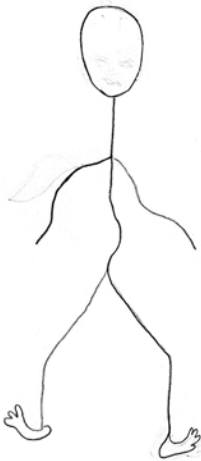


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position & disposition

In the August 1856 issue of *Life Illustrated: A Journal of Entertainment, Improvement, and Progress* (a monthly that would become the *American Phrenological Journal*), there appeared a column entitled “New York Dissected: V.—Street Yarn.”¹ In it, Walt Whitman, writing anonymously, offers readers various humorous descriptions of New Yorker types: the Episcopal deacon, the Wall Street banker, the “third-rate artist,” the harlot, the gambler, etc. These caricatures are interesting for the glimpses they provide of midcentury Manhattan street life, and, I want to note, they also work to draw attention to a not-fully-historicizable current of influence flashing between personality and what Whitman calls “phiz,” a shorthand for physiognomy + physique.² Here are a few examples from the article:



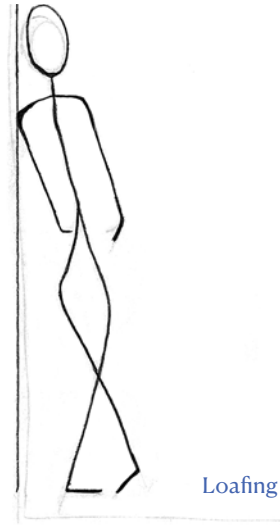
Mild, foolish, dough-colored, simpering face;
black cloth suit—shad-bellied, single-breasted
coat, . . . vest buttoned close to the throat, knees
a little bent, toes turned out, and chin down.
Episcopalian deacon.

Toes turned out



Jerk and bustle

Dress strictly respectable; hat well down on forehead; face thin, dry, close-shaven; mouth with a gripe like a vice; eye sharp and quick; brows bent; forehead scowling; step jerky and bustling. Wall Street broker.



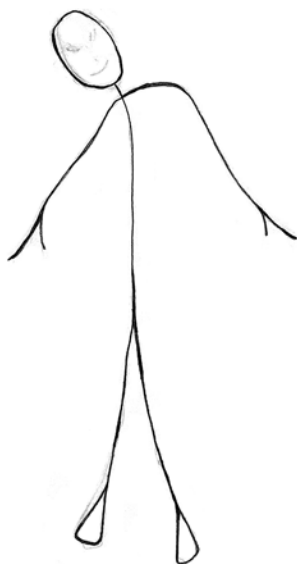
Loafing

Heavy moustache; . . . Big breast pin; heavy gold chain; . . . Hat down over brows; Loafing attitude on corner; Eye furtive, glassy, expressionless; Oath; tobacco spit. Gambler.



Alert step

A straight, trim-built, prompt, vigorous man, well dressed, with strong brown hair, beard, and moustache, and a quick and watchful eye. He steps alertly by, watching everybody. Charles A. Dana, chief editor of the *New-York Tribune*, a man of rough, strong intellect, tremendous prejudices firmly relied on, and excellent intentions.



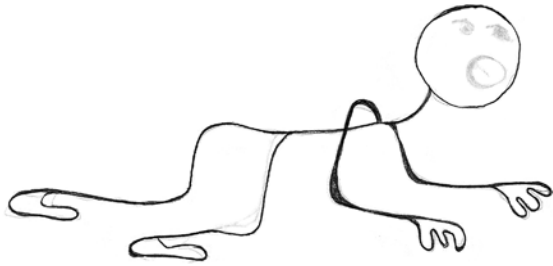
Tall, large, rough-looking man, in a journeyman carpenter's uniform. Coarse, sanguine complexion; strong, bristly, grizzled beard; singular eyes, of a semitransparent, indistinct light blue, and with that sleepy look that comes when the lid rests half way down over the pupil; careless, lounging gait. Walt Whitman, the sturdy, self-conscious microcosmic, prose-poetical author of that incongruous hash of mud and gold—"Leaves of Grass."³

Careless lounge

Two years later, in the September 12, 1868, issue of the Sunday newspaper the *New York Atlas*, there appeared a series of articles entitled "Manly Health and Training." In them, Whitman, now writing under the name Mose Velsor, again attends to the conjunction of personality and phiz. He writes of an "inevitable and curious conjunction, or rather resultance, of a fine manly moral character, out of a perfect physique."⁴ Moral character, Whitman here affirms, can be the "resultance" of physique: not only does personality *express* itself on phiz, phiz *impresses* on personality⁵—outer changes in a body's shape or movement style can induce inner changes of feeling. Whitman's serialized manual on "health and training" is premised on the productive power of phiz: readers are called to engage their flesh as lively matter whose generative force can, through careful diet and exercise, be put to the task of moral self-improvement.⁶ For Whitman, demeanors of the body comport with attitudes of the mind, in something like the way different yoga poses are said to stimulate a corresponding set of spiritual states. There is, in other words, a natural ("inevitable") and somewhat obscure ("curious") conjunction between position and disposition.⁷

Whitman's interest in this conjunction helps to explain what all those depictions of bodily posture, carriage, and gait are doing in his poetry. *Leaves of Grass* repeatedly highlights the geometry of a body in space and the rhythms of a body in motion:

Crouch



the “crouch extended with unshut mouth” (“So Long!”)
the “roll head over heels” (“Song of Myself”)
the “walk with erect carriage, a step springy and elastic” (“A Song of Joys”)
the “rise and fall of the arms” (“Song of the Broad-Axe”)
the “stand and lean on the rail” (“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”)
the standing “plumb in the uprights” (“Song of Myself”)
the “left hand” hooked “round the waist” (“Song of Myself”)
the “arm hanging idly over shoulder” (“Spontaneous Me”)
the “arms slanting down across and below the waist of the other”
 (“Spontaneous Me”)



Arm hang

the “upper hold and under-hold” (“I Sing the Body Electric”)

the “crooked inviting fingers” and “fingers across my mouth” (“Song of Myself”)

the “elbow stretching, fingers clutching” (“We Two Boys Together Clinging”)

the “rigid head and just-open’d lips” of a reclining body (“Song of Myself”)

the “bent head and arms folded over the breast” (“I Sing the Body Electric”)

the “dead on their backs with arms toss’d wide” (“Look Down Fair Moon”)

the “half-shut eyes bent sideways” (“Song of Myself”)

the “lightly closed fists and arms partially rais’d” (“The Runner”)

the “half-closed hand” (“Germs”)

the “side-curved head” (“Song of Myself”)

the “curv’d limbs, Bending, standing, astride the beams” (“Song of the Broad-Axe”)

the “lean and loafe” (“Song of Myself”)

the “press of my foot to the earth” (“Song of Myself”)

This chapter will take a closer look at the last four on that list, with the aim of highlighting how Whitman, invoking the influence of posture upon mood, tries to harness that influence to induce in his readers a specifically *democratic* disposition or “manner.” Democracy, Whitman insists, is more than a regime of governance: “Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruit in *manners*.”⁸ In speaking of “manners,” Whitman is not simply repeating that old adage of political philosophy according to which formal laws are effective only if they become installed in *social mores*. That adage appears, for example, in Alexis de Tocqueville’s claim that “manners” (defined as “the whole moral and intellectual condition of a people”) are “one of the general causes to which the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States is attributable.”⁹ It is not that Whitman disagrees with Tocqueville—manners are indeed the outgrowths (“flower and fruit”) of democratic institutions and norms. One difference, however, is that for Whitman, the sprouting of democratic manners is but one instance of a broader natural tendency to produce offspring: by likening political life to vegetal activity, Whitman, more than Tocqueville, accents the materiality of manners and locates democracy within a natural ecology. As Robert Leigh Davis puts it, Whitman attends to “forms of microcitizenship,” or the ways in which “culture enters the body

through barely visible habits of appetite, disposition, and posture: a certain way of holding one's chest or eyes, a fondness for certain kinds of food or music or reading (and a distaste for others), a learned repertoire of physical gestures and expression.¹⁰ What I add to Davis's reading is this: in addition to being alert to the subtle ways in which "culture" infiltrates the everydayness of the body, Whitman also explores the efficacy of physical postures: postures are more than expressions of culture—they are *shapers* of it. Whitman helps us to hear the word *manner* in the sense of phiz—as in "the halting manner of an old man," "the shifty manner of a fox," or "the wobbly manner in which the egg rolls on the counter." The "manners" of democracy supplement electoral and party politics not only because they add a democratic cast of mind but also because they enlist the egalitarian potential of certain bodily configurations and movement-styles.

This chapter will also place what Whitman has to say about infra-body eddies of influx and efflux in the context of two other explorations of relays between position and disposition: twenty-first-century theories of embodied cognition, and mid-nineteenth-century American advocates of "self-improvement" that enlisted elements from phrenology. What Whitman's poetry, contemporary neuroscience, and this peculiar phrenology shared was a recognition of that curious conjunction between position and disposition. The chapter ends by returning to Whitman's vision of a multilayered, highly sensuous, and egalitarian democracy.

Side-Curved Head/Nonchalance

In several poems and the 1855 *Preface*, "nonchalance" is mentioned favorably, as a mood to be courted:

O to speed where there is space enough and air enough at last!
To be absolv'd from previous ties and conventions. . . .
To find a new unthought-of nonchalance with the best of Nature!¹¹

or

A Southerner soon as a Northerner,
a planter nonchalant and hospitable down by the Oconee I live,
A Yankee bound my own way ready for trade,
my joints the limberest joints on earth and the sternest joints on
earth.¹²

or

O to struggle against great odds, to meet enemies undaunted!
To be entirely alone with them, to find how much one can stand!
To look strife, torture, prison, popular odium, face to face!
To mount the scaffold, to advance to the muzzles of guns with
perfect nonchalance!¹³

or

Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds
with the broadcast doings of the day and night
Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes. . . .
Here are the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and
nonchalance that the soul loves.¹⁴

Such celebrations of “nonchalance” may seem odd given Whitman’s predilection for an *egalitarian* pluralism and the term’s conventional reference to *aristocratic* condescension and flaunting of social privilege. This latter entails the *sprezzatura* described in Castiglione’s 1528 guide to courtly behavior.¹⁵ *Sprezzatura* signaled the carriage of carefree effortlessness befitting royal bodies freed from “external bodily movements like labor, [and] . . . internal bodily movements like emotionality and awkwardness. . . . The upper classes constructed for themselves an aristocratic body purged of those elements it shared in common with other classes.”¹⁶ Van Dyck painted Charles I in the model of Castiglione’s courtier, with a posture that Anthony King describes as one of “(studied) relaxation; . . . a graceful pose, with the left arm set akimbo, or bent from the hip, and the hand turned back.”¹⁷

Charles’s pose is strikingly similar to the one assumed by Whitman on the 1855 frontispiece of that “hash of mud and gold,” *Leaves of Grass*: again, the hand-on-hip, the slightly bent knee, the tilted head.¹⁸



Looking with side-curved head curious what will
come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.
Backward I see in my own days where I sweated
through fog
with linguists and contenders,
I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and
wait.¹⁹

Arm akimbo

What is going on here? I contend that Whitman is restaging the courtier's calm, composed bearing and neutral gaze as the stance of an ordinary citizen capable of keeping her cool (nonchalance: present participle of *nonchaloir*, from Latin *calere*, "be hot," roused with zeal or anger) in the face of the variegated foliage ("feuillage") of a messy democratic culture and the many daily challenges it poses to the primacy of any one lifestyle.²⁰ The pose of the frontispiece retains the temperate temperature of Charles I while reversing its political valence: nonchalance becomes a *democratic* disposition. *And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes;*²¹ walk at your "ease through and out of that custom or precedent or authority that suits [you] not."²² Nonchalance provides an affective detour around what might otherwise solidify as fear and antagonism; nonchalance impedes the process whereby exposure to differences crystallizes into a feeling of affront. Nonchalance buys time for more subtle and complex responses to emerge. Like the "matter-of-fact" voice of Whitman's lists,²³ and like the way an effective soldier will "advance[s] to the muzzles of guns with perfect nonchalance,"²⁴ so too can the egalitarian pluralist encounter her fellows with apersonal curiosity and nondefensive affect: *I have no mockings or arguments. I witness and wait.*²⁵

We know that Whitman was intrigued by phrenology, especially by its intuition of a link between the composition of character and the comportment of body. Of particular interest to our theme is Whitman's engagement with that branch of phrenology known as pathognomy, which focused on the relationship between personality and posture, carriage, or gait rather than on the less plastic geometry of nose, ear, or skull. We can discern the influ-



Side-curved head

ence of pathognomy on Whitman in these lines from the 1855 *Preface*: “the attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots. The turn of their neck, the sound of their feet, the motions of their wrists, are full of hazard to the one and hope to the other.”²⁶ And in these lines from “I Sing the Body Electric”:



the expression of a well-made-man appears not only in his face, It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists, It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees.²⁷

Hip and wrist

Pathognomists of Whitman’s time tended to accent expression (efflux) over impression (influx), that is to say, to present bodily postures as *effects* of the creative power of “passions or states of mind.”²⁸ Whitman’s own pictorial and poetic practice of pathognomy, however, played with the possibility that the causal arrow could go the other way too, that postures could be triggering causes of changes in mood and, ultimately, character.²⁹ Would not readers looking at Whitman’s stance on the frontispiece, for example, start to feel a bit more nonchalant themselves? And would not this nascent feeling resonate with the lines of poetry that twist nonchalance into a *democratic* stance—that is to say, one slow to be alarmed or threatened by encounters with unfamiliar persons, places, things? (Anti-immigrant racisms might find it hard to flourish in nonchalance.)

But just *how* does hand-on-hip-with-side-curved-head induce insouciance? Can more be said about the causality of the influence of position upon disposition, of phiz upon mood? Soon we will consider some more recent studies, from behavioral psychology and cognitive science, that tackle this question. For now, we might look to ordinary experience for a hypothesis: the cooling, calming effect could be a function of the slow *tempo* of nonchalance, wherein small fidgets and the restlessness of sensory attention take a pause.³⁰ With hand-on-hip and side-curved head, the “I” is both active and receptive: attentively alert but quiet and still enough to “absorb” the affects of other bodies

and atmospheres. *Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next, / Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.*³¹ So arranged into this calm but not slack posture (neither “hurried [n]or retarded”),³² a body may be more disposed to receive others with egalitarian equanimity and “poetical” curiosity, rather than with the quick judgment of “the judge with hands tight to the desk, his pallid lips pronouncing a death-sentence.”³³

In “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” we find a second posture of nonchalance. Alongside the standing lean of Charles and Walt, there is the relaxed seated position of a motherly woman who “glances as she sits, inviting none, denying none.” This woman, like the “liberty” described in the 1855 *Preface*, “sits in calmness and light, is positive and composed.”³⁴ She is earth, and she is glancing at her reflection in a mirror, at, that is, the multiple versions of herself that are the individuals of the creative process (the *natura naturata* of *natura naturans*). Her regard is nonchalant, contentedly impartial: “The earth does not exhibit itself nor refuse to exhibit itself,” she is “delaying not, hurrying not.”³⁵ Her slightly unfocused gaze, unaccompanied by any specific intention, resembles a look recommended today for the practice of meditation: “Sit comfortably on the floor in . . . a kneeling position in which the gluteals rest on the heels. Rest your hands in your lap. Find a point on the floor approximately 6 feet in front of you, and look at it with unfocused gaze.”³⁶ “The gaze should be large and broad. . . . Perception is strong and sight weak . . . it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things.”³⁷

The slight, gentle movement of glancing might also be compared to “sweeping,” which is described by François Jullien (in his exploration of Daoism) as “moving in a way that is . . . neither hurried nor fatigued, cleaving to the form of things without pressing on them or breaking away from them.”³⁸ Earth’s expansive glance also resonates with what Jullien calls “decanting.” To decant experience (or a bottle of wine) is to aerate and thereby intensify (by allowing to bloom) its subtle flavors, shades, tones, scents.³⁹ Decanting is a mode of action that obtains without striving; it follows “a logic of refinement and transformation” rather than goal-seeking. It has the “adequacy” specific to “floating.”⁴⁰

“A Song of the Rolling Earth” encourages the reader to take on, to mimetically reenact, the nonchalance of earth: “I swear there is no greatness or power that does not emulate those of the earth!” “No politics, song, religion, behavior, or what not, is of account” unless it compares with the “amplitude” and “impartiality” of the earth.⁴¹ This is also the “insouciance” of the “open countenances” of animals, inanimate things, the landscape, waters, and “the

exquisite apparition of the sky.”⁴² It is also “the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside.”⁴³ The sentiments of plants, too, are expressed by postures, as in the “tall leaning of sunflowers on their stalk”⁴⁴ or, as we shall see in chapter 5, by a movement-style, as when Thoreau’s ryeheads “nod.” Whitman’s men and women, themselves natural bodies and themselves part vegetal (*I find I incorporate . . . long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots*),⁴⁵ can, with the help of poetry, induce the insouciance they harbor within.

Consider nonchalance, then, as a stance in both the attitudinal and spatial sense. Whitman’s poems juxtapose descriptions of bodily configurations (of hand, hip, head, legs, eyes, stalks, and roots) with names for dispositions (insouciance, amplitude, impartiality). In so doing, he writes up—gives poetical inflection to—already circulating currents of influence. And he does so in order to encourage readers themselves to really feel nonchalance, to experience that disposition more intensively, as readers mimetically reproduce in their own bodies protoversions of the stances described.

Bent Back, Curv’d Limb/Pluck

In the short poem “Sparkles from the Wheel,” we meet a knife-grinder absorbed in his task:

Bending over, he carefully holds it to the stone—by foot and knee,
With measured tread, he turns rapidly—As he presses with light
but firm hand.
Forth issue, then, in copious golden jets,
Sparkles from the wheel.

This poem salutes both the excited sparkles of its title (“diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting, in tiny showers of gold”) and the less ecstatic position of a body “bending over” and following a “measured tread.” A similar posture of bent back hard at work, with a similarly repetitive rhythm (this time of the “rise and fall of the arms” of construction workers), appears in “Song of the Broad-Axe”:

The blows of mallets and hammers, the attitudes of the men, their
curv’d limbs,
Bending, standing, astride the beams, driving in pins,
. . . the floor-men forcing the planks close to be nail’d,
Their postures bringing their weapons downward on the bearers.⁴⁶



Bent back

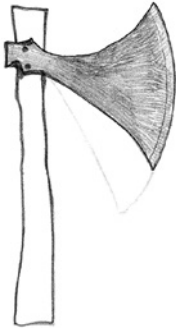
In these lines, Whitman seems to be engaged in what Derek McCormack (following Henri Lefebvre) calls “rhythmanalysis”: the attempt to provide an account of the body “as a set of rhythmic relations through which the spatiotemporal turbulence of everyday life registers as so many intensities of feeling.”⁴⁷ Whitman names the mood associated with the muscular repetitions of bent back and curved limbs *pluck*: “Muscle and pluck forever!”⁴⁸ The muscle-and-pluck combo reappears in “I Sing the Body Electric”:

Examine these limbs, red, black, or white, they are cunning in
tendon and nerve,
They shall be stript that you may see them.
Exquisite senses, life-lit eyes, pluck, volition,
Flakes of breast-muscle, pliant backbone and neck, flesh not flabby,
good-sized arms and legs,
And wonders within there yet.

“Pluck” is a combination of assiduousness (willingness to work hard), thrift, prudence, and the independent-mindedness of men and women who “think lightly of the laws” and for whom “outside authority enters always after the precedence of inside authority.”⁴⁹ Pluck is the self-respecting self-discipline of a citizen up to the task of self-rule. Pluck links Whitman to what Max Weber will describe as the Protestant work ethic.

It is noteworthy that Whitmanian “pluck” is not an exclusively human attitude or stance. Just as “Sparkles from the Wheel” attends to the assiduousness of man *and* things, “Song of the Broad-Axe” celebrates not only the crafter and wielder of axes but also the shape and movement-style of the axe.

Its material composition—heavy metal on top, lighter wood below—conjoins with gravity to *encourage* the downward swing:



Weapon, shapely, naked, wan!
Head from the mother's bowels drawn!
Wooded flesh and metal bone!
Limb only one, and lip only one!
Gray-blue leaf by red-heat grown! helve produced
 from a little see sown!
Resting the grass amid and upon,
To be lean'd, and to lean on.⁵⁰

Broad-axe

The mobile axe enables and cooperates with the pluck of men, which is a vitality emanating from “the limber motion of brawny young arms and hips.”⁵¹ And so, while the poem celebrates *homo faber*, it also makes clear that the real source of endeavoring is multiple and ontologically diverse. The wooded flesh, the metal ore, the broad-axe tool, and the human miners and loggers and wielders *together* form the collective agency of pluck. And it is by virtue of this conjoint efficacy, distributed across many cooperating bodies, that “shapes” continue to arise:

The shapes arise!
The shape measur'd, saw'd, jack'd, join'd, stain'd,
The coffin-shape for the dead to lie within in his shroud,
The shape got out in posts, in the bedstead posts, in the posts of the
 bride's bed,
The shape of the little trough, the shape of the rockers beneath, the
 shape of the babe's cradle,
The shape of the floor-planks, the floor-planks for dancers' feet,
The shape of the planks of the family home, the home of the
 friendly parents and children,
The shape of the roof of the home of the happy young man and
 woman.⁵²

and then, finally,

Shapes of Democracy total, result of centuries,
Shapes ever projecting other shapes . . .
Shapes bracing the earth and braced with the whole earth.⁵³

Democracy, for Whitman, consists not only in a set of institutions of governance but in a set of postures and moods of rhythmic bodies (human and not).

Leaning/Dilation

In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” we meet commuters “who stand and lean on the rail.” In “Spontaneous Me,” two sleepers lay close, each with “arms slanting down across and below the waist of the other.” The I of “Song of Myself” likewise appears at an angle off the perpendicular: “*I loafe and invite my soul, I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*”⁵⁴

Nonhuman bodies too appear aslant, as, for example, the “firelock lean’d in the corner” in the house of a sympathetic white I where “a runaway slave” finds shelter. The gun, aimed at fugitive slave hunters, adds to the trajectory of the enslaved man’s line of flight.⁵⁵ And when the leaning and loafing I eyes a blade of grass, the grass too tilts toward him—for how could there even *be* the sight of grass were there not also a certain vegetal leaning in favor of human perception? The grass provokes attention, presses upon human senses—even if it is impossible to determine whether we or it was the first to engage in the



Loafing

circuit of influence. In a world of tendential materials, “whether you are a mover or . . . a relay for flow processing . . . is never quite clear.”⁵⁶

Whitman’s poems are full of bodies, body-parts, and objects that are on the bias and biased, leaning and luring. Famous for his poetry of lists, we here note that Whitman also explores “list” as a verb: like a ship that lists to one side, “Song of the Open Road” speaks of “Going where I list,”⁵⁷ just as, in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” “I wend to the shores I know not, / . . . I list to the dirge, the voices of men and women wreck’d.”⁵⁸ Whitman’s outgoing, inclined bodies—full of “adhesiveness”⁵⁹—present a sharp contrast to what Adrianna Cavarero has identified as a Kantian I on guard against “inclination:” “the Kantian moral I, in whom verticality and autonomy coincide, manifests a motivated alarm for the phenomenon of inclination and therefore fiercely contrasts with either the various inclinations—passions, impulses, desires—that affect the human animal or the stereotypical attitude of mothers and women to incline toward the vulnerable creature depending on them, the newborn, the child.”⁶⁰

What disposition corresponds to a tilted position? It might be called “dilation,” Whitman’s term for a body’s capacity to open its pores to the outside, to (in the example given by Michael Moon) “dilate the throat in utterance, in speech, ‘chant,’ or song.”⁶¹ To be dilated is, as Whitman says in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” to be “unclosed to good and evil” alike.⁶² Dilated, one is vulnerable to affections, to being affected by the world: “My limbs, my veins dilate; The blood of the world has fill’d me full.”⁶³ The dilated self encourages more of the outside to seep in—even as more of its insides ooze out. “Dilation,” the complement to the more detached witnessing that is “nonchalance,” is a presumptive friendliness. This effusive affability is at the same time a becoming-diffuse and trans-individual;⁶⁴ it is to inhabit a personality that is distributed and distributive; it is to live an existence that goes beyond the human being experiencing it.⁶⁵

Before turning to a fourth and final Whitmanian pose—that of a foot-fall—let us look at how the idea of an “inevitable and curious conjunction” between position and disposition has been taken up in two other genres: twenty-first-century cognitive science and a nineteenth-century discourse of self-improvement.

Sciences of Embodied Cognition

At roughly the same time that Whitman was engaged in poetic experiments with sympathies between phiz and mood, Darwin was pursuing his own em-

pirical studies of the topic in *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). As that title makes clear, Darwin figured that relationship as the *expression* of mind upon body: a proud man, for example, “*exhibits* his sense of superiority over others by holding his head and body erect. He is haughty (haut), or high, and makes himself appear as large as possible.” Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton took up the task of finding ways to quantify the bodily expression of emotion. He noted, for example, that the correlation between a leaning posture and a feeling of affection could be specified by measuring the distribution of weight along the legs of two people sitting side by side: “when two persons have an ‘inclination’ to one another, they visibly incline or slope together . . . and they then throw the stress of their weights on the near legs of their chairs.”⁶⁶

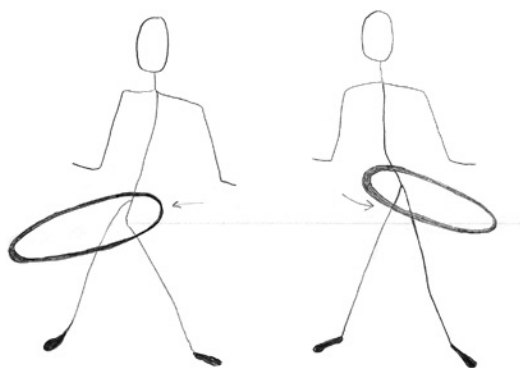
Since then, a large body of research in social psychology and cognitive science (under the banners of “embodied,” enacted,” and “extended” cognition)⁶⁷ has continued to try to measure how “emotional states affect the somatovisceral and motoric systems (e.g., mood affects posture).”⁶⁸ Early waves of this experimental science aimed, as did Darwin and Galton, to confirm scientifically the testimony of ordinary experience that inner feelings and states of mind were *expressed* in corresponding body-postures and movement-styles. These studies demonstrated that an already established sense of pride manifests in an erect posture, that a preexisting mutual affection expresses as an inclined or leaning pose, that an extant fear displays itself as a trembling limb, that amusement presents as a smile, and that a feeling of power is conveyed by “widespread limbs and enlargement of occupied space by spreading out.”⁶⁹

More intriguing, however, is the next wave of experiments, which inquire into the “bidirectional influence” between posture and mood. These suggest what Whitman seemed to intuit, that is, that not only is mood *exhibited* or *expressed* in muscular configurations, those configurations (the “somatovisceral and motoric systems”) can *generate* moods. Not only do frowns indicate sadness, “botox injections to reduce frown lines . . . reduce depression in people with major depression.”⁷⁰ Not only does a feeling of power “exhibit” itself as a haughty posture, the posture has generative power of its own: it can “actually produce . . . feelings of power, elevation of the dominance hormone testosterone, lowering of the stress hormone cortisol, and an increased tolerance for risk.”⁷¹ Adopting “an upright seated posture in the face of stress can maintain self-esteem, reduce negative mood, and increase positive mood compared to a slumped posture. Furthermore, sitting upright increases rate of speech and reduces self-focus.”⁷² The angle of the seated body has also been shown to affect the

“memory bias” of persons with depression, who tend to have “enhanced encoding and recall of negative self-referent material and . . . a reduced processing of positive information.” Depressed patients “in a slumped posture recalled more negative than positive words in comparison with upright-sitting patients. . . . Bodily aspects such as posture or movement patterns (e.g., gait characteristics) might be more than epiphenomena of psychopathology but also might contribute to an escalation of distorted process in psychological disorders.”⁷³

What is more, not only do smiles betoken amusement, but participants who were “asked to contract the zygomaticus major muscle, which is involved in the production of a human smile, by having a pen between their teeth, enjoyed cartoons more than those who were prevented from contracting the zygomaticus.”⁷⁴ Not only do Galton’s lovers express their mutual attraction by shifting their weight toward each other, an “approach” posture (leaning forward) induces a mood of generous receptivity, just as an “avoidance” posture (leaning away) promotes negative feelings toward an external object.⁷⁵ Finally, not only is “side-to-side movement . . . a physical expression of ambivalence,” but the inverse is also the case: “when people are made to move from side to side, their experiences of ambivalence are enhanced”⁷⁶—the ambivalence of hula-hooping.

Body postures have also been found to affect *persistence* in tasks or motivation—in what Whitman calls pluck. For example, participants positioned in a slumped posture showed lower persistence on insolvable puzzle tasks than participants positioned in an upright posture.⁷⁷ In a related experiment, participants assumed one of three different seated postures: leaning forward with hands on knees, sitting normally, and reclining with feet elevated. These postures had been shown to be associated with different de-



Hooping

degrees of “approach-motivation,” or the intensity of felt desire for an object and with different amounts of cortical activity. Researchers then recorded the electroencephalographic activity of participants in each of these three postures, and they found that “leaning forward with arms extended, a posture indicative of reaching out and acquiring a desired object, led to greater relative left frontal cortical activity than reclining backward,”⁷⁸ even in the absence of any physical object of desire. The authors of the study conclude that while others “have focused on how physical actions can be transferred to knowledge concepts via mirror neuron responses (Gallese 2009), our results demonstrate that body position alone can influence underlying cortical activity associated with more than just physical movement. . . . In summary, posture influences how we think and feel, as well as underlying cortical activity.”⁷⁹

There are also many convincing studies by scholars in the humanities critical of the unacknowledged and contestable assumptions—about gender, race, neuro-typicality—embedded in these and other studies in cognitive science. Gabriel Abend, for example, argues that scientists ought to consider the relevant literatures in philosophy, social science, and the humanities in order to “better conceptualize and operationalize the social-psychological phenomena they are interested in—and thus better . . . specify how experimental results might speak to the real social world, and clarify what exactly neural correlates are neural correlates of.”⁸⁰ I cite some studies from cognitive theory not to offer scientific “proof” of Whitman’s “poetic” claims, but rather to underscore how both refuse to confine activeness to mind and receptivity to body. The psychophysiological studies affirm that an affinity between position and disposition cannot be understood exclusively in terms of the imprints of a set of preexisting “mental” states upon “an otherwise neutral . . . bodily clay.”⁸¹ Rather, for them as for Whitman (and me), that “clay” has some impressive agency of its own. Also notable in the studies is their lack of consensus about just how to name the curious efficacy of phiz. Some researchers speak of “causal power” in the robust sense (“postural interventions causally affect mood, behavior, and physiology in response to a short-term stressor,” “leaning forward with arms extended . . . caused greater left frontal cortical activity”).⁸² Others speak of a catalytic capacity of a pose to “initiate” a mood that did not exist prior to it.⁸³ Yet others, wary of “endowing a strong mapping between specific emotions and specific embodiments,” will speak only of a posture’s ability to “modulate” or “cue” an affective state,⁸⁴ and of the need for explicit knowledge (“noetic information”) associated with

the emotion also to be present.⁸⁵ The epilogue will return to the thorny matter of causality or efficacy.

American Pathognomy

“By the middle of the nineteenth century, phrenology held a place in the American mind not unlike that occupied by psychiatry in the 1930s. Its terminology and tenets entered the language of daily conversation.”⁸⁶ Whitman himself had a phrenological exam in 1849, which identified Friendship, Sympathy, Sublimity, and Self-Esteem as his leading traits.⁸⁷ As already noted, Whitman’s exploration of channels of communication between disposition and position was influenced by the idea of a pathognomic relationship between personality, on the one hand, and posture, carriage, and gait, on the other. The phrenology Whitman knew (in particular from his association with the Fowler brothers, publishers of his “Street Yarn”) operated within a broader American discourse of “self-improvement.” As such, it was not quite identical to more thoroughly racist versions known to Hegel or to European discussion of “scientific racism.” Phrenology was popularized in antebellum America as a hands-on form of popular science: anyone could, with a little training, learn how to examine the shapes of one’s body and movement-style, tune into the characterological propensities associated with them, and then alter the latter by making changes in the former.⁸⁸ Phrenology’s orientation to the body as a text to be read *by touch* surely resonated with Whitman’s poetry of the body: *Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from.*⁸⁹

Mind and body connect and communicate, and it is by virtue of this profound and dynamic affection that each could be altered by making changes in the other. One of the things that phrenological measurements measured, then, was the *malleability* of the human personality, a malleability that Catherine Malabou would much later describe as “brain plasticity.”⁹⁰ Or, as Orson Fowler put it, the “science of mind not only teaches us our characters, but also, what is infinitely more important, how to improve them. . . . It shows us in which perfection consists, and how to form character and mould mind in accordance with its conditions.”⁹¹ Fowlerian phrenology did not treat the interior faculties as fixed endowments imprinting themselves upon a flesh that was passive matter. Quite to the contrary, changes in the surface could and would “stimulate” changes in the interior.

This meliorism, however, had to contend with phrenology’s *taxonomical*

drive—its quest for a definitive, scientific schema of the human “faculties” (such as Sympathy, Adhesiveness, Destructiveness, Self-Esteem, Firmness, Veneration, Imitation, Mirthfulness, Causality, Comparison, etc.) and of the personality-types formed by differentially weighted compositions of faculties. The fixed categorization required for a phrenological *science* was at odds with the malleability of form required for a phrenological *practice* of self-improvement. The egalitarianism of phrenology as a DIY regimen of physical and moral health was also in tension with the tendency for taxonomies to become organized *hierarchically*. This tension is apparent in the Fowlers’ writing on “Self-Esteem” (the faculty that creates “in the bosom of its possessor, a good opinion of himself; of his own character and opinions, and of whatever belongs to, or proceeds from, himself.”)⁹² On the one hand, the Fowlers invoked the universality of “Self-Esteem” to make a case for democracy as the most “natural” form of social order:

[Because] the feeling or principle of liberty and of equal rights, is inalienable, and inherent in the very nature and constitution of man [and] . . . can no more be destroyed than hunger, or love; . . . a purely republican and democratic form of government is the *only* one adapted to the nature of man.⁹³

On the other hand, however, they claimed that even though every faculty is present in each human being, every faculty is not equally *developed* in size or strength in each person. Thus emerges the racism still operative within a phrenology of the improveable body. Indeed, the Fowlers also claimed that, as a group, “the European race (including their descendants in America) possess a much larger endowment of these organs [of intellect and morality], and also of their corresponding faculties, than any other portion of the human species. Hence, their intellectual and moral superiority over all other races of man.”⁹⁴ Even if the Fowlers’ racism was diluted by their democratic appeal to self-improvement, it retained and maintained the violent conceit of a *developmental* superiority of European peoples and civilizations.⁹⁵ Though the larger “endowment” of intellect and morality in Europeans was a historically fortuitous development rather than a fixed biological inheritance, the ideal toward which the developmental process aimed was nonetheless the mind and body of (what Kafka’s ape called) “the average European.”⁹⁶

Whitman tilted that model—the ideal became the robust body of the working-class American fluent in *nonchalance*, *pluck*, and *dilation*. And while his poetry is certainly not free of Euro-American conceits, it also includes

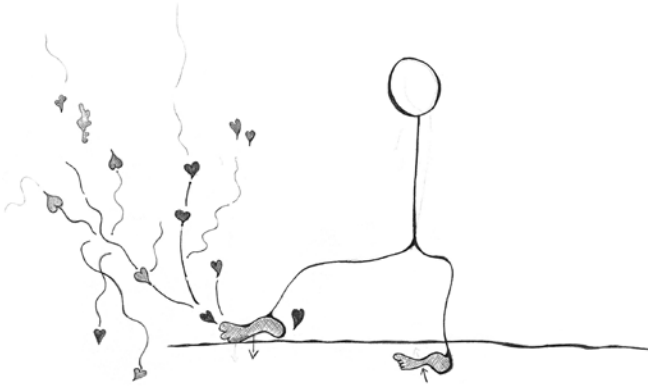
elements that push against civilizational (and ontological) hierarchies. Open-ended, horizontal lists occupy sites where vertical taxonomies would normally be expected, and a process-forward grammar competes well with one seeking to demarcate clearly between bodies, and between activity and passivity. Such a poetics help to induce, however subtly and incompletely, an I experienced as always in-process *and* as capable of inflecting the direction of the flow. In short, what Whitman took from phrenology was the idea to craft a regime of self-improvement that was “in principle available to all.”⁹⁷ As he himself says in “Manly Health and Training,” though there is a habitual configuration of faculties within each individual, this is no fixed and final arrangement: faculties could be selectively strengthened by exercise, just as muscles could be by targeted training. There is, in other words, an “inevitable and curious conjunction, or rather resultance, of a fine manly moral character, out of a perfect physique.”⁹⁸

According to Nathaniel Mackey, “Practical phrenology marketed the idea that a person could change his or her character. . . . A belief in the changeability or, even, perfectibility of personality was crucial to phrenology’s program of self-improvement and social reform.”⁹⁹ Like the Fowlers’ booming business in self-help pamphlets and trinkets, *Leaves of Grass* would offer techniques for enlarging and reshaping the self. As Anton Borst notes, Whitman’s line (from “Song of Myself”) *I show that size is only development* refers “directly to two phrenological doctrines: that the size of mental faculties indicates their strength and that their size can be increased through cultivation. They also suggest other correspondences between interior character and physical exterior. [Whitman’s reference to] ‘Ducking and deprecating’ connects bodily posture to character.”¹⁰⁰ Readers today might be surprised to learn that several African American performers and lecturers of the time, including Dr. Henry H. Lewis, Simon Foreman Laundry, Lucretian Mott, and Frederick Douglass, also drew upon phrenological terms and practices as resources for an antislavery politics.¹⁰¹

Taking a Step/Personal Affection

I return now to a final example of Whitman’s pairing of position and disposition: the lean of a walker whose lifted foot nears the ground and a corresponding mood of a gravitational affection. They appear together in these lines:

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections.
They scorn the best I can do to relate them.¹⁰²



What these lines invoke is less a *taking* of a step than an *encounter* between foot and ground, for earth too is a player—it draws the foot down to it and prompts “a hundred affectations.” As Kathy Ferguson notes, walking is “always already packed with falling. Each step hosts the lift as well as the fall. Our body’s goal is not to actually fall, but to always almost fall.”¹⁰³ *Footstep* is *foot-fall*. Notable also is that the “affectations” named are irreducible to any sentiment belonging to walker. They are also apersonal, atmospheric—springing up between a sensitive foot and a gravity-saturated, vibratory earth. The affectations are, moreover, multiple, arising as a swarm that “scorns” rational comprehension: attempts to identify a stable system of relations between the “hundred affectations” get bounced back. The hundred affectations affect without passing through the understanding.

In these two lines, *The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affectations. They scorn the best I can do to relate them*, Whitman marks a gossamer mood that accompanies every step we take. Operating way, way in the background of awareness is a cloud of protosensations that “seem to want to stay below the threshold of visibility and experience” and “whose survival depends, . . . virus-like, on lying low.”¹⁰⁴ This vague cloud or mist nonetheless colors experience—it strikes what Alfred North Whitehead might call an “affective tone” in the walker. Much of the influx of the world is “felt” by us, says Whitehead, *below* the level of sense-perception, at the “visceral” level of an “affective tone” with “the vagueness of the low hum of insects in an August woodland.”¹⁰⁵ One of the effects of Whitman’s lines seems to be to highlight this more-than-human or earthy mode of affection, and to interpolate readers as earthlings—as geo-beings. Whitman thus locates the mundane step within a much larger and even more complex ongoing process of influx and

efflux: from the movement downward of a foot springs a swarm of affections, and from this, “other becomings will link up . . . , molecular-becomings in which the air, sound, water are grasped in their particles at the same time as their flux combines with mine.”¹⁰⁶

The two lines come at the end of this passage:

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation . . .
The sharp-hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill,
the chickadee, the prairie-dog,
The litter of the grunting sow . . .
I see in them and myself the same old law.

.....

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,
They scorn the best I can do to relate them.

What have we here? A gander leans in, sounds down, and ya-honks as if in invitation. Gander, I, moose, cat, chickadee, prairie-dog, sow appear as discrete entities, and yet enmeshed in the “same old law”—they are, in the words of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme.” What is this “same old law”? That the passage lands on those apersonal “hundred affections” suggests that the law invoked is that of gravity, of the “press” of foot to ground.¹⁰⁷ At work in the ya-honk, grunt, quiet cat, and moose, then, is an impersonal and usually unremarked-upon *gravitational leaning*. Foot falls to earth (so what? happens every day) and yet (amazingly!) a hundred affections spring.

Noteworthy also is the odd syntax of the springing affections: not “*from* the press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections” but rather “the press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections.” The absence of the usual “*from*” confounds the reader’s attempt to distinguish sharply between cause and effect: had the “*from*” been there, the pressing foot would have been positioned as the *source* of the resulting affections; without the “*from*,” there can be no clear delineation between what does the springing and what is being sprung. The “press of my foot” is mine—or is it the pulling down of gravity? Likewise, the “spring” is a function of foot lifted by walker *and* the (spring-back) resistance offered by the ground. What the line suggests, then, is that foot, earth, and affections are sprung *together*, quickened into life by virtue of the encounter and its diffracting waves of influence.

And what about these peculiar “affections”? They can be read as personal

sentiments of love or gratitude for the solid earth (as when the Pope kisses the ground after getting off a plane). But their explosive and alien character—a *hundred* affections *spring, scorning* efforts to relate them (to understand the logic or structure of their relations)—also suggests that they are affects more than emotions, which “go beyond the strength of those who undergo them.”¹⁰⁸ These footed but not-quite-human affections recall the “screaming electric” Whitman describes in “So Long!”:

Screaming electric, the atmosphere using,
At random glancing, each as I notice absorbing,
Swiftly on, but a little while alighting,
Curious envelop’d messages delivering,
Sparkles hot, seed ethereal down in the dirt dropping.¹⁰⁹

Like the pedestrian affections that elude comprehension, these electric “messages” are “curious” and “ethereal.” They are not clearly present to us. But they have influence. The process of “influx and efflux” is always “tickling” at the “bellies” of individuals.¹¹⁰

Whitman inflects what is (for a typically bodied human being) a banal footstep into a most curious encounter. In singing out a strange affectivity sprung with each footfall, he renders more visible a subtle kind of love whose object is not anything in particular but is rather earthly life itself. This affection is apersonal—not only because earth does not qualify as a person but also because the attachment taps into the apersonal facets of the I. This is what I have elsewhere described as the *it* in the I: the material vitality of a flesh composed of, among other things, iron, calcium, silica, trace minerals, etc. Perhaps it is this geo-materiality within that is activated when my foot meets the ground. In this reunion, I can experience an uncanny belonging—not a belonging to a civilization, or nation, or class, or even race, but the radically egalitarian belonging of earthlings to earth. *Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*¹¹¹

Manners and the Phiz of Democracy

Let us review Whitman’s four (dis)positions. First, there is the “side-curved head” with hand-on-hip, paired with a mood of cool and impartial observation. Whitman calls this “nonchalance,” as he shifts the political valence of the term from aristocratic disdain to democratic tolerance for a cultural variegation that is the natural result of vibrant porous bodies. Second, there are the characteristic shapes and speeds of workers’ bodies—curv’d limb,

bending, standing astride, etc.—which resonate with a mood of “pluck,” that vitality of the disciplined, productive body. Third, there is the posture of the “lean and loafe,” which tends toward a friendly disposition that is open to direct, sensuous contact with other bodies. The fourth and last posture, that of taking a step, also induces an affectionate mood, but this time it is an apersonal geo-affection, whose object is no particular person or thing but the planet and the life it affords. As already noted, these postures and moods are for Whitman valuable elements of what he calls, in *Democratic Vistas*, the “manners” of democracy.

To understand what he means by “manners,” let’s look at another of Whitman’s newspaper articles, this one published on the fourth of July in 1878 in the *New-York Tribune*. Titled “A Poet’s Recreation: Gossipy Letter from Walt Whitman,” it describes Whitman’s recent three-week visit to New York. He attended the funeral of William Cullen Bryant, took a “jaunt” up the Hudson, “circumnavigated” Staten Island, ate a breakfast of currants and raspberries (“I pick ’em myself”) at the cottage of John and Mrs. Burroughs, and encountered in the countryside the mother of a “tramp” family whose “figure and gait told misery, terror, destitution” and whose “eyes, voice and manner were those of a corpse, animated by electricity.” Near the end of the letter, Whitman identifies “what these offhand descriptive sketches are for”: they corroborate his “dream” of a robust, democratic America. “Today I should say—defiant of cynics and pessimists and with a full knowledge of all their exceptions—an appreciative and perceptive study of the current humanity of New-York gives the directest proof yet of . . . Democracy, and of the solution of that paradox, the eligibility of the free and fully developed Individual with the paramount Aggregate.” He then describes the “interior and exterior” of that democratic Individual, who is characterized by “alertness, generally fine physique, clear eyes that look straight at you, a singular combination of reticence and self-possession, with good nature and friendliness.” It is Whitman’s concern with the “interior *and* exterior” of persons, and with the mode of influence at work between them, that has been the focus of this chapter.

It was because Whitman believed that democracy was a matter not only of political institutions but also of “phiz” and “manners” that his poems played around with the intuition that the shapes taken on by the flesh could make a difference to the contours of attitude. R. P. Blackmur, describing Whitman’s poetics as that of a “barbarian” of spontaneity without “composition,” says that “Nobody ever learned anything but attitude or incentive from Whitman.”¹¹² To this one might respond: Yes,—but do not underes-

timate the political efficacy of “attitude” and “incentive”! Whitman is reported to have said, “I have long teased my brain with visions of a handsome little book, a dear, strong, aromatic volume like the *Encheiridion*, as it is called, for the pocket. That would tend to induce people to take me along with them and read me in the open air: I am nearly always successful with the reader in the open air.”¹¹³ Such a public performance would allow all of the potencies within the *Leaves*—the sound and sense of its words and visual images,¹¹⁴ as well as the lively attitudes of people, places, and things—to do their thing, to help readers begin to morph into egalitarian democrats. Political institutions + social and ethical norms + a repertoire of phiz and mood (including the bent arm and tilted head of nonchalance, the pluck of bent back and curv’d limbs, the friendly inclination, the foot planted in a field of sprouting affections)—*all* of these must be operative if America is to realize the especially diverse and pluralistic kind of democracy that Whitman thought was its best bet.¹¹⁵