Whitman's Catalogues and the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*," *Walt Whitman Review* 23 (1977): 68-76.

<sup>2</sup> Even when a preface such as "A Backward Glance" is used to point out a "less grandiose" style than one appearing in the 1855 Preface, the indicative working word is "inconsistent": see R.W. French, "Reading Whitman," *Essays in Literature* 10.1 (Spring 1983): 75.

<sup>3</sup> *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994) 247.

<sup>4</sup> *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 12. Fisher relates "Song of Myself" to the Constitution, as an outline, and immediately links Whitman's poetics to "Lincoln's political idea," emphasizing "unity" (see 56-57).

style of course include discussions of Whitman's groundbreaking free verse, as well as other innovations in meter or figurative language.

The actual difficulty in pursuing Whitman's style head-on, however, is equally well documented. A reviewer in July of 1855 from *Life Illustrated* practically gives up on naming it: "Lines of rhythmical prose, or a series of *utterances* (we know not what else to call them)."<sup>5</sup> Later that year, in September, another reviewer in *United States Review* decides to let Whitman's style speak for itself: "The style of these poems, therefore, is simply their own style ..." (Price 10). Oscar Wilde is still more blatant: "If Poetry has passed him by, Philosophy will take note of him."<sup>6</sup> Fellow poet William Carlos Williams in 1955, chasing style, hears the same drumbeat of ideas, finding a message where he expects "light," or poetry: "He had seen a great light but forgot almost at once after the first revelation everything but his 'message' ...."<sup>7</sup>

Whitman's "message"—still another name for what Charles A. Dana named, one hundred years earlier, Whitman's "bold, stirring *thoughts*" (emphasis mine)<sup>8</sup>—continues to dominate discussions of style, receiving extensive attention in contemporary criticism; discussions shaped by "message" or "thoughts," not uncommonly on the spectrum between unity and lawlessness, predominate. At present, of course, such discussions are resituated in terms of context, best described by Betsy Erkkila in an excellent collection *Breaking Bounds*: "rethinking the very *meaning* we bring to such terms as American, literature, history, culture, and Walt Whitman himself" (italics mine).<sup>9</sup> Addressing Whitman's style directly in an earlier essay, Erkkila says of *Autumn Rivulets*, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, and *From Noon to Starry Night*, "These clusters radiate in ever-widening concentric circles from a focus on self, life, body, light, day, and the social world toward a focus on the cosmos, death, soul, darkness, night, and the spiritual world. At the same

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth M. Price, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, *American Critical Archives* 9 (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996) 8.

<sup>6</sup> "The Gospel According to Walt Whitman," *Pull Mall Gazette* 25 January 1889: 3.

<sup>7</sup> "An Essay on *Leaves of Grass*," *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After*, ed. Milton Hindus (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 1955) 35.

<sup>8</sup> "New Publications: *Leaves of Grass*," *Daily Tribune* [New York] 23 July 1855: 3.

<sup>9</sup> "Introduction: *Breaking Bounds*," *Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies*, ed. Betsy Erkkila and Jay Grossman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 8.

time, these clusters and the poems they include continually fold back on one another chronologically and thematically, temporally and spatially, in a manner that suggest the image of ensemble—of 'form and union and plan'—that is the final design and desire of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>10</sup> Even in Bloom's essay on Whitman, a search for style and design yields ground to an analysis of another founding trope of America, here, "originality": "Whitman's originality has less to do with his supposedly free verse ..." (248).

As difficult as his *poems* have proved to be for style, they are considered, at least, to have one. His prefaces have not fared nearly as well. Even the Preface of 1855 is usually ignored by those searching for style, and landing in "meaning," whether adjudicated through "thoughts" or discourse. Yet it proposes prose and explanation, as the poems do not. It provides, therefore, a case in point for examining the question of style and discourse relevant to poems and prose. If approached in terms of rhetoric it reveals a style predicated on overdetermined comic tension, a humour that overlooks meaning. To hear the overdetermination in the humour, it is necessary to know its background in America. Robert A. Ferguson notes something important about rhetoric and style, detailing strategies of control in the literature of the Founders. The struggle to articulate style is described this way: "But neither the discovery of proto-American characteristics in the first approach nor the search for philosophical consistencies in the second explains the vitality of the works in question." Ferguson reiterates, "Again it is the combination that counts. Thematic simplicity and rhetorical complexity seem a peculiar blend, but they always connect in a language of political statement. We have seen that the Founders are political writers who create a consensual literature for a diverse and divided citizenry. They write to reconcile."<sup>11</sup> This combination in politics of "thematic simplicity and rhetorical complexity" is useful in helping to put a finger on why so much attention has been paid to "meaning" (or crises of meanings) and why the stylistic complexity in Whitman's poems and prose has generally lost the battles, but not the war. By isolating one feature of the prefaces, the comic ele-

<sup>10</sup> *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 292.

<sup>11</sup> "We Hold These Truths": Strategies of Control in the Literature of the Founders," *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, Harvard English Studies 15 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986) 24–25.

ment resulting from a tension between different historically-mediated voicings, we can begin to hear what Ferguson aptly names the problematic "language of many levels" (25).

Recovering the critical clamour that surrounds Whitman's prefaces, we see that they create a complex frame that suggests, and grounds into words, continuing misapprehensions of "meaning" or "originality," resolving the problem of the search in a style that does not solve it. I will for the most part focus on the Preface of 1855 to *Leaves of Grass*. Though independent, each preface is part of a larger design (the 1876 Preface is not a resonating revision, as it is often claimed to be, but a formal extension). Each reveals a complex exploitation of a contrived frame. And to see them in this shape allows us to overhear Whitman's comedy of overdetermined voices that has not been heard. It deserves to be.

In the nineteenth century, many American men of letters agreed that although America had gained commercial success, it lacked a national poet. Walter Channing, for example, lamented the gap between America's letters and its other achievements: "In science, and more especially in the fine arts, America has done its part for the world." But he does not fail to note its coming-up short: "Why is this country deficient in literature?"<sup>12</sup> Evaluating America's "moral and intellectual power" in 1830, William Ellery Channing posed several versions of what he saw as "the great question" for America: "Do we possess, indeed, what may be called a national literature? Have we produced eminent writers in the various departments of intellectual effort? Are our chief resources of instruction and literary enjoyment furnished from ourselves? We regret that the reply to these questions is so obvious."<sup>13</sup>

Whitman's Preface of 1855 does not answer this attitude in kind—by formal exposition. It refits and recategorizes what appears stable in a frame. Writers—such as Pope in his *Moral Essays*, or Swift in *A Tale of a Tub*—have frequently spoken through personae. Whitman adapts this concept, discarding the well-known irony. One voice—in an oversimplification I will designate it as the

<sup>12</sup> "Essay on American Language and Literature," *The North-American Review and Miscellaneous Journal* 1 (September 1815): 307.

<sup>13</sup> William Ellery Channing, "Remarks on National Literature," *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D., Seventeenth Complete Edition with an Introduction, Making of America Books, E-Book 1* (Boston: Unitarian Association; Walker, Fuller, and Company, New York: James Miller, 1866): 245, 252.

first voice, though attitude or action is closer—follows the Channings and others to convey the cowering arguments of those who see an American lack in letters. It colludes with the hesitant critics who see a country's lagging literary achievement. A second act of voicing—which refits expectations of achievement to state the achieved—simultaneously dislodges that data: "facts" of the doubters are mouthed, made fictionally redundant, leaving open renaming in real time. In the prefaces, thus, there is a drama between a defensive first voicing and an offensive second one. In Whitman's framing of fact into fiction, as a way to reintroduce what constitutes "fact," the standing round of opinions that denigrate America's literary strength is enacted, fictionalized as a form of resistance, and reintroduced as self-evident, non-fictional, and available. Mock declarations of simplicity are fantastic frames: "What I tell I tell precisely for what it is" (719) and "How beautiful is candor!"<sup>14</sup>

This frame, however, is not the traditional "story within a story" or an "embedded narrative."<sup>15</sup> The frame is not identified by interlocking characters (such as Nelly Dean and Lockwood in *Wutbering Heights*) or plots (such as the Cass Mastern episode in *All the King's Men*), but voices in time. Such is the case with the even more arcane *Tale of a Tub* too, but Swift's tale exploits corrosive irony. Whitman's frames do not. They exploit rhetorical confusion, honouring and humouring it with a frame and the participation associated with it, not framing it for humour.

George Tucker's defensive language from 1822 represents critics such as Richard Henry Dana, Sr., Edward Tyrell Channing, and Royall Tyler, who defensively all but admit the fate of America's exclusion from "genius": "It will scarcely be denied, that if we examine the individuals of the two continents, with a view to compare their senses and their bodily powers, no difference can be observed." He concludes that "genius is not the exclusive gift of any country."<sup>16</sup> In a prefatory letter to Emerson (from the 1856 Preface) the language of the first voice strikes up with the defen-

<sup>14</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973) 724.

<sup>15</sup> William Nelles, *Frameworks: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997) 1.

<sup>16</sup> George Tucker, *Essays by a Citizen of Virginia: Essays on Various Subjects of Taste, Morals, and National Policy by a Citizen of Virginia* (Georgetown, DC: Joseph Milligan and Jacob Gideon, Junior, Printer, 1822) 42, 66.

siveness of George Tucker's, that no American poet at present is up to the mark, saying defensively, "Of course, we shall have a national character, an identity." Then the second voice, in but a shade of difference, appears, nonetheless blindsiding the first voice: "The genius of all foreign literature is clipped and cut small, compared to *our genius*" (736, italics added). To hear the snigger, one must know such writers as the Channings and their views of the obstructions that American critics saw. Fisher Ames, for example, observes, "... in democracies writers will be more afraid *of* the people, than afraid *for* them."<sup>17</sup> Inside Whitman's Preface, the second voice disagrees, defiantly declaring that the genius of the United States lies with the "common man and woman" (712). A "master" repeatedly "sees health for himself in being one of the mass .... he sees the hiatus in singular eminence. To the perfect shape comes common ground. To be under the general law is great for that is to correspond with it." This 1855 voice silently transmogrifies Ames's mob, but it is lost if the reader does not hear early American doubters.

Faithfully, the first voice mirrors the perception of the missing American "genius," who is still only yet to come, a replacement for the "priests": "There will *soon* be no more priests" (729, my italics). Such an utterance, held for a moment as truth, initially and routinely seems to be expanded by the second voice. Although the "superior breed" has yet to "arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth" (729), already (and despite Walter Channing's fears to the contrary) "The English language befriends the grand American expression" (729). But then the second voice exaggeratedly rescinds the first voice and the apparent acquiescence: "it is the *chosen* tongue to express faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage" (729-30, my italics). According to a Royall Tyler or a Richard Henry Dana, Jr. it has been anything but. The allusive jabs riddle the acted-out comic dramas.

In these plays within a play, the verbs often carry the frame. "The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races," the first voice says in future tense: "Of them a bard

<sup>17</sup> *Works of Fisher Ames with a Selection from His Speeches and Correspondence*, compiled by his son Seth Ames, "American Literature" (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1854) 439.

is to be commensurate with a people." Then the second voice slips out: "To him the other continents arrive as contributions . . . he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake" (713). The first voice's future construction ("is to be") gives way grammatically to the second voice's plain present tense ("arrive," "gives"). There is another comic drama in the ensuing scene. The second voice has echoed those critics whom the first voice is drawing on. Royall Tyler, for example, had cited "continents" as distancing the individual from each other. For the second voice, the continents are "contributions" ("the other continents arrive as contributions"). The second voice's apparent throwaway, "he gives them reception for their own sake," demonstrates that there is *already* something to offer; he is putting it to the first speaker as he has put it to Tyler.

Though they look like they are present tense verbs, "are to enclose" and "is to be" have divested themselves of their residual present-tense quality of lacking (what would have been suggested by "encloses" or "is") and "are to enclose" and "is to be" acquire instead a resonance of possibility. Between two denotations of possibility—"chance" and "realization"—lies the changeover from the first voice, who speaks but of the future, to the second voice, who stays in the present (and marks it with present tense verbs). Therefore two presences that have not yet been shaped except as constructions in a frame are presumed: the step into the future, as present momentarily creates the real present as past (that is, finished, done, over—and one that does not exist as it has existed, that is as in the manifest "contributions"). In this exchange, the reader is presented with a drama: a slip from the future (dramatized by the first voice) into the present (dramatized by the second voice). Future achievements pass for the past; they are realized. The complexities of time shifts are thereby elastic, assimilated and condensed into a seemingly simple presence.

Here is another example of the comic timing. In the 1855 Preface, for example, the first voice, initially a voice designed to represent "fact," historically refers to the "endless gestation of new states" as a source for poetry that has yet to come: "Of them [the American poets] a bard is to be commensurate with a people." Contradicting in present tense, the second voice comes in, designating poetry as immanent, *not* predicated on the future: "To him [the American bard] enter the essences of the real things and past and present events—of the enormous diversity of temperature and agriculture and mines—the tribes of red aborigines—the

weatherbeaten vessels entering new ports or making landings on rocky coasts—the first settlements north or south—the rapid stature and muscle—the haughty defiance of '76, and the war and peace and formation of the constitution" (713–14). The first voice's free fall is part of the second's standing.

So the verb tenses of the speakers are integral to the comic tension. The first voice, preferring the future tense, appears to echo contemporary American critics, acknowledging the absence of what it wants (desires and lacks): the American bard. The second voice reorganizes (*is*) the first, pulling a straight present tense from a future command. Thus the first voice seems to carry the contemporary voices of consensus, but is undermined by the second voice. The second voice *formally* renames the first voice, turning it, redundantly, into foolish fiction. Contemporary critics, such as Walter Channing or George Tucker or Fisher Ames, see little but imitation in the American bard ("Is there one luminary in our firmament that shines with unborrowed rays?" 430). Ames's rhetorical question proclaims that there is no "luminary," and the first voice acknowledges the same in the Preface by using the future tense. In contrast, the second voice, reconstructing that report, refutes contemporary verdicts and edicts. The first voice does not get it and reasserts America's current lack: "Of all nations the United States ... most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest" (714). By being forced to separate and put back together what at first appeared to be one voice, the reader, in effect, is dared to keep the facts straight (precisely what the second voice has been suggesting in his claim for a "national" poet). The second speaker is framed: the achieved unawareness that his reality is but a possibility, is formally fictionalized, thereby producing and demanding rereading as fact.

Celia M. Britton ponderously describes a related strategy. "Rather than seeking a solution to the problem as defined by the dominant culture," she says, the speaker "changes the terms of that definition—twisting the parameters of the subject's situation in such a way as to turn lack, negativity, and otherness themselves into a means of resistance and self-representation."<sup>16</sup> She has caught some

<sup>16</sup> *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 1999) 183.



of the dilemma at mid-nineteenth century. Whitman's readers are under great pressure, aware, open to play. The rhetoric twists what the local critics call America's "lack" into advantage. For example, the 1807 *Port Folio*, surveying American literature, sees a decline: "with no people, whose history is recorded, have letters flourished" in a time "prior to this auspicious period" of "ample leisure."<sup>19</sup> Leisure, far from a flaw, is actually positive, by the time the second voice appears again: "His [the American poet's] love above all love has leisure and expanse .... he leaves room ahead of himself" (717).

In these dramas, the American vernacular (or its absence) becomes a prop. "Embouchure," for example, appears in the first voice's statement in 1855: "[The bard's] spirit responds to his country's spirit .... he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not *embouchure* where they spend themselves more than they *embouchure* into him" (713, italics mine). "Embouchure" is not just found fit for American use but is made fit by relegating its humour to the first voice's voice, thereby defensively removing the language's potential to be laughed at. By adding a French word, only the first voice can make English, which has been at the centre of potential postcolonial debate, just one of the many sources for American English.<sup>20</sup> Whitman's framing of comic dramas helps to explain, therefore, the preponderance of borrowed language in his prefaces. "N'importe" (742), "surplusage" (741), "*eclaircissement*" (742), "*sine qua non*" (743), "Literatuses" (743) rain down on us.

The frame also exploits metaphors, and Whitman's Preface plays with the metaphors of youth, retardation, and "embarrassments of infancy"<sup>21</sup> which appear in the articles and newspapers at

<sup>19</sup> *The Port Folio* 4.22 (28 November 1807): 343.

<sup>20</sup> For a continuing discussion on inclusion of America in the debate on the "postcolonial," see Peter Hulme in "Including America," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.1 (January 1995): 119. He says that the "postcolonial" is (or should be) a descriptive, not an evaluative, term" (120). My own additions to the discussions are forthcoming in *ARIEL*.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see an attempted rhetorical question in *The Port Folio* 3.25 (20 June 1807): 386–87: "Do the early accounts of any nation comprise more proofs of an ardent, persevering, and aspiring temper, incessantly struggling with difficulties and dangers, unwearied and undismayed; or an intelligence more prolific in

mid-century to point out the country's lack of age.<sup>22</sup> Identifying "the causes that have *retarded* the progress of literature in the United States" (my emphasis), *The Port Folio* sees that the "cause which will primarily suggest itself is, the youth of the country." The Preface makes these descriptions part of his grist. Youth becomes a heroic person, who "leaves room ahead of himself" (717). And the Preface praises youth: "Nothing is better," says the framed voice, "than *simplicity* . . . nothing can make up for excess or for the lack of definiteness" (719, my italics). Richard Shryock calls such embedded narratives "actions";<sup>23</sup> rather than an attempt to say something, with pointless humor that but prepares the frame, the Preface attempts to *do* something.

Within the frames, there is playful doubling on a word. "Inexpressible," for example, dramatizes rhetorical play with point of view. The second voice suggests the English language (befriending the "grand American expression") "is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible." The word "inexpressible," a point of contact between the two voices, is also its moment of self-division. It comes from the first voice, which wishes to designate the *future*-bound and literal connotation of "yet-to-be expressed" American poetry. Chiding, the second voice identifies the inexpressible as an American literary characteristic. Crucially—and this is rhetorically complex—the first voice's literal connotation creates

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devices to overcome the embarrassments of infancy?" See also "Literary Prospects of 1845," *The American Review: A Wb'ig Journal of Politics, Literature Art, and Science* 1.2 (February 1845): "The beginnings are faint and scattered, but the elements are here" (149). In "American Letters—Their Character and Advancement," the writer suggests that youth is to be overcome: "Our physical triumphs are acknowledged; and in most of the great departments of intellectual power, we need not hesitate to compare ourselves with other nations. But surely we ought to be wiser than to plume ourselves yet upon our literary position. We need have no doubts of our destiny in this respect; but we are young and can afford to wait a little for a reputation." See *The American Review: A Wb'ig Journal of Politics, Literature Art, and Science* 1.6 (June 1845): 57.

<sup>22</sup> Citing a lack of hope in the "rigor of our conventions of religion and education" and "only such a future as the past," Ralph Waldo Emerson also echoes disadvantages that critics noted. See remarks from "The Editor to the Reader," *The Dial* 1.1 (July 1840), including editorial twists and turns on "backwardness." Margaret Fuller edited the journal from 1840 to 1842.

<sup>23</sup> *Tales of Storytelling: Embedded Narrative in Modern French Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) 4.

a different, more liberal connotation in the second voice. Neither voice uses it figuratively, and so the double play on literalness reveals the gap between these voices. America's poetry is thus literally—and concomitantly—coined "inexpressible." This natural loophole is played off against England's artifice of literary architecture, which later will be referred to as "constipated." The voices cannot accommodate each other.<sup>24</sup>

Since there are no easy signals for these switches in voices, it can be difficult to recognize the authorial disputations. The first voice again: "Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff *most need* poets and *will* doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest" (my italics, 714). The second voice bowls him over: "Of all mankind the great poet *is* the equable man" (my italics) and continues right up through the following: "Now he has passed that way see after him." Correction is all but impossible *because* it has already been granted; the second voice's claim: the correction has been achieved and, thus, cannot come in the future ("he has passed ..."). Anyone who gives the first voice credence, even for a moment, is gulled. But Whitman does not explicitly champion the second voice either. Point of view remains

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<sup>24</sup> For example, in the Preface of 1876, the second voice, the renegade, writes, "Poetic style, when address'd to the Soul, is less definite form, outline, sculpture, and becomes vista, music, half-tints, and even less than half-tints." The first voice reappears, responding silently to critics: "True, it may be architecture." Then he cedes his place again gradually to the second voice: "but again it may be the forest wild-wood, or the best effects thereof, at twilight, the waving oaks and cedars in the wind, and the impalpable odor" (755). Trying to describe poetic style, both voices end up with its impalpability: for the second voice, the a literal meaning, "inexpressible"; for the first, the literal inability to say, defined in exposed adjustments, the "may be," the "or," its tools for echoing "an utterance adjusted to, perhaps born of, Democracy and Modern Science, and in its very nature regardless of the old conventions, and, under the great Laws, following only its own impulses" (755). In Whitman's frame, small equivalences, such as "perhaps" in "adjusted to, perhaps born of," indicate a transition from fact to fiction. The uncertainty of the first voice, that of the framer, is a reflection of Whitman's defensiveness and an integral part of his frame: "perhaps" echoes the critics' conundrum of what comes first, poet or language? Thus the problem and frame, the first voice and the second voice, are turned inside out, making the uncertainty ("perhaps") small, syntactically negligible, but crucial. If frame texts can be said to be about "what they cannot name" (Charles Iserberg, *Telling Silence: Russian Frame Narratives of Renunciation* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993] 143) the condition makes this literal and exactly acute.

continuously less-than-certain. Ninety-five per cent is not one hundred per cent.

Defensive posturing in the Preface also exploits a longstanding storytelling technique—the shaggy dog tale.<sup>25</sup> In a classic example, one of these long narratives concludes with a fizzle ending. Jan Harold Brunvand explains that in these “No Point” stories, “a wholly unrelated and pointless punch line is told to a group containing some dupes who believe that they are hearing a genuine joke. When those in-the-know laugh, the suckers wonder what’s wrong with their sense of humor.”<sup>26</sup> Afraid to be outsiders, listeners laugh. But they do not, cannot, understand a humorous punch line as fiction that is not humorous in fact. Either they are suckers, or they redirect their attention from what they (do not) know to how they go about knowing.

In Whitman’s dodgy prefaces, the American poet is not here yet, yet to come (the first voice); but he is already present, he is in existence; “he has passed” (the second voice). Such joking around demands listeners who share a point of view, while refusing meaning, and Whitman’s frames, similar to shaggy dog jokes, work on forging a community on the offensive from defensive listeners. Whitman’s readers are those who (to use Ted Cohen’s phrase), accept a “special invitation.”<sup>27</sup> His “intimate community” of readers began even from Puritan heritage to “be a special people, an only people—none like thee in all the earth.”<sup>28</sup> For the Preface, this “intimate community” of “special people” is crucial. Those who do not acknowledge this backdrop—America’s special climate for a “bard” in 1855, despite all signs to the contrary—miss the inside humour.

<sup>25</sup> Shaggy dogs “are very, very long tales.” “Indeed the essence of telling them,” Betty Rapkins continues, “is to make them as long and detailed as you can before you reach the punch line. Well, not so much punch line, perhaps.” She concludes that telling these stories in one’s own words is the point. See Betty Rapkins, *The Leader* June/July 1981 <http://www.isd.net/stobin/story/sh-dog.html>.

<sup>26</sup> “A Classification for Shaggy Dog Stories,” *JAF* 76 (1965): 44.

<sup>27</sup> “Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy,” *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) 6–8.

<sup>28</sup> Headnote for Peter Bulkeley, *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*, ed. Alan Heimart and Andrew Delbanco (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985) 117.

Because Whitman's narratives present real effects for the actual reader, his frame is everywhere. He describes his verse form, "Thus my form has strictly grown from my *purports and facts*, and is the analogy of them ..." (755, my emphasis). His dramatic methods of writing, not only the writing, is an analogy of his "purports and facts." The most important two words in their implication for both the shaggy dog story and, here, the local context from which the strategy emerges are the words "I say." This seemingly innocent pair has a simple singular pronoun (which gains its charge from representing *two* voices) and a verb (which is more than verbal due to Whitman's dramatic frames). Neither of these two words, then, should be taken at face value. They are an extension of his jokes-that-are-not-jokes. The frequently uttered disclaimers in the Preface, "in my opinion" or "True ...," similarly, are anything but transparent; they are of course part of the fun that makes uncertainty small, syntactically and literally negligible, and therefore crucial to the making of *nonfiction*. Present verbs, such as "is" ("Here [in America] the theme is creative and has vista") collide with future ones, such as "shall" ("Their [Americans'] Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall"[714]) and sacrosanct tenses are as elastic. In the prefaces, what is being put on stage is not primarily whether there is a poet, but point of view, inherent in every shaggy dog story. The first voice frames perceived facts. But what is uttered in Whitman's dramas is not valid; the first voice's words are turned back on it, making out of perceived "real" declarations fiction. To say this another way, the first voice seems to frame what was there—no American poet—but that point of view is also part of the drama. There are voices—"Past and present and future are not disjointed but joined" (718)—that humorously point to a lurking shaggy dog that demands "a wittily unexpected and sudden ending, all the more unexpected in that the 'lead-in' and the 'lead-up' have to be deceptively leisurely and almost diffuse."<sup>29</sup>

Simply, the frames and humour in Whitman's prefaces are more important in the consideration of style than most critics have acknowledged. To hear them, the reader must know the nineteenth-

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<sup>29</sup> Eric Partridge, *The 'Shaggy Dog' Story: Its Origin, Development and Nature (with a few assembly examples)*, 2nd ed. (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970) 52.

century voices for they are in the dialogue—talked to, echoed, ribbed, parodied. The prefaces equally and demandingly insist upon establishing a community of listeners repudiating perceived fact *and* developing fiction, finding a refitted nonfiction. They must know the voices of the critical debate concerning the American poet; they must hear, and overhear, verb tenses, conditional words, foreign vocabulary, redoublings, slight shifts in syntax. They must be alert to Whitman's tension of personae and jokes and stay in-your-face upheavals, of the shaggy dog's presence (beneath this seeming long-winded, tangled exposition). In Whitman's strategy, defense has become offense; exposition, demonstration; the prefaces, humour, and the "face" itself. For too long, these frames have not been overheard for humour that is dead serious.