THE ANTEBELLUM UNDERGROUND: AMERICA'S KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE

by

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The Vault at Pfaff's, a beer cellar at 647 Broadway in New York City, was one of the most consequential and least remembered spaces in nineteenth-century American literary history. Between 1859 and 1866, it served as the gathering place for a community of writers, artists, journalists, and a diverse group of men who found there a sanctuary from the social conventions that governed life above ground. This thesis examines the vault as a literary laboratory: a space in which alternative modes of expression, identity, and intimacy were developed under conditions of deliberate concealment, and through which those modes survived long enough for scholarship to recover them.

Utilizing primary correspondence, newspaper archives, 19th-century phrenological texts, and close textual analysis, this thesis traces that argument across four chapters. The first chapter establishes the spatial history of the vault and frames the vault as a site of active linguistic and social innovation. It establishes the social architecture of Pfaff's itself: its culture of eased rank, its inclusion of women and queer men, and its role as the incubator of a generation of writers whose interior lives had no sanctioned framework in the public world. The second chapter

centers on Walt Whitman and the analysis of his manuscripts and published works of prose, how the language used is demonstrative of an intentional and coded vocabulary used to express explicit desire. The third examines Walt Whitman and the Fred Gray Association: a loose confederation of men who, through private correspondence and shared intimacy at the vault, developed a vocabulary for same-sex love borrowed from phrenology, matrimonial language, and the coded shorthand of men who understood that discretion meant survival. The fourth examines the vault's literary works, reading Theodore Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme* and Fitz-James O'Brien's *The Lost Room* as self-encoding. These two stories transform personal experience, desire, and fear of exposure into fiction that is representative of the only space where these elements could exist without exposing their authors. The fifth chapter follows these same men out of the vault and into the Civil War. The thesis concludes Pfaff's mattered to American culture as both a gathering place and a mechanism: a space enabling concealment and, through it, literature that outlived it.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Located at 647 Broadway, just north of Bleecker Street, The Vault at Pfaff's was once home to some of the 19th century's greatest American minds. When Charles Pfaff opened his bilevel restaurant and beer cellar in March 1859, the cellar quickly became the center of New York's Bohemian movement.[1] Its original location, established sometime in 1858 and located at 685 Broadway, was a much smaller eating and drinking house. [2] In the vaulted space directly beneath Broadway's bustling sidewalk, the city's bohemians spent their nights in an accepting space that welcomed writers, artists, actors, and women on equal terms.[3] Split into two areas, the main saloon opened to the general public while the double-width inner vault was reserved for the bohemian circle, where a long table served as their gathering point.[4] Bestowed with the title "Lions of Bohemia" by New York's residents, these figures ruled over the movement they had built, while seated around that great table.[5] Much like the Arthurian table, the minds here all sat as equals. Some celebrated frequenters of Pfaff's cellar included Walt Whitman, Theodore Winthrop, Fitz-James O'Brien, and "King" Henry Clapp.[6]

The scholarly conversation that surrounds Pfaff's beer cellar has long been dominated by a traditional framework led by historians David S. Reynolds and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. While from different fields of study, Reynolds in American literature and Smith-Rosenberg in

[1] "New Wein and Lager Bier Saloon," *New York Herald*, March 31, 1859, 8, Library of Congress, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83030313/1859-03-31/ed-1/?sp=8; "Pfaff's," *New-York Saturday Press*, December 3, 1859, 2.
[2] Stephanie M. Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!": The History of a Restaurant and Lager Beer Saloon* (Lehigh University Press, 2014), 12.
[3] Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!"*, 21.
[4] Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!"*, 21.
[5] "In and About the City; Death of Charles I. Pfaff; Something About the Old Vault and the Famous Bohemians Who Frequented It," *New York Times*, April 26, 1890, https://www.nytimes.com/1890/04/26/archives/in-and-about-the-city-death-of-charles-i-pfaff-something-about-the.html.
[6] "Death of Charles I. Pfaff."

women's history, their combined impact in this area of study has created a solid and unified historiographical record of 19th-century male comradery. The main argument here is that the 19th century was a time of highly sentimental and expressive culture, one that regarded intense relationships between members of the same sex as normal and non-sexual in nature. As such, they believe it is anachronistic to project contemporary categorizations of sexuality onto relationships of this period, particularly onto a group of 1850s bachelors. They argue against medical pathologization and instead argue for an analysis of Whitman and other men from this time through cultural and social frameworks of their own era. This view, however, categorizes male and male behavior as only broadly social rather than fundamentally queer, sanitizing these relationships of their eroticism.

Alternatively, contemporary scholars focus analysis on the explicit sensuality within texts written in this period and the fluid sexualities that under currented nineteenth-century male comradeship. Scholars such as like Stephanie M. Blalock, who focuses on specific spatial and subcultural recovery of Pfaff's Vault, proves the space functioned as a radically democratic space. A space that allowed and even fostered unconventional thinkers to escape Victorian policing and norms to express themselves sexually. Ed Folsom, Ken Price, and Fredson Bowers do the work of biographical and textual recovery. Bowers recovered and pieced Whitmans fractured manuscripts back together and Folsom and Price, in collaboration named the Fred Gray Association members by name.

Building upon the vital groundwork laid by historians Folsom, Price, and Bowers, this project pushes the scholarship one step further. It evaluates specifically how these men were intertwined in each other's lives and how they actively built a shared, protective lexicon to navigate the very spaces and relationships that revisionists have brought to light. While previous

research has done the heavy lifting in recovering social networks and manuscripts, there is a serious deficiency in information regarding the structural interconnectedness of these men. This project directly intervenes in this scholarly fragmentation by doing the work of connecting men who have never been studied in relation to one another. Additionally, analyzing the space as more than a site of refuge or concealment, and instead as a place of active linguistic innovation brought forth by a need to innovate. In examining the recurring deployment of phrenological and matrimonial language in Pfaffian men's intimate correspondence, draft manuscripts, and even published works of literature, this paper demonstrates how the Paff's circle employed trusted Victorian pseudoscience's and domestic habits to claim biological legitimacy and dignity for their feelings. It is the studying of unpublished and pasted over edits in manuscripts that reveal a truer understanding of the lives of these men. This work essentially blueprints contemporary queer identity from inside the 19th-century underground world.

This project is situated at the intersection of literary history and antebellum masculinity. Drawing on a methodology that involves close readings of primary and secondary sources, including draft manuscripts, published works of fiction, correspondence among Pfaffian men, and newspaper publications, this thesis reads its sources as evidence of intentional self-encoding. It treats coded language, the physical alteration of manuscripts, and conventions of concealment as historical acts rather than literary accidents. This paper proceeds across six chapters, the first establishing the history of the Pfaff's Vault as an incubator for linguistic innovation and social change. The second chapter focuses primarily on Walt Whitman and his creation of a coded language that leverages phrenological language in his literature. Chapter three examines the relationships of the Fred Gray Association, and their employment of Whitmans linguistic lexicon to communicate feelings of intimacy and desire. Chapter four analyzes the published works of

Theodore Winthrop and Fitz-James O'Brien as mechanisms of self-encoding. The fifth chapter follows Winthrop and O'Brien onto the battlefield of the Civil War, and how the interconnectedness of Pfaff's extended far beyond the reach of the cellar walls. Lastly, the paper is wrapped up in the final chapter that centers on the legacy left behind by these men through letters and literature. Despite the forced concealment the enduring impact of their lives remained and thus, today it serves as a foundational document of early American queer identity.

Each of these men contributed to the cultural landscape of their time. Whitman reshaped American poetry, Winthrop explored themes of gender subversion and queer romance through his novels, O'Brien explored uncanny structures and gothic displacement in his fiction, bringing an Irish immigrant's sensibility to American letters, and Clapp built the editorial infrastructure that made bohemian culture visible to the reading public.[7] The writers who gathered at this venue were deeply influenced by the progressive discourse that permeated that basement room. Historian Mark A. Lause noted that, "despite its tiny size, probably no single socialist community ever enlisted more original contributors to American radical thought."[8] Notably, the literary contributions of many of Pfaff's Knights, such as Whitman and Theodore Winthrop, marked the emergence of realism, which captured the uncomfortable realities of life in prose and poetry. Serving as both a sanctuary and an incubator, the Vault fostered early queer culture and ultimately helped lay the groundwork for later progressive social movements. The broader cultural shifts of the 19th century, particularly those around gender, identity, and sexuality, were

[7] David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 5; Christopher Looby, "Introduction: Cecil Dreeme and the Misfortune of Sexuality," in Theodore Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme: A Novel* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), vii-viii; John P. Irish, "Darkness, Doubles, and Displacement: Uncanny Structures in O'Brien's 'The Lost Room,'" *American Gothic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2025): 190, https://doi.org/10.5325/ags.1.2.0190; Ingrid Satelmeyer, "Publishing Pfaff's: Henry Clapp and Poetry in the Saturday Press," in *Whitman Among the Bohemians*, eds. Joanna Levin and Edward Whitley (University of Iowa Press, 2014), 38.

[8] Mark A. Lause, *The Antebellum Crisis and America's First Bohemians* (The Kent State University Press, 2009), 27.

significantly influenced by the community at The Vault at Pfaff's. In a time when Victorian norms were deeply entrenched, Pfaff's provided a space where writers, artists, and members of the queer community could escape and redefine societal conventions. A meeting point for unconventional thinkers, the Vault helped foster a climate in which new expressions could find fertile soil: "This is the capital of BOHEMIA … this is the womb of the best things that society has heard for many-a-day."[9] The boast was earned: by giving visibility and voice to non-normative groups. Pfaff's contributed to the ongoing cultural shifts of the 19th century, planting seeds that would not bloom until the cultural and sexual revolutions of the 20th century.

Pfaff's became a well-known and treasured sanctuary for non-conformity. The writers and artists who frequented Pfaff's were, for the most part, unconventional in both their personal lives and their work. Pfaff's was unique among its contemporaries in that it allowed women to enter, "especially the women of the American bohemian group, regardless of whether they were escorted by men."[10] Inside the cellar, hierarchies and social constraints loosened.[11] Everyone who descended the narrow staircase was expected to contribute. They held writing workshops at the cellar to aid one another in their literary endeavors, forming what has been called "the first trade union of intellect," where every man would bring "a new poem, editorial, or idea for a magazine sketch" to the table."[12] The Saturday Press described the atmosphere in December 1859 as nothing less than "the womb of the best things that society has heard for many-a-day." [13] It was a space where the city's most restless and unconventional minds gathered nightly to think, argue, and create. New York's bohemians sought refuge from a world that often rejected their

[9] "Pfaff's," *New York Saturday Press*, December 3, 1859, 2.
[10] Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!"*, 36.
[11] Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!"*, 21.
[12] Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!"*, 37.
[13] "Pfaff's."

ideas, their art, and their identities.[14] By providing a space where ideas and emotions could freely emerge, the vault incubated the kinds of writing and being that the surface world of mid-nineteenth-century New York did not permit. That two of the era's most significant explorations of same-sex desire, Whitman's *Live Oak with Moss* and Winthrop's *Cecil Dreeme*, took shape during the years both men frequented Pfaff's vault, suggests that the room itself made certain kinds of writing possible.[15]

[14] Joanna Levin, *Bohemia in America, 1858–1920* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 135.
[15] Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 376-377; Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!,"* 7; Michael Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women: Sodomy and Male Sentimental Citizenship in the Antebellum City," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 24, https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2002.0014.

Chapter 2: Walt Whitman's Deliberate Concealment and Coded Language

A literary and biographical look at one of the most important members of this bohemian society is essential. It is imperative to understand Walt Whitman, one of the most influential figures at Pfaff's, before grasping how the Vault incubated a culture that accepted alternative modes of intimacy. Walt Whitman, christened America's poet by the contemporary American literary public, was once among many artists who felt drawn to Pfaff's literary allure and the presence of sympathetic intellects.[1] A man driven by a radical egalitarian philosophy, Whitman devoted his life to encouraging a new way of thinking that embodied love. For him, love was a spiritual and magnetic force, manifesting in all his intimate relationships with lovers and friends alike.[2] This metaphysical attraction was not merely a concept for Whitman but rather a physical necessity of which he found himself truly bound, so much so that it became the very language of his poetry. He authored extensive poems examining his "desires to touch and experience the 'electricity' of his comradeships."[3] Relationships were born out of the cellar bar, Whitman lauded Pfaff's as a space where "his friendship … provided 'an alternative to the institution of heterosexual marriage'" which he sought so adamantly to avoid.[4] Pfaff's served not solely as a refuge for private intimacies but as a microcosm of Whitman's broader social vision.

Indeed, in 1859, Whitman composed at Pfaff's the poems that ultimately became *Live Oak, with Moss.*[5] This anthology contains one of his more overtly queer pieces, where he

[1] Ezra Pound, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" (1909), in *Selected Prose 1909-1965* (New York: New Directions, 1973).
[2] Reiss, "Whitman's Debt to Animal Magnetism," 80.
[3] Stephanie M. Blalock, *Whitman among the Bohemians*, ed. Edward Keyes Whitley and Joanna Levin, 1st ed. (University of Iowa Press, 2014), 181.
[4] Blalock, "Whitman Bohemians," 178.
[5] Walt Whitman, *Songs of Male Intimacy and Love*: "Live Oak, with Moss" and "Calamus," ed. Betsy Erkkila (University of Iowa Press, 2011), ix.

uncovers his past romance with an unnamed man and his struggle to reconcile feelings of abandonment, grief, and shame. This anthology of 12 poems remained unpublished as a set until 1950, when it was discovered by famed literary scholar Fredson Bowers and subsequently published in the journal Studies in Bibliography in 1953.[6] Bowers largely believes this once-unified collection of 12 poems was written sometime around the spring of 1859, a time of Whitman's life when he spent his days lounging at the cellar restaurant Pfaff's.[7] The original sequence, as reconstructed by Bowers, was meant to be published as a cohesive and intimate account of male relationships but was instead split and published as individual poems within the Calamus cluster in the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass.[8] The unnamed man, historian Charley Shively pinpoints as Fred Vaughn, was a working man who lived with Whitman and his family during the early 1850s.[9] Written during the politically polarized years leading up to the American Civil War, this collection of poems offers a singular perspective on the era. Whitman, who remained unmarried, spent his days writing about romantic relationships between men, whose themes often bled into his personal life.[10] In *Live Oak, With Moss*, Walt Whitman challenges prevailing norms of sexuality, morality, and belonging through his representations of queer existence in America. It is through this collection that we are convinced of his desire to live his life despite the cultural taboo against such an existence. His poetry serves as a testament to the struggles faced by queer individuals and the oppressive societal forces that seek to stifle their identity.

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[6] Fredson Bowers, "Whitman's Manuscripts for the Original 'Calamus' Poems," *Studies in Bibliography* 6 (1953): 259.
[7] Bowers, "Whitman's Manuscripts," 261.
[8] Alan Helms, “Whitman’s ‘Live Oak with Moss,’” in *The Walt Whitman Archive*, eds. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, 1992, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/anc.00154.
[9] Charley Shively, ed., *Calamus Lovers: Walt Whitman's Working-Class Camerados* (Gay Sunshine Press, 1987), 14.
[10] Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, expanded ed. (University of Iowa Press, 1999), 34.

Whitman's deliberate modifications of *Live Oak, with Moss* are illustrative of an awareness he possessed of the need to be cognizant of societies watchful and scornful eye. Only a few excerpts of *Live Oak, with Moss*, were stripped apart and recycled into Whitman's third edition of *Leaves of Grass* in its 'Calamus' sequence, published in 1860.[11] While never introduced to the public eye in its authentic form, *Live Oak, with Mos*s, remains one of Whitman's least covert poems, explicitly expressing his love and longing for a distant male lover. He likely read his drafts to the Knights of Pfaff's, in a place where he and his fellow Bohemians felt safe to explore their identities fully. An inscription in the journal of the original sequence reads: "Fit to be perused during the days of the approach of Death (that I have prepared myself for that purpose. Remember now - Remember then."[12] In some sense, one imagines Whitman understood he could never publish the full extent of his romantic life due to the scrutiny he would surely face in a world less accepting than Pfaff's. Perhaps he hoped that one day, as a beloved poet, a man like him would read through his notebooks and journals and find a piece of themselves within them. While perhaps not in his time, soon the world would evolve and make reality his dream "of a city where all the men were like brothers," where he could see in public "them tenderly love each other … walking hand in hand."[13]

Ultimately, these fragments of poetry survive today as the very artifacts of nineteenth-century queer existence that the public would one day recognize as legitimate identity. It is with these breadcrumbs, stashed away like codes to solve in his published poetry, that we encounter Whitman's unvarnished expressions of intimacy, nurtured into expression in the safety of Pfaff's

[11] G. Thomas Tanselle, *The Life and Work of Fredson Bowers* (Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia, 1993), 52–53.
[12] Walt Whitman, "Live Oak, with Moss," in *Walt Whitman's Songs of Male Intimacy and Love: Live Oak, with Moss and Calamus*, ed. Betsy Erkkila (University of Iowa Press, 2011), 1-38.
[13] Whitman, "Live Oak," 31.

basement Vault. An inscription announces that this poem will be read only after his death, as if he knew someone would one day come searching. To see beyond his duplicity in concealing himself, one must know not only what they are looking for in his words, but also what they are seeing. Whitman wished to be discovered; he recorded his deepest feelings, understanding the risk of retribution. Thus, modern readers can recognize that these formerly unpublished works of poetry are now historical artifacts, proving that queerness was as much a part of American heritage as his cherished writing and, indirectly, validating the collective impact of the intellectual cross-pollination at those long-ago nights at Pfaff's. The atmosphere of Pfaff's, characterized by its embrace of unconventionality, provided a refuge where individuals could explore and express themselves in ways that were not tolerated in mainstream society. The Vault's significance for individuals who defied 19th-century sexual norms is undeniable. While explicit, openly "gay" declarations were rare, Walt Whitman's presence at Pfaff's is significant. His poetry, rife with homoerotic undertones, transformed the cellar's physical proximity into a vehicle for spiritual adhesiveness.

Homoeroticism is most evident in Whitman's reflections on his intimate companionships. In excerpt III of *Live Oak, with Moss,* Whitman writes of his distant lover finally re-entering his life. At night, this mystery man appears on his doorstep. Here, Whitman reports his feelings of elation at last having the man he loves by his side, "but my heart beat happier than you … for he I love is returned and sleeping by my side."[14] However, this passage of the text was later pasted over with a less forthrightly queer version. The amended line read, "for the friend I love lay sleeping by my side." These changes were intentional, and rather than ripping out the page or covering the original lines with ink, Whitman chose to leave a loose, small page covering his

[14] Whitman, "Live Oak," 10.

sincerest expression of love. Not merely poetic abstractions, this reflection on intimacy between two lovers in the *Calamus* cluster reflects the safety found through participating in the subterranean world of Pfaff's. In this section, Whitman captures their moment of "stillness" in the night, his lover's "face was inclined toward me while the moon's clear beams shone," perhaps in anticipation of a kiss.[15] The source of Whitman's undying affection, this mystery man, appears alongside the moon as the sun sets. It is shrouded in the darkness of these two lovers' meeting, forced to love each other in secret. *Calamus* seems to capture an almost domestic intimacy that defied all rigid Victorian social doctrine of the time.

Whitman was only one of the myriad men inspired by the transgressive potential of the Pfaffian underground. The cellar bar was more than just a literary laboratory, but rather a space in which men developed alternative modes of expression, identity, and intimacy under conditions of deliberate concealment, and through which those modes survived long enough for scholarship to recover them. The shadows of the bar were not places to hide; they were the very conditions necessary for a new modern American selfhood to germinate.

[15] Whitman, "Live Oak," 10.

Chapter 3: The Fred Gray Association as an Adhesive Force

Walt Whitman found his people at Pfaff's. The Fred Gray Association, born from the bar's culture of eased rank, was known as "a loose confederation of young men who seemed anxious to explore new possibilities of male-male affection."[1] Although the 'Fred Gray Association' was never an official title used by Whitman or his peers, scholars such as Ed Folsom and Ken Price have adopted the name to describe this group of close friends.[2] Whitman notably wrote extensive poems regarding his "desires to touch and experience the 'electricity' of his comradeships with his Fred Gray associates," among them Nat Bloom, John Frederick Schiller Gray, Charles Kingsley, Charles Chauncey, Hugo Fritsch, and occasionally his roommate Fred Vaughan.[3] According to Stephanie Blalock, this is "a rarely studied group of young bachelors," and that observation suggests a need to understand them as such.[4] What we know of these men is largely limited to Whitman's perspective. Of the core members, only Hugo Fritsch and Fred Vaughan left any surviving correspondence, and even those letters only reflect Whitman's half of the exchange. No letters from Bloom, Gray, Kingsley, or Chauncey survive in any archive. Their own voices, feelings about what the group was and what it meant, have not survived in any meaningful record. What remains is a love story told by only one of its authors, one we must review precisely as we historicize the nature and meaning of these relationships.

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[1] Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 62.
[2] "Projecting Whitman: The Evolution and Remediation of The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman." *The Walt Whitman Archive*. 2001. Accessed March 17, 2026. https://whitmanarchive.org/about/archive/wwa-2000-to-2007/articlesAboutArchive/anc.00003.html..
[3] Stephanie M. Blalock, *Whitman among the Bohemians*, ed. Joanna Levin and Edward Keyes Whitley (University of Iowa Press, 2014), 181.
[4] Blalock, *Whitman Bohemians*, 172.

While some cultural historians, such as David Reynolds, emphasize the normalcy of 19th-century male friendship, the intentional "coding" of phrenological and matrimonial language indicates that the Fred Gray circle deliberately created a distinct and progressive space for intimacy compared to Victorian camaraderie.[5] The intimacy Whitman shared with members of the Fred Gray Association was not purely sexual. Real and profound feelings existed independently of any physical consummation. It was a love so unprecedented that Whitman himself had to construct the vocabulary to name it. Words such as magnetism and adhesiveness, which sprang from the once-acceptable pseudoscience of phrenology, formed the groundwork for a private language these men created to name a feeling the world hadn't yet named.[6] Phrenology, now discredited, was recognized and published in Victorian society as a legitimate science. Whitman seized its terminology deliberately, using 'adhesiveness', "the phrenological term for the capacity for friendship," as a synonym for male comradeship and to make sense of his "homoerotic urges as feelings of intense male friendship."[7] This rebranding expanded the 19th-century science into a poetic and political movement that sheltered something far more radical. Rather than same-sex desire being an act of deviance, this framing made it a biological fact. You cannot condemn what science says a body was made to feel. The widely regarded pseudoscientific language of 'adhesiveness' and 'magnetism' enabled Whitman and the members of the Fred Gray Association to inhabit a reality in which male intimacy was legitimized and their love protected, a reality that later served as the blueprint for modern queer identity. To

[5] David S. Reynolds, Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 195.
[6] John Van Wyhe, "The Authority of Human Nature: The 'Schädellehre' of Franz Joseph Gall," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 35, no. 1 (March 2002): 17–42, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4028401.
[7] Anton F. Borst, "A Chant of Dilation: Walt Whitman, Phrenology, and the Language of the Mind" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2014), 20.

grasp the importance of Whitman's, rebrand, it is essential to understand the supposed anatomical certainty that Phrenology claimed to provide.

Phrenology, developed by German physician Franz Joseph Gall in 1796, was the belief that the bumps and contours on a person's skull revealed their character, emotional capacity, and intelligence.[8] Popularized in 1810, Gall's theory held that the brain was composed of small, independent organs, each corresponding to a distinct personality trait, all of which were measurable and visible to a trained eye. The science found its most receptive audience among the white intellectual elite, who employed it to cement their authority by encoding social hierarchy as a biological fact.[9] In this way, they could mark those outside their rank as lesser by nature, not by circumstance. While debunked by some in the mid-19th century, phrenology remained a popular and trusted medical science well into the 19th century.[10] Phrenology did not just describe their world; it justified it, and it was trusted by those who embraced and applied it.

That trust was so deep that phrenology evolved into a popular form of entertainment for a broader audience. So much so that "phrenology reigned as the favorite entertainment of society," as "Americans became very much interested in a strange force through which one person could have power over another or could see things without using his eyes."[11] Phrenology became so "sensationalized that phrenology parlors appeared in Europe and America along with 'automated phrenology machines' for self-diagnosis or as entertainment."[12] This mainstream credibility is exactly what made it so useful for Whitman. He did not stumble into phrenological vocabulary; he chose it with the precision of a poet who knew the power of the right word in the right

[8] Wyhe, "Human Nature," 21.
[9] Wyhe, "Human Nature," 22-23.
[10] Wyhe, "Human Nature," 24.
[11] Edmund Reiss, "Whitman's Debt to Animal Magnetism," *PMLA* 78, no. 1 (March 1963): 80, https://doi.org/10.2307/461228.
[12] Emily Walhout, "Face to Face: Physiognomy & Phrenology," *Preserving Heritage Collections* (blog), September 24, 2012, https://archive.blogs.harvard.edu/preserving/2012/09/24/face-to-face-physiognomy-phrenology.

context. Scholars have argued that he was "the first self-proclaimed homosexual in modern literature," and that in doing so he "succeeded in forging appropriate artistic strategies of simultaneous revelation and concealment for subtly communicating a positive image of a gay sensibility to other gay readers."[13] That strategy is nowhere more visible than in his adoption of phrenological language. He used "phrenological terms such as 'amativeness' to describe heterosexual love and 'adhesiveness' as a synonym for male comradeship," and then carefully expanded those definitions just enough to be still socially acceptable.[14] Adhesiveness, in Whitman's hands, was much deeper than the capacity for friendship; it was the biological fact that some men, like himself, were built to love other men. As one scholar and English critic, Robert K. Martin, argues, Whitman's homosexuality became "the source of his art, the center of his book, and the foundation of his political theory."[15] Additionally, phrenology gave him the language to lay that foundation without exposing himself to condemnation. His sexuality and masculinity weren't a crisis of belief for him; it was the very "essence of and culmination of his faith."[16]

Because the word homosexual did not yet exist, the deliberate expansion of terms like adhesiveness and magnetism was not merely concealment but invention. Whitman and the Fred Gray Association were collectively creating queer language in real time, filling a gap in the English language with the tools available to them. The phrenological terms provided a respectable veneer and a shared shorthand understood by like-minded men. This private lexicon is what distinguished Whitman from his contemporaries. It was not merely that he found a private language for his desire, but that he circulated and published it in his poetry and personal

[13] David Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy: Walt Whitman's New American Religion* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 131.
[14] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 390.
[15] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 131.
[16] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 131.

letters. Underneath the borrowed science was something radical: a sincere personal recognition and acceptance of his feelings. Whitman arrived intuitively at an argument the modern world would spend another century learning: sexuality is not a choice but simply how people exist. The Fred Gray Association was not simply the audience for that language. It was proof that the feeling had always been there, waiting to be named. While the outside world lacked clear definitions of Whitman's desire, the poet carried his self-authored reality into the most tumultuous periods of American history. Even as he cared for the wounded in military hospitals, Whitman's correspondence continued to be grounded in the distinctive, 'magnetic' language characteristic of the Fred Gray circle.

In the summer of 1863, Whitman was volunteering as a nurse in military hospitals in Washington, DC.[17] He was surrounded by severely wounded and dying men. As he nursed them, he sat with them, consoled them, touched them, and wrote letters back home to their families. It was in this context that Whitman wrote a letter to Fred Gray, a member of Hugo Fritsch, describing his longing to be reunited with his dear companion, Fred Gray. Whitman voiced his desire, saying, "how I should like to see him & have a good heart's time with him, & a mild orgie, just for a basis, you know, for talk & interchange of reminiscences & the play of the quiet lambent electricity of real friendship."[18] The letter is significant both for what it openly declares and for what it reveals through its chosen language. On its surface, it evokes a man missing his friends, yet it was so much deeper than that.

The word "orgie" in the nineteenth century custom referred to a carousing with wild abandon as opposed to current associations of sexual excesses.[19] By employing the word mild

[17] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.
[18] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.
[19] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.

before “orgie” and a “quiet lambent electricity,” Whitman suggests a controlled chaos.[20] It's a night of physical closeness, so close to physical touch that lines are blurred; it's a tactile energy shared between these men. Again, he applies scientific language to explain something that Victorian society would condemn. Whitman isn’t discussing sex or a night of wild drinking, but rather the texture of their relationships. Whitman felt that men couldn’t reach a ‘real’ or unrestrained conversation without the loosening effects of alcohol; you needed the orgie with the heat of crowded bodies around a congested table to strip away inhibitions.[21] In this sense, the orgie is the fuel and the electricity, and the deep emotional bond is the result. The orgie was a space for Whitman to be physically affectionate and emotionally vulnerable in a new way.

The letter continues in the same vein. Whitman writes of wanting “to be within hand’s reach of you,” a phrase which, given the context of Whitman’s daily work, carries particular weight.[22] Whitman’s hands, in 1863, were instruments of comfort and healing, laid daily on the bodies of strangers who had no choice in being in that medical tent. The desperation encoded in “hand’s reach” proclaims the specific, physical ache of a man who spends his capacity for touch on everyone except the men he chose in the Fred Gray Association.[23] The intentional choice is central to understanding what Whitman means when he writes that he wants Fritz, “Fred and Charles Chauncey to remain a group of itself in the portrait gallery of my heart and mind, yet and forever.”[24] The collection reflected the inner life of the person who assembled it. These are the people Whitman selected above all others as essential to his joy and his identity.

[20] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.
[21] Justin Martin, *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians* (Da Capo Press, 2014), 64, Kindle.
[22] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.
[23] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.
[24] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.

The most significant language in the letter, however, is matrimonial in tone. Whitman's reference to their "knitting together" and his question, "is there any better kind in life's experiences?" borrows directly from the religious and domestic language of Victorian marriage.[25] Knitting was gendered work, associated primarily with women, the home, and the patient, the creation of something strong from two separate threads.[26] By applying this to bonds between men, Whitman claimed dignity and merit for male same-sex intimacy that was reserved for the institution of marriage. Whitman remained a bachelor his entire life, not out of dejection but choice.[27] The Fred Gray Association gave him what marriage was meant to provide: trust, comfort, partnership, fidelity, and chosen commitment. In a time when marriage was as much a social contract as an emotional one, when vows were sworn as much for family and propriety as for feeling, what Whitman shared with these men was by his own measure more binding.[28]

Male relationships in Victorian times were largely seen as either familial or situational.[29] Bonds were forged through work, social events, clubs, and at the bar, and were believed to be easily replicated in any new city or circumstance.[30] Whitman's despair that no other person can fill the frames in his gallery is in stark contrast to that model. The Fred Gray Association was not a club with open membership; it was a select collection of people who shared so many things. To be included in the gallery was to be claimed lovingly, permanently, without the need for a public proclamation to make it real. Whitman, using the coded language born in that cellar, privately

[25] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Yale University Press, 1999), 125-145.
[26] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (The Women's Press, 1984), 60-109.
[27] Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, "Biography," *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Matt Cohen, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price, accessed March 17, 2026, https://whitmanarchive.org/whitmans-life/biography.
[28] Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (Washington, DC, 1871), 61, https://archive.org/details/democraticvista00whitrich.
[29] Richard Dellamora, *Friendship's Bonds: Democracy and the Novel in Victorian England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 21–23.
[30] Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (Yale University Press, 1989), 63.

claimed a relationship that society offered no public path for. These men were his. He was theirs. The bond between them was worth preserving, with the care one gives to what is most worth keeping.

The letter to Fritsch ultimately documents the historical record of men, under significant social pressures, creating, in real time, a language to describe a love the world had not yet named. Whitman was a poet, language was his primary instrument, and the words he chose throughout this letter connect to themes his era recognized as legitimate: science, nature, domesticity, and marriage. Each word was chosen with intention. Each frame was borrowed from respectability and quietly bent into something new. The Fred Gray Association was the space where that language was tested and shared, at a time when the feeling would not wait for the English language to catch up, a century later.

By the mid-1860s, the vocabulary circulating among these men had become more confident and specific, branching beyond the safe code of scientific terminology into something direct and revealing. This knitting metaphor in Whitman's letter, for example, was not an isolated instance of matrimonial language finding its way into the correspondence of these men. It was a deliberate, recurring pattern in the private correspondence of members of the Fred Gray Association. The closest example is the letter to Hugo Fritsch, in which Whitman accuses his companion Nat Bloom of having broken his "faithful troth," a term drawn directly from Victorian marriage vows.[31] The accusation is framed as a tease to a friend who has been out of touch, but the choice of "troth" is not accidental. It is not the language of an acquaintance or a friend. It was the language of permanent, binding commitment between two people, hiding

[31] Walt Whitman to Hugo Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863], in *The Correspondence*, vol. 1, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York University Press, 1961), 123–24, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/loc.00779.

behind intentional casualness. Whitman expresses a real feeling about loyalty and exclusivity within the group while retaining the plausible deniability of humor. The joke only works if the feeling behind it is real. A man does not accuse another man of breaking his marriage vow, even in jest, unless some version of that vow had been previously made.

This pattern of coded intimacy extended to Whitman's writing about the physical beauty of these men. In his correspondence, he lingers on physical details: a man's complexion, his build, his "whiskers."[32] Whitman's clear appreciation of men's bodies and appearances went far beyond the conventions of male friendship in that era. These were not passing observations; they were the thoughts of a man who found other men beautiful.[33] The Fred Gray Association provided the necessary safety through private correspondence, allowing Whitman to voice his admiration. The Association occupied much more than the physical space of Pfaff's; these letters demonstrate that it was also an interior space where the normal conventions of masculine restraint and sobriety did not apply. A man could write about another man's beauty with a candor normally expressed only in romantic correspondence.

What is most revealing is that this internal language did not remain entirely invisible to outsiders. The Reverend Moncure Conway, an abolitionist who met Whitman for an interview during this period, described him as "hugging the water with a lover's enthusiasm," an observation made in passing but revealing in its instinct.[34] Conway had no access at that time to the Association's private communications, let alone the pet names or the marriage language captured in the letters among the men. Yet, his description went to the erotic imagery of a lover,

[32] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863], 123-124.
[33] Walt Whitman, "[New York Atlas, 19 September 1858]," *New York Atlas*, September 19, 1858, [1], *The Walt Whitman Archive*, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/per.00424.
[34] Moncure D. Conway, "A Visit to Walt Whitman: He Recalls the Years When He Lived in Brooklyn," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 11, 1886, 4, https://bklyn.newspapers.com/image/555304099/.

rather than a friend. What the Fred Gray Association named in private, Conway perceived in public. Whitman's magnetic personality was visible to anyone paying close enough attention and legible even to those without a framework to truly understand what they were seeing and intuiting.

This was not incidental. Whitman was, by every contemporary account, a man of considerable personal magnetism, widely regarded as charming and socially compelling.[35] He moved easily within New York Society and could, by the social logic of the era, have secured a conventional marriage without great difficulty. Such an arrangement would have insulated him from scrutiny and simplified his public life. However, he remained a bachelor his entire life.[36] For a man of his visibility, that was a significant choice, and it reinforced his determination to fully live with integrity to his true self. The members of the Fred Gray Association felt this privately, and observers like Conway registered it publicly. Taken together, the troth letter, Whitman's love of the male physique, and Conway's observation provide evidence for something rarely preserved in the historical record: a group of men in the 1860s actively constructing and circulating a private language for same-sex male intimacy. They tested their limits in correspondence and lived within it fully enough that it became perceptible from the outside. They may not have had the word for all of this, but they had everything else.

What the Fred Gray Association had, however, did not originate in the cellar of Pfaff's. The evolution of that language began earlier, and more privately, in a domestic space that predated the poetry and the coded vocabulary entirely. This evolution of that language is evident in the letters with Fred Vaughan and Whitman. Before there was a Pfaff's, before there was a

[35] Reiss, *Animal Magnetism*, 87.
[36] "Whitman, Walt (1819–1892)," *The Vault at Pfaff's*, Lehigh University, accessed March 3, 2026, https://pfaffs.web.lehigh.edu/node/54162.

Fred Gray Association, before there was a coded vocabulary of adhesiveness, lambent electricity, and faithful troths, there was Fred Vaughan. Vaughan was a stage driver from Brooklyn.[37] He and Whitman lived together in the late 1850's.[38] Same-sex cohabitation was a common practice in the nineteenth century in America, a practical arrangement driven by cramped city conditions and economic necessity.[39] At first glance, two men sharing a home would not arouse suspicion, but the intimacy they developed went far beyond that of simple roommates. Vaughan is significant to Whitman's life because their relationship was the origin of Whitman's search to legitimize his feelings. The writings that remain portray the raw experience of two men loving one another behind closed doors. Whitman's search for meaning is rooted in the time with Vaughan, before any framework existed. The Fred Gray Association, the *Calamus* poems, and the elaborate vocabulary the Association crafted were Whitman's attempts to build a social, communal structure for something he had already lived.

In a letter dated March 19, 1860, Vaughan writes to Whitman with the casual urgency of a man in a personal relationship who is accustomed to being in close contact. He writes apologizing for missing Whitman's departure to Boston: "I called in at Pfaff's, two evenings in succession, but did not find you on hand. Vaughan adds that he is "quite anxious to hear about how matters are progressing with" him and closes the message off with "yours as ever."[40] On its surface, this is a friend checking in on another friend. Read against the full context of their relationship and correspondence, it is more specific than that. In her reading of this letter,

[37] Blalock, *Whitman Bohemians*, 172.
[38] Blalock, *Whitman Bohemians*, 172.
[39] Anthony E. Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (BasicBooks, 1993), 84-85.
[40] Fred B. Vaughan to Walt Whitman, May 17, 1860, Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/loc.00572.

Blalock argued, “Whitman and his lover . . . Fred Vaughan” shared a domestic life.[41] *The Whitman Archive* also confirms that the two were living together while he finished his *Calamus* poems, which their love helped shape. Placing this letter in context, those poems were going to press in Boston at the time of this letter. He was anxious, calling and looking for news at Pfaff’s two evenings running. He is writing to a man whose most intimate poetry is being printed for public view; poetry inspired by their romantic life together. The language had to be careful; their correspondence could be read by others. This was not wartime censorship, but the social surveillance that governed men in the nineteenth century.[42] Discretion was survival.

A March 27, 1860, letter reveals the sophistication of the Fred Gray association’s coding even more fully. Writing from New York, Vaughan describes attending a lecture by Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the most publicly revered intellectual figures in America at the time.[43] He writes, Emerson "has that in him which makes men capable of strong friendships,” and quotes Emerson as saying that "a man whose heart was filled with a warm, ever enduring, not to be shaken by anything Friendship was one to be set on one side apart from other men, and almost to be worshipped as a saint.”[44] Vaughan is not simply reporting a lecture; he is intentionally invoking the credibility of one of the most respected American authors to legitimize, by association, the precise feeling he shares with Whitman. If Emerson himself says that men capable of strong friendship are to be revered, then what Vaughan and Whitman have is, by Emerson's own public testimony, the highest form of human connection.

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[41] Blalock, *Whitman Bohemians*, 172.
[42] James W. Westlake, *How to Write Letters: A Manual of Correspondence* (Porter and Coates, 1876), 122, https://books.google.com/books?id=Pz0XAAAAIAAJ.
[43] Fred B. Vaughan to Walt Whitman, March 27, 1860, Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/loc.00569.
[44] Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Houghton Mifflin, 1885), 234, https://alliance-uoregon.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01ALLIANCE_UO/negubp/cdi_hathitrust_hathifiles_hvd_32044080905557.

That same letter then closes with Vaughan pressing Whitman to send the draft copies of *Leaves of Grass* he had promised. "How about them proof sheets?"[45] He writes, nagging Whitman for copies he had been waiting on since March. Vaughan and the men around Whitman were not passive recipients of his poetry but active participants in its creation. They were his first readers and editors, men who understood that *Leaves* was not merely a literary project but a public manifestation of everything they had been living privately. These poems represented them, and Vaughan wanted to see them in print. By April 9, that patience had run out. Vaughan writes with barely concealed urgency: "I have written to you twice since I heard from you. Why don't you answer? Come, Walt, remember I take a deep interest in all that concerns you and must naturally be anxious to hear from you."[46] The tone is demanding, far outside the conventions of nineteenth-century male correspondence. Vaughan writes like a man who feels entitled to Whitman's attention, anxious in the way of someone whose loved one is far away and silent. The emotional dependency the letter reveals is the other side of the electricity Whitman describes in some of his own correspondence; the feeling was not one-directional. Vaughan felt it too.

What the letter between Vaughn and Whitman ultimately documents, however, is not emotional urgency but something more concrete: the practical, daily management of a queer life under conditions of domestic surveillance. These letters were written in a household he shared with at least two other adults, where, as Vaughan himself describes it, "Robert is drinking Tea, Mrs. Cooper is moving around the room as usual, ready to wait upon Bob even before he needs it," the daily machinery of respectable domestic life turning and watching around him.[47] Vaughan writes that Mrs. Cooper and Robert "keep asking me every evening if I have heard

[45] Vaughan to Whitman, March 27, 1860He.
[46] Fred B. Vaughan to Walt Whitman, April 9, 1860, Charles E. Feinberg Collection of the Papers of Walt Whitman, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/loc.00570.
[47] Vaughan to Whitman, March 27, 1860.

from Walt yet," and that if Whitman does not write soon, he will "be under the painful necessity of telling a lie to keep up your reputation."[48] Mrs. Cooper was not a landlady, but rather something more consequential in certain respects, likely the mother of Vaughan's roommate, Robert Cooper. As such, a maternal domestic authority was embedded in his daily life. Mrs. Cooper was present, attentive, and personally acquainted with Whitman. Her daily inquiries about his correspondence were a mechanism of social surveillance that governed respectable households in the nineteenth century. A man who did not write, who offered no account of his whereabouts and activities, invited precisely the kind of scrutiny these men could not afford. Vaughan's "painful necessity of telling a lie" was not a figure of speech.[49] It was a survival strategy, delivered in the casual register of a letter between intimates, coded as mere pleasantries just carefully enough that Mrs. Cooper herself could have read it without understanding what was being protected. The necessity of concealment that Whitman practiced in facing critics and the public world had its origins here, in the domestic spaces where the consequences of visibility were immediate and personal. The double life did not begin at Pfaff's; it began at home.

The Vaughan letters document the private architecture of life in 1860, when the group was intact, and the work of concealment was still a daily mindfulness among the association. Three years later, that structure was under a different pressure. By December 1862, Whitman was in Washington, the country was at war, and the Association was losing members to illness, distance, and death.[50] In an 1863 letter addressed to Fritsch, Whitman laments the sudden loss of one of their comrades, Charles Chauncey.[51] Chauncey, confronting death at only 25 years old,

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[48] Vaughan to Whitman, March 27, 1860.
[49] Vaughan to Whitman, March 27, 1860.
[50] Blalock, *"Go to Pfaff's!"*, 41.
[51] Walt Whitman to Hugo Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863], in *The Correspondence*, vol. 1, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York University Press, 1961), 123–24, The Walt Whitman Archive, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/loc.00779.

seemed to follow in the footsteps of the Pfaffian generation of men who tended to die young due to the manner of their substance abuse, the extreme poverty that ravaged their demographic, and the cramped nature of their housing in urban Manhattan and Brooklyn boroughs.[52] Biographical information on Chauncey is scarce, and his life remains almost a mystery outside his obituary, brief mentions in correspondence, and this letter, which immortalizes him only through the eyes of his dear friend and, haply, lover. Unknown are his interests outside this small circle of friends, his life before the bar, and his own thoughts and feelings about the life he led. This letter serves as an elegy for the rather un-narrated lives of Chauncey and Pfaff's regulars, including Fritsch.

None of Chauncey's correspondence or writings has been preserved; thus, the poignancy of Whitman's letters underscores the familiarity of the pair. By means of this letter in particular, Whitman muses on the "easy falling into intimacy" the two shared, the nights spent together in their entirety, and the secret words they exchanged.[53] It is Whitman to whom Chauncey would talk "freely about himself, his experiences, feelings," and all he considered "quite confidential."[54] They spent, however, only a couple of years in each other's company from the late 1850s until Chauncey's passing. Although Whitman never wrote of any physical intimacy shared between them in his largely uncensored journals, he writes that he "loved him then," and continues to profess his love for "him now."[55] Through these nightly confessions, it is clear that the two shared a close connection, perhaps closer than two friends would be accustomed to. And in all, they felt without touch, without the need to say it out loud, that they did love each other.

[52] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863]; Christine Stansell, "Whitman at Pfaff's: Commercial Culture, Literary Life and New York Bohemia at Mid-Century," Walt Whitman Quarterly Review 10, no. 3 (1993): 107-126.
[53] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863].
[54] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863].
[55] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863].

Perhaps bittersweet, but it is through the loss of a loved one that Fritsch and Whitman allow themselves to embrace a vulnerability not characteristic of a nineteenth-century urban man. It allowed these men to reflect on memories and realize how much they did care for each other, perhaps "more than [they] supposed."[56] The suddenness of the void Chauncey created in the group allowed Whitman to double down on the intensity of their exploration of intimacies. It was now more important than ever to him to ensure his "boys" stayed close, as he was perhaps of the belief that you must spend time with people before you lose them.[57] Often, our emotions become clear only after experiencing the loss of someone. This passing of a loved one seemed to have allowed space for greater vulnerability than men were perhaps accustomed to at the time. He sat up through the night not in desolation but in a grief that was, by morning, something closer to gratitude, for the hilarious fresh ways, the sunny smile, the confidences freely given. Without what he called "mourning thought," he chose to celebrate the man rather than the loss.[58] What the death of Charles Chauncey made undeniable, in the privacy of that letter, was the depth of what the Fred Gray Association was. The question was what happened when that same feeling met the public world. The answer had already been composed: Walt Whitman was building the interior world of chosen love and coded language while the public world began answering the question loudly and without ambiguity.

Despite the sizable support for Whitman's work, there was an equally vigorous opposition movement that published critiques in newspapers and circulated them through private correspondence. The 1855 debut of *Leaves of Grass*, in particular, garnered immediate backlash, as people sought to chastise Whitman for the sexually explicit themes within the collection.

[56] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863].
[57] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863].
[58] Whitman to Fritsch, [before August 7, 1863].

Initial reviews were anything but kind, with a review declaring "that Whitman's indecencies stink in the nostrils."[59] In 1856, the *Christian Examiner* published a notice of *Leaves of Grass* in which they declared it one of "the worst disgraces" in literary history.[60] They describe the work as "an affront to the morality of respectable people," which makes it clear they are acting on moral obligations, "bound in conscience to call it ominous and obscene."[61] They push further on the notion of libidinousness, writing: "Dante's guide through the infernal regions bade him, on one occasion, look and pass on."[62] By framing reading *Leaves* as a journey through Dante's Inferno, they render Whitman's work synonymous with sin. *Leaves of Grass* is portrayed as an act of corruption unworthy of discussion; it is relegated to silent treatment, mirroring Virgil's advice to Dante to ignore the uncommitted souls of the inferno.[63]

Another review published by *The London Critic* in 1856 similarly targeted the obscenities of *Leaves*. Myriad violent threats, the author asserts that he "deserves nothing so richly as the public executioner's whip."[64] They reclaim Whitman's title as poet and brandish him as nothing more than a criminal for his threats to good sociability, deserving of public punishment at the hands of the state. Most famously, philosopher and essayist Henry David Thoreau visited Whitman in New York in 1856 and said of his candid treatment of the human body and sexual love, "it is as if the beasts spoke."[65] While Thoreau made clear that the pair parted as friends and that he thought the world "ought to rejoice greatly in him," he was still repelled by the uninhibited nature Whitman possessed.[66] These scathing reviewers were

[59] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 130.
[60] "Notices of Recent Publications," *The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany* 61 (4th ser., vol. 26), no. 3 (November 1856): 472.
[61] "Notices of Recent Publications," 472.
[62] "Notices of Recent Publications," 472.
[63] Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (Doubleday, 2000), 1-63.
[64] "Reviews: Leaves of Grass," *The London Critic* 15, no. 360 (April 1, 1856): 170–71.
[65] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 130.
[66] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 130.

commonplace, as libraries refused to buy or sell *Leaves* due to public aversion to explicit sexual themes of heterosexual and homosexual sex.[67]

Whitman's own confidant and friend, Sarah Tyndale, an abolitionist and Fourierist from Philadelphia, felt troubled by the unbridled nature of his writing. In a correspondence from Tyndale to Whitman on July 1, 1857, she vocalizes her concern regarding his drafts containing "the entire nakedness of the intercourse is rather calculated to increase libidinousness in weak minds, which Heaven knows is frightfully rampant."[68] Tyndale feared that his work would inspire an increase of sexual desire in others, a fear that was grounded in the severe social anxieties of the 19th century. Whitman's poetry, particularly *Leaves of Grass*, published on July 4, 1855, sought to make sex a public and poetic theme. This abandonment of contemporary moral conventions drew widespread criticism, which labeled his writing as obscene or filthy. Whitman's work was a threat to the very fabric of morality of the time. Even Tyndale, a woman of progressive ideology, "would be delighted if some of the expressions were left out."[69] There is a need from even those closest to Whitman for him to censor his work, leaving out expressions of sexuality or eroticism that scandalized even the most radical of persons. Such apprehension confirms that contemporary readers recognized the 'too vivid' sexual nature of his work. Those who read his work felt strongly about it one way or another. Those who found themselves in his work, however, "hailed him as a religious prophet," as "for them, the *Leaves* was more than literary art, it was scripture."[70]

[67] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 130.
[68] Sarah Tyndale to Walt Whitman, July 1, 1857, in *The Correspondence*, vol. 1, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York University Press, 1961), *The Walt Whitman Archive*, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/loc.04300.
[69] Tyndale to Whitman, July 1, 1857.
[70] Kuebrich, *Minor Prophecy*, 1.

The institutional consequences were real and immediate. Whitman, working as a clerk for the U.S. Department of the Interior at the time, was recommended for termination on the grounds that "he lacked the requisite moral character for public service," evidenced by the supposed immoral content within *Leaves*.[71] The same feelings he had been quietly naming in letters with Fred Vaughan and the same adhesive love he was practicing in Pfaff's led a federal employer to declare his poetry as grounds for dismissal. The coded language the Fred Gray Association had developed was not a private indulgence; it was a necessary response to the public world. In that world, the consequences of plain expression were now explicit. And yet, the following year, Whitman walked into the center of that world, carrying the same force inside himself, and found in the war-ravaged hospitals, a context in which adhesive love did not require any code at all.

The Civil War did not interrupt Walt Whitman's practice of adhesive love; it institutionalized it. Whitman arrived in Washington in 1862 to nurse his wounded brother and stayed to volunteer in military hospitals.[72] Whitman found a new world where the urgency of war dissolved the ordinary rules governing masculine behavior. Men held one another as they died. Men wept openly in front of other men. Men gave and received comfort through physical presence in ways that would have been impermissible in peacetime. The war created, at least in the hospitals of Washington, DC, something superficially similar to what Whitman had been building at Pfaff's: a space where male intimacy did not require justification and in which adhesive love could be practiced openly under the guise of necessity. Whitman understood this immediately. Whitman wrote that when he visited hospitals, "it was in the simple matter of my

[71] Seth P. Waxman, "Presenting the Case of the United States As It Should Be: The Solicitor General in Historical Context," *Journal of Supreme Court History* 23, no. 2 (1998): 13.
[72] Martin G. Murray, "Traveling with the Wounded: Walt Whitman and Washington's Civil War Hospitals," *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Matt Cohen, Ed Folsom, and Kenneth M. Price, 1996, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/anc.00156.

Personal Presence, and emanating ordinary cheer and magnetism" that he "helped more than my medical nursing." [73] Here, Whitman was not merely reflecting on his personal bedside manner; he was invoking a specific therapeutic tradition of the nineteenth century.

Whitman understood this with his characteristic intuition and precision. He wrote of giving his patients, whom he regarded as his "dear suffering boys," a presence and magnetism that neither doctors nor medicines nor routine nursing support could provide.[74] Whitman truly felt himself endowed with the power of healing, using what he believed was a sincere medical treatment, surpassing those available to nurses at the time, to heal soldiers assigned to his wing. By "petting" these men, Whitman manifested his magnetism, functioning as a euphemism for a physical, quasi-erotic healing energy shared between men.[75] Magnetism is a familiar term Whitman had used to describe the invisible force of connection between the men he loved. In the hospital, however, it became part of healing rather than friendship. There is a touch of arrogance in Whitman's letters of this era, as he described how he kissed the wounded men. He sat with them through the night. He held their hands and wrote their letters home.[76] "Through breath and touch," one account records, "he apparently has control over life and death and thus assumes the function of physician, priest, and guardian angel."[77] Regardless of the role he is fulfilling, each is described through the same lens of adhesiveness and chosen physical intimacy that began with Vaughan and continued through his relationships with Fritsch, Bloom, and Chauncey.

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[73] Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War* (Camden, NJ: 1875), *The Walt Whitman Archive*, accessed March 17, 2026, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/ppp.01875.
[74] Whitman to Fritsch, October 8, 1863, 158-160.
[75] Walt Whitman to Hugo Fritsch, August 7, 1863, in *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York University Press, 1961), 125–27.
[76] Walt Whitman, "The Wound-Dresser," Poetry Foundation, accessed March 17, 2026, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53027/the-wound-dresser.
[77] Reiss, *Animal Magnetism*, 83.

The war also gave Whitman a public vocabulary for his practices that his private letters could never become. He publicly advocated for the presence of people in hospitals whose personal magnetism could soothe what medicine could not. He describes the energy in the language of feminine domesticity: “The presence of a good middle-aged or elderly woman, the magnetic touch of hands, the expressive features of the mother, the silent soothing of her presence … are precious and final qualifications.”[78] It was the same move he made with phrenology, with the portrait gallery, with marriage vocabulary: finding a publicly acceptable framework for feelings and actions that, outside that frame, would have been outside the social realm of description.

We see the congruence between the private world of the Fred Gray Association and the public world of war hospitals. The men in those tents whom Whitman touched were strangers, none of whom had chosen one another. It was not reciprocal intimacy, nor was it built through years of correspondence, late nights, and shared confidences. Yet somehow Whitman brought to it the same force, the same magnetism, the same adhesiveness that defined his relationships with the men he chose and loved most. The Fred Gray Association was the laboratory, and the hospitals were the application. The vocabulary was the same because the feelings were the same. Whitman did not have oneself for Pfaff’s and another for war; he was his true self in every space he occupied.

Years after the war, Whitman’s personal power was still visible to everyone he met. Whitman's contemporary and biographer Richard Maurice Bucke describes Whitman’s physical presence and energy: “No description can give any idea of the extraordinary physical attractiveness of the man. I do not speak now of the affection of friends and of those who are

[78] Walt Whitman, "Female Nurses for Soldiers," in *Complete Prose Works* (David McKay, 1892), 104, *The Walt Whitman Archive*, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/ppp.00504.

much with him, but of the magnetism exercised by him upon people who merely see him for a few minutes or pass him on the street."[79] In fact, people found Whitman intoxicating, with one visitor who spent merely an hour with Whitman leaving in a state resembling "slight intoxication by champagne, or falling in love," an exaltation that lasted at least six weeks and that did not thereafter fully dissipate but became, as he put it, "a permanent element in his life, a strong and living force making for purity and happiness."[80] These were not the responses of men who had been on a long journey of discovery with Whitman. They had not read Calamus or corresponded with him for years. These were the reactions of strangers who had no context for their feelings and no coded vocabulary. Yet they independently and instinctively defaulted to the language of love. Whitman's magnetism wasn't a characteristic of his poetry, but rather a biological reality of his life. Without even having to speak, men felt themselves drawn to him. What the Fred Gray Association had named in private, and what the hospitals had practiced under the cover of necessity, was simply what Whitman was: a force that exceeded the categories available to describe it, legible to anyone who came close enough to feel it.

The Fred Gray Association was not, by any conventional measure, a historically significant organization. There were no formal membership protocols, no charter, or public record of its gatherings. It was a loose confederation of young men who met in a New York City beer cellar beneath Broadway in Greenwich Village, corresponded across the distance of war, grieved their youthful dead, and loved one another in ways their era had no sanctioned language to define.[81] Yet through the written chronicles of their journeys, we see the Fred Gray

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[79] Richard M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Innes & Sons, 1905), 217, https://archive.org/details/cosmicconsciousn00buckuoft.
[80] Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness*, 217.
[81] Catherine Clinton, and Nina Silber, *Battle Scars: Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, 2006), 61, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uoregon/reader.action?docID=271050&ppg=74.

Association doing something the historical record rarely captures so clearly: deliberately constructing together language for a form of love that the public world was actively working to suppress. That suppression was concrete, taking the form of firing notices for Whitman and newspaper reviews calling for his public flogging. It took the form of libraries refusing to carry *Leaves of Grass* and even abolitionist friends asking Whitman to censor himself. The Fred Gray Association found itself in a culture so hostile to what these men felt that even those who admired Whitman the most could not understand what he was describing. These men watched the public denounce *Leaves of Grass* as a criminal act. This landscape makes the necessity of their coded language even clearer. The borrowed language for mainstream social constructs was the mechanism they used to build a protected world in the shadow of a public one that would have destroyed them all.

That the Fred Gray Association loved one another is secondary to the fact that they loved with a full understanding of the cost, and they forged a life together anyway. The vocabulary they created moved across science, nature, domesticity, marriage, and health. Each term was chosen with intention, and each frame was borrowed from the socially legitimate and bent into something new. Whitman carried that vocabulary from the basement of Pfaff's into the hospitals of Washington, where he practiced the same adhesive love under the cover of wartime necessity. The strangers he touched there responded to it instinctively, reaching for the language of love without knowing why. The feeling required no translation. It was legible to anyone who encountered it, with or without the vocabulary to name it. Walt Whitman and the Fred Gray Association simply had the courage and the ingenuity to find words for it.

Chapter 4: The Vault as a Literary Laboratory

By the late 1850s, Pfaff's had become, as historian Justin Martin documents, the center of New York's literary bohemian world, drawing writers who sought both an audience and a community that mainstream publishing culture could not provide.[1] Among them, albeit briefly, was Theodore Winthrop, an aspirant and then unpublished author.[2] Arriving in New York in 1854 to finally settle down, Winthrop spent this time focusing on his literary career, with his friend Curtis recording that these years in Greenwich Village were the most productive of his writing life.[3] In 1858, he had a quaint apartment on 15 Tenth Street in Greenwich Village (later renamed 51 West Tenth Street in 1866), a building designed with artists in mind, only 0.7 miles from Pfaff's.[4] Located at the heart of the American bohemian movement, Winthrop had easy access to a community of radical and intellectual thinkers who prioritized individuality at all costs. It is through this association that Winthrop finally discovered his footing in the literary world and began the work of becoming a novelist. His few years there, before the Civil War, were the most productive of his life. For the first time, Winthrop was writing not only for himself or his family, but also for an audience of magnetic thinkers who understood his journey. Perhaps, for Winthrop, New York was not a place to settle domestically but instead a place where he could finally speak and be heard and transform his cozy travel stories into fully fleshed works of fiction.

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[1] Justin Martin, *Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and the Broadway Bohemians* (Da Capo Press, 2014), 45–60.
[2] George William Curtis, "Biographical Sketch," in Theodore Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 1–22; "Theodore Winthrop," *The Vault at Pfaff's*, Lehigh University, accessed March 2026, https://pfaffs.web.lehigh.edu.
[3] Curtis, "Biographical Sketch," 1–22; "Theodore Winthrop," *The Vault at Pfaff's*.
[4] David Peters Corbett, "Art, Morality and the National Interest: Theodore Winthrop, Frederic Church and Martin Johnson Heade at the Tenth Street Studios in 1859," *European Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 1 (May 2011): 57–72, https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.30.1.57_1.

Winthrop took a circuitous route to New York City, having spent the majority of his adult life in near-constant motion: touring Europe, traversing the Isthmus of Panama, exploring the American West, dedicating himself to fulfilling familial expectations, and serving the ideals of the United States through government surveys and initiatives across the country and overseas.[5] Curits recalled Winthrop had "an ill-health that colored all his life."[6] Winthrop's body rarely kept pace with his ambitions: in Panama, he was confined to a cane chair, while his mind was already racing ahead to his next expedition and the next obligation he had promised himself to meet.[7] At his core, he was a man raised in the New England tradition of moral seriousness: his faith demanded personal accountability, and his historically distinguished family mandated propriety, leaving him, as art historian David Peters Corbett argues, "fully socialized into this self-disciplinary state of mind."[8] Nineteenth-century journalist George William Curtis, who knew Winthrop well, described him as possessing a "womanly grace" that accompanied his brilliant intellectual capacity.[9] Such an observation hints at something for which his world did not have a category. For a man of that inheritance, those two things pulled in opposite directions. The weight of a family name anchored in statesmen and governors could conflict with a nature that Curtis and others recognized as unusually gentle, not to mention his feelings of attachment, for which his world had no sanctioned framework, yet came to life in his novels. This tension calls into question whether Winthrop spent most of his adult life in motion to avoid the self-

[5] Theodore Winthrop, *The Canoe and the Saddle: Adventures Among the Northwestern Rivers and Forests; and Isthmiana* (Ticknor and Fields, 1862), 1–15.
[6] George William Curtis, "Theodore Winthrop," in *The Fallen Brave: A Biographical Memorial of the American Officers Who Have Given Their Lives for the Preservation of the Union*, ed. John Gilmary Shea (Charles B. Richardson and Co., 1861), 81.
[7] Curtis, "Theodore Winthrop," 81.
[8] David Peters Corbett, "Art, Morality and the National Interest: Theodore Winthrop, Frederic Church and Martin Johnson Heade at the Tenth Street Studios in 1859," *European Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 1 (May 2011): 60, https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.30.1.57_1.
[9] Theodore Winthrop to Elizabeth Carow Winthrop, July 12, 1855, Theodore Winthrop Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, Box #, Folder #.

analysis that stillness would require, and whether the restlessness his friends remembered so fondly was as much evasion as passion.

The roots that Winthrop began to establish in Greenwich Village allowed him to, for the first time, remain stationary and begin writing novels in earnest. Curtis records that in college, "his favorite studies were Greek and mental philosophy" and "he never lost the scholarly taste and habit."[10] Here was a man who was built for a life of ideas, spent his twenties frustrated by a body that betrayed him, and striving to gain the respect of a family that expected him to be elsewhere. His extensive wandering was not wasted: his friends remembered it as a "secret passion with him," and that when he sat and recounted his journeys, "his stories of travel were so graphic and warm he had touched the whole region into life."[11] As warm and engaging as those stories were, they had not found a reading public. Winthrop arrived in Greenwich Village around age twenty-five, carrying five filled diaries of travel stories, yet with not a single word in print.

Pfaff's cellar room provided this community of bohemian men, such as Winthrop, with the opportunity to refine their raw experiences and feelings into complete or published works of literature. Now, for the first time, Winthrop had a reason to stop moving and a community where his gifts and nature could be developed, not managed. Pfaff's was the heart of that community, and what it offered a man like Winthrop was not simple. Winthrop had been raised for an elite life; a man of his social standing was expected to be a learner, a thinker, a reader, a gentleman of letters.[12] The intellectual aspect of Pfaff's was, in that sense, consistent with his destiny. The Vault delivered it in a way nothing in his upbringing had prepared him to experience. The people at that table were not gentlemen of leisure; they were journalists, artists, actors, and radicals who

[10] George William Curtis, "Theodore Winthrop," *Atlantic Monthly* 8, no. 46 (August 1861), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1861/08/theodore-winthrop/308747/.
[11] Curtis, "Theodore Winthrop."
[12] Curtis, "Theodore Winthrop."

lived on credit, drank heavily, and tended to live hard and die young.[13] In this space, to be unconventional was the key to entry; to live a life of contrasts and tension was the norm. The vault offered more than an intellectual community for Winthrop; it was a place he and his friends could safely navigate the complex interplay between magnetic attraction and social unease. For a man caught between the weight of his heritage and the new pull of his nature, the vault was both a homecoming and a confrontation. Those few years before the Civil War were the first in which Winthrop could engage fully in his creative passions. Winthrop experienced a pivotal moment in his literary journey where he embraced his creative inclinations and began his evolution into a novelist. It was in those unique and somewhat improbable confines of the cellar room that the conditions were ripe for the emergence of *Cecil Dreeme*.

Published posthumously in 1861, Cecil Dreeme is a semi-autobiographical work that depicts what literary scholar Michael Millner describes as 'a longingly romantic, emotionally charged love between men, spoken of in no uncertain terms,' with a specificity that hints at Winthrop's personal experience.[14] The novel appears set in Winthrop's own apartment building, peopled by characters modeled on his personal acquaintances, and written by a man who understood, from the inside, what it meant to love someone for whom the world had no category. The story at its heart follows key elements of Winthrop's personal life, which are woven into its subtext. His apartment building at Tenth Street appears as Chrysalis College, the novel's central backdrop, and he positions the story's protagonist, Robert Byng, as a surrogate for himself.[15] Additionally, the cast of characters draws real-life inspiration from Winthrop's acquaintances and

[13] Christine Stansell, "Whitman at Pfaff's: Commercial Culture, Literary Life and New York Bohemia at Mid-Century," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 10, no. 3 (1993): 107-126.
[14] Michael Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women: Sodomy and Male Sentimental Citizenship in the Antebellum City," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 19.
[15] Corbett, "Art, Morality and the National Interest," 63; Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women," 25.

friends. The character of *Cecil Dreeme* himself is understood to be modeled on William Henry Hurlbut, a figure from Winthrop's social circle.[16] Churm functions in the novel as an older, stabilizing presence, a wealthy and benevolent figure who offers a secure footing in New York life to the younger men around him.[17] The vault itself appears as Chuzzlewit Hotel, where the novel's own knights lounge around a long table in a space that is at once magnetic and world-weary. Winthrop writes that "these unknightly knights of the Long Table stood about us, with the blunted lances of a blunted chivalry," a portrait of men who had found their way to the table and were not entirely sure what it had cost them.[18]

Yet the club of *Cecil Dreeme* is not simply a haven. It is a space ruled by the novel's villain, Densdeth, who "revealed evil everywhere," and who nonetheless held rank as the man who could provide "the entrée to the other worlds, the business world, the literary world, the religious world, all of them."[19] Contemporary critics identified Densdeth as modeled on William Henry Hurlbert, whom the *New York Times* described in 1911 as "Winthrop's brilliant friend of the fifties."[20] During the peak years of Pfaff's, Hurlbert wrote for *Putnam's Monthly* and *The New York Times*, moving in the same literary circles Winthrop inhabited.[21] The identification was disputed even then, and Winthrop was not alive to address it. Literary scholar Michael Millner further complicates the picture, specifying that "Cecil Dreeme himself is said to be modeled on William Henry Hurlbut (sic)," placing the connection with the novel's sympathetic artist rather than its villain, a discrepancy in the secondary literature that remains unresolved.[22]

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[16] Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women," 25.
[17] Theodore Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme*, ed. Christopher Looby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014)
[18] Theodore Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 181.
[19] Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme*, 184.
[20] "Theodore Winthrop," *New York Times*, June 10, 1911.
[21] T. C. Evans, "William H. Hurlbert: Mr. Evans's Reminiscences of a Noted Writer and Journalist," *New York Times*, June 14, 1902, https://www.nytimes.com/1902/06/14/archives/william-h-hurlbert-mr-evanss-reminiscences-of-a-noted-writer-and.html.
[22] Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women," 24.

That the villain is also the gatekeeper is the novel's central tension and its most honest observation about the world Winthrop actually inhabited. Winthrop knew both things and wrote them into the same man.

Cecil Dreeme is many things at once: a romance, a gothic mystery, a farcical drama, and above all, a narrative of the experience of magnetism itself. Byng's love object, Cecil, conceals an identity beneath a disguise, as Byng navigates his attraction to him, "Him I trust. Him I love with a love passing the love of women."[23] When he describes the bond between the two as, "we form a capital exclusive pair, close as any of the historic ones, Orestes and Pylades, for example," the implication is clear.[24] Orestes and Pylades are the Greek archetype of absolute male devotion and ultimate sacrifice.[25] For the educated young men in antebellum New York, as in ancient Greece, this level of feeling was understood by them through the classical homoerotic examples within Greek literature, such as Orestes and Pylades. A Yale graduate and educated man, Winthrop likely saw these stories of intimate male relationships through that lens. [26] Yet, while understood through themes of 'Greek love' or platonic devotion, there was an absence of framework to define modern frameworks of male partnership.

Winthrop resolves the dissonance in the only way the era could permit: Cecil is revealed to be a woman, and with the disguise removed, the attraction is now made retroactively legible.[27] The resolution satisfies the conventions of the era but does not explain Byng's feelings for the person he believed was a man, and Winthrop does not try to explain them. The feeling exists in

[23] Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme*, 275.
[24] Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme*, 243.
[25] Euripides, *Orestes and Other Plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott, Kindle edition (Penguin Classics, 1973), 323-331.
[26] Theodore Winthrop, "Yale Paper 1847," 1847, box 1, folder 17, Theodore Winthrop papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.
[27] Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women," 12.

the novel exactly as it stood in the world Winthrop inhabited: real, palpable, and without an adequate name.

Winthrop spent most of his adult life in motion, and Greenwich Village was the first place the motion stopped. What stilled him was not domesticity or professional security but the vault: a room that demanded honesty and rewarded it, that took his nature seriously enough not to require its concealment, and that gave him, for the first time, an audience worthy of the work he had been carrying for years. Winthrop responded by writing the most personally revealing fiction of his life, encoding his apartment, his acquaintances, his fears, and his desires into a novel that would sell seventeen editions and that he would never see in print.[28] A passionate abolitionist and loyal Unionist, he enlisted the moment Fort Sumter fell and was killed at Big Bethel at age thirty-two, with *Cecil Dreeme* still in manuscript in his desk drawer.[29]

Another Pfaff's member, a man who dove himself deeper into bohemian subculture than more casual observers such as Winthrop, was Fitz-James O'Brien. In fact, O'Brien was among the vault's earliest members, Clapp's "first recruit" into the community he was building beneath Broadway.[30] So engrossed in the then-blossoming community of creatives at the cellar bar, he became "one of the cardinals in the high church of bohemia."[31] A near contemporary of Winthrop, O'Brien was born in 1828 in County Cork, Ireland, and immigrated to America in 1852, leaving England under the shadow of squandered finances and rumors of an affair with a married woman.[32] Historian Francis Wolle argued that part of his financial devastation, or

[28] Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women," 24.
[29] "Theodore Winthrop," *New York Times*, June 10, 1911; Corbett, "Art, Morality and the National Interest," 62; Millner, "The Fear Passing the Love of Women," 19.
[30] Martin, *Rebel Souls*, 47.
[31] Martin, *Rebel Souls*, 30.
[32] Francis Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien: A Literary Bohemian of the Eighteen-Fifties* (University of Colorado, 1944), 21, 27–28.

perhaps all of it, stemmed back to a failed literary magazine called *The Parlour Magazine of the Literature of All Nations*, which he established around 1849 and 1851.[33] Arriving as a now penniless immigrant at New York's docks, O'Brien, quickly began the work of transforming himself from the feared immigrant caricature into a 'real American' man. O'Brien worked tirelessly to cultivate a self-image that would enable him to achieve celebrity. O'Brien leaned into the persona of a cosmopolitan man, mimicked English manners, and focused on American literary styles, abandoning Irish themes in his work. O'Brien's hero instead became American author Edgar Allen Poe, whose style he mimicked in his various American Gothic-Style novels such as *The Diamond Lens* and *The Lost Room*. O'Brien's friends also noted that he seemed "delighted when mistaken for an Englishman," as it meant he was no longer subjected to the stereotypes that came with embracing his heritage.[34] Even O'Brien's involvement in the bohemian circle at Pfaff's was representative of his attempt to escape that part of himself. As O'Brien increasingly engaged with the cultural and social fabric of New York, his stature grew, allowing him to transcend generalizations about immigrants and be recognized, above all, as a significant literary force. Life within that circle became his literary leverage, and imitation meant survival.

O'Brien built more than a writing career in New York; he built a persona that was, in and of itself, a contradiction. O'Brien fought to abandon his Irish identity in his writings, modeling his writing style on Edgar Allen Poe, and coming to be known among his fellow Pfaffians as a "Celtic Poe."[35] Joanna Levin's scholarship identifies O'Brien as "the Bohemian most likely to

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[33] Wolle, *Fitz-James O'Brien*, 21.
[34] Bridget Hourican, "O'Brien, Fitz-James," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, accessed May 8, 2026, https://www.dib.ie/biography/obrien-fitz-james-a6467.https://www.dib.ie/biography/obrien-fitz-james-a6467.https://www.dib.ie/biography/obrien-fitz-james-a6467#:~:text=Afterwards%20he%20seldom%20used%20Irish,although%20he%20had%20numerous%20affairs.
[35] Joseph J. Reilly, "A Celtic Poe," *The Catholic World*, March 1920. https://nyirishhistory.us/article/fitz-james-obrien/

inspire comparisons to both the working-class loafer and the aristocratic dandy" because he was able to adopt different class identities with such ease.[36] By the time O'Brien found his community at Pfaff's, he had already spent years constructing a public identity designed to obscure his true, private self. Pfaff's did not create that habit, but it certainly solidified it.

In the cellar of Pfaff's, O'Brien assumed the persona that he eschewed in his writing, one of a brash, combative, physically aggressive Irishman who answered to no one. Cultural historian Albert Parry documents him as the "chief fighter" who engaged in frequent "fistic combats over literary issues" at the vault, with his broken nose as his "hallmark" and "Fist-Gammon O'Bouncer" as his nickname.[37] These fights, laughed off as the antics of a bohemian and radical man, may have been representative of a deeper friction among young men struggling to navigate their own desire for intimacy. As historian Anthony Rotundo notes of nineteenth-century male psyche, "fist fights and wrestling matches not only bespoke boyhood rivalries, but they served as a disguised channel of affection in a boys world that forbade gestures of tenderness." [38] Perhaps for O'Brien, physical combat became the only permissible way to touch another man, a way to release himself of the tension he felt. O'Brien's friend and fellow member of Pfaff's observed that O'Brien "never cared for anyone with whom he did not quarrel," and that this was, for him, "almost a matter of principle."[39] The arguments served as O'Brien's tool to develop intimacy. His nightly boisterous aggression at Pfaff's was not hostility toward the people around him; it was a man performing intimacy in the only register publicly available to him. A stereotypical boisterous, brash, drunken Irishman does not require deep scrutiny.

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[36] Joanna Levin, "American Bohemians", 1858-1912: A Literary and Cultural Geography," PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2001, 41.
[37] Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America* (Covici Friede, 1933), 50-51.
[38] Anthony E. Rotundo, "Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800–1900*," Journal of Social History 23, no. 1* (Autumn 1989): 10.
[39] Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders*, 52, quoting John Brougham.

O’Brien’s hyper-masculinity served a similar role to Whitman’s phrenological vocabulary in the Fred Gray Association: it provided a framework that shielded his internal self from outside scrutiny. Where Whitman borrowed accepted scientific language to name feelings the world had not yet named, O'Brien borrowed a performative stereotype to ensure nobody looked closely enough to ask what he was feeling. The contradiction ran deeper than the nightly Pfaff’s performance. Levin notes that through The Bohemian, O'Brien critiqued the Bohemian persona “more scathingly than any Sunday paper.”[40] The man acting out a stereotype at Pfaff's had already written, in precise fictional detail, about the cost of living behind a mask. O’Brien’s Pfaffian persona and his writing were not separate lives; they were two halves of the same concealment he felt compelled to live.

The concealment also had a literary dimension. The same circle that witnessed O’Brien’s nightly performances also produced, as previous chapters have shown, a culture of mutual documentation in which these men consistently encoded their interior lives in fiction. In his doctoral research, Dr. John P. Irish established that O'Brien “often uses images closest to him for inspiration in both his prose and poetry,” confirming that this pattern extended to him as well.[41] Where Whitman encoded the men he loved, and Winthrop encoded the world he inhabited, O'Brien encoded himself.

What distinguished O’Brien’s self-encoding from Walt Whitman's or Theodore Winthrop's was the direction of the mirror. His fiction documented his own anxieties, his own performance, and his own fears about the costs should the performance fail. The surviving primary sources confirm that a man was under considerable internal pressure. William Winter, one of O'Brien's closest companions at Pfaff's, recorded in his memoir a scene from the autumn

[40] Levin, "American Bohemians," 44.
[41] Irish, "Of Nobler Song Than Mine," 101.

of 1860 in which O'Brien arrived at the vault "pale and careworn," his "expression preoccupied and dejected," completely penniless.[42] O'Brien spent two days at Winter's rooms without sleeping more than four hours or eating, and produced a complete manuscript in one sitting, before departing "formally, even frigidly" at dawn.[43] O'Brien's private despair and obsessions, invisible at the table yet captured in print in his writings, are the interior life the Bohemian persona was built to conceal. The two stories that best illuminate that interior life are separated by three years and punctuated by the distance between publishing something for the world to see and the fear of the consequences.

The first of these, "The Bohemian," was published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in July 1855, a year before O'Brien is documented as setting foot in Pfaff's cellar on Broadway. He had already written his most unflinching portrait of the Bohemian persona before he had a stage on which to perform it. This is yet another instance of O'Brien's literary self-fashioning, a short story born from the adversity of a penniless, starving man.

The story's protagonist, Philip Brann, is what cultural historian Albert Parry calls "the daring Bohemian."[44] Brann begins the story exclaiming about his poverty; his sole consolation to his rumbling stomach is his "visions of boundless treasure," upon which he falls like a maddened beast.[45] This characterization actualizes the fear many Pfaffian men felt intimately. A fear of dying like their friends, a man in all his desperation for validation, deemed invisible by a city that had no purpose for a poet's hunger. Much like O'Brien, Brann's focus was aimed solely on achieving material security and professional distinction. Yet in Brann's world, as in O'Brien's,

[42] William Winter, Old Friends: Being Literary Recollections of Other Days (Moffat, Yard and Company, 1914) 70-71.
[43] Winter, Old Friends, 70–71.
[44] Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America* (New York: Covici Friede, 1933), 56.
[45] Fitz-James O'Brien, "The Bohemian," in William Winter, ed., The Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien (James R. Osgood and Company, 1881), 306.

this security would not be found in traditional laboring but rather through the mastery of human connection. Brann speaks in a register that would have been immediately legible to anyone sitting at Pfaff's table. Brann describes himself as possessing "remarkable powers" that science cannot explain, able to "throw people into trances, deaden the nervous susceptibilities," a man of what the story calls "magnetic influence."[46] That O'Brien was already fluent in this vocabulary before he arrived at Pfaff's is significant. The phrenological language of magnetism circulated broadly through New York intellectual culture in the early 1850s, and O'Brien absorbed it before he had an audience that spoke it back to him.

Where Whitman used the language of magnetic force to name love between men, O'Brien used it to show what that force looks like in the hands of a man who would abuse the power. He understood that the magnetic force his circle celebrated could just as easily be turned toward destruction, both socially and emotionally. O'Brien demonstrates this when Brann's scheme to acquire wealth through manipulation ends by destroying the life of an innocent woman. Returning to the city afterward, the narrator reflects: "My dream of wealth had been realized beyond my wildest hopes … and yet there was not a more miserable wretch in existence."[47] Joanna Levin's scholarship documents that through this story, O'Brien "critiqued *The Bohemian* persona more scathingly than any Sunday paper."[48] O'Brien was not yet reflecting on Bohemian life from inside it. O'Brien was examining it before he was a true member, which means the performance he delivered nightly at Pfaff's from 1856 onward was never unconscious. O'Brien

[46] O'Brien, "The Bohemian," 291.
[47] O'Brien, "The Bohemian," 306.
[48] Joanna Levin, Bohemia in America 1858-1920 (Stanford University Press, 2010). He was not yet reflecting on Bohemian life from within it. He was examining it before he became a true member, which means the performance he delivered nightly at Pfaff's from 1856 onward was never unconscious. He understood what it would cost because he had already written it. Pfaff's did not give O'Brien the vocabulary; he had it before he walked through the door. What Pfaff's gave him was a reason to keep it hidden.

understood what it would cost because he had already written it. Pfaff's did not give O'Brien the vocabulary; he had that before he walked through the door. What Pfaff's gave him was a reason to keep it hidden.

The pressure of that concealment soon dug its way further into O'Brien's writing, manifesting in his literature three years after *The Bohemian*. *The Lost Room* was published in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in September 1858, two years into his time at Pfaff's.[49] The plot starkly conveys the horror of O'Brien's fears. A man leaves his room for a moment and returns to find it occupied by strangers engaged in a hedonistic gathering, and all signs of the narrator's private self are gone. John P. Irish, drawing on Jessica Amanda Salmonson's biographical research, notes that the objects cataloged in the story's opening almost certainly belonged to O'Brien himself: the ancestral dagger tied to his Irish heritage, the embroidered smoking cap the reminder of a buried love, and the piano tied to the memory of Blokeeta.[50] These objects are not decorative; they are the artifacts of his private life, each one a symbol of his history and the truth outsiders do not know. Entering his room, the narrator feels the threat before he can name it: "Does not some magnetic influence fold itself continually around you when they pass, and send a thrill through spirit and body, and a cold shiver that no sunshine will chase away?"[51] As the narrator explores his home, he finds the objects still there, yet transformed beyond recognition. He thinks, "All was changed. Wherever my eyes turned, they missed familiar objects, yet encountered strange representatives. Everything reminded me of some

[49] Fitz-James O'Brien, "The Lost Room," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 17, no. 100 (September 1858).
[50] John P. Irish, "Darkness, Doubles, and Displacement: Uncanny Structures in O'Brien's 'The Lost Room,'" American Gothic Studies 1, no. 2 (2025): 199–200; Jessica Amanda Salmonson, "Story Notes and Sources," in The Wondersmith and Others, ed. Jessica Amanda Salmonson (Ash-Tree Press, 2008), 255.
[51] Fitz-James O'Brien, "The Lost Room," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, September 1858, republished in William Winter, ed., The Poems and Stories of Fitz-James O'Brien (James R. Osgood and Co., 1881), 319.

former possession that it was not."[52] O'Brien names the terror: "So in all things the room was, yet was not, mine."[53] The narrator's private sense of selfhood had not been destroyed; it had been discovered and put on display by strangers. Every night at Pfaff's, O'Brien performed to prevent exactly that.

The dichotomies that craft the story's horror are the structure of that performance made visible. Levin identifies O'Brien as the Bohemian "most likely to inspire comparisons to both the working-class loafer and the aristocratic dandy," because he could adopt different class identities with such ease.[54] O'Brien spent years constructing a public identity designed to obscure his private self, even before he arrived at Pfaff's: his friends noted he seemed delighted when mistaken for an Englishman, his hero was Edgar Allan Poe, and his nickname at the vault was Celtic Poe. The man performing at that table in Pfaff's was two people simultaneously. Familiar and unfamiliar, the individual and the other, conscious and unconscious: they are the chronicles of a life lived in concealment. Lepaludier reads the story as figuring "the denial of sexuality," the repressed fears of the subject displaced onto objects that become symptoms; Irish identifies the same oppositions as the condition of a man who occupies a world while remaining symbolically outside it.[55] The dichotomies are O'Brien's fictional autobiography.

Of all the private things the room contained, one deeply personal moment stood apart. Blokeeta was a composer who had come to the narrator's piano one night and played until dawn, a night the narrator had never been able to forget.[56] Among the strangers, the narrator glimpses a

[52] O'Brien, "The Lost Room," 326.
[53] O'Brien, "The Lost Room," 326.
[54] Levin, *Bohemia in America*, 33.
[55] Laurent Lepaludier, "Not To Have and Not To Be: The Denying of Sexuality and Identity in Fitz-James O'Brien's 'The Lost Room,'" *Journal of the Short Story in English* 40 (Spring 2003): 153–164, https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/511.
[56] O'Brien, "The Lost Room," 327.

masked musician who plays exactly as Blokeeta once played. The original bond had been magnetic from the start: "Blokeeta, the composer, came … as if some magnetic power lay within it …. all night long…he sat and played."[57] When the stranger plays, the narrator cannot stop himself: "It seemed to be Blokeeta … that wondrous night of pleasure and pain that I had once passed listening to him seemed to have been taken up again at the spot where it had broken off, and the same hand was continuing it."[58] The narrator cries out: "Blokeeta! my friend! speak to me, I entreat you!"[59] Irish describes this as the doubling of memory itself: the masked musician is, in his words, "a simulacrum, a specter of affective experience made visible" to people who do not know what they are seeing.[60] The bond has not been destroyed; it has been appropriated, and the narrator cannot reclaim it without revealing what it meant. The specific fear of discovery O'Brien navigates through this story is not only that private things will be seen, but that once seen, they will be performed back in a form one cannot recognize or defend. *The Bohemian* and *The Lost Room* are not separate stories, written three years apart; they are the same story told twice, from opposite ends of fear. *The Bohemian* shows O'Brien before Pfaff's, exploring the Bohemian performance from the outside, already naming its costs. *The Lost Room* shows him two years into the vault, writing the nightmare of what happens should the performance fail, and the truth become exposed. Between them sits Pfaff's: the community that made the vocabulary of intimacy possible for men like O'Brien, and the world that made its honest use impossible. O'Brien encoded that contradiction into fiction because that was the only space it could exist without destroying him. The brash fighter with the broken nose and the man who wrote about

[57] O'Brien, "The Lost Room," 311.
[58] O'Brien, "The Lost Room," 327.
[59] O'Brien, "The Lost Room," 327
[60] Irish, "Darkness, Doubles, and Displacement," 198.

wondrous nights of pleasure and pain with another man were the same person. Pfaff's did not resolve that contradiction; it simply gave it an audience.

That audience was about to be tested in a way no performance could prepare them for. When Fort Sumter fell in April 1861, the men of Pfaff's did not scatter. Many of them marched out of the vault together, toward the same war, under the same flag, carrying the same contradictions they had spent years encoding into fiction and concealing behind borrowed personas.

Chapter 5: The Bohemians and the Civil War

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Pfaff's beer cellar was not only a gathering place for New York's bohemian crowd but also became an unlikely recruiting ground for Union enlistments. The bohemians who had spent the late 1850s performing against convention, encoding their interior lives in fiction, and gathering nightly in a vault beneath Broadway answered Lincoln's call. Historian Louis Starr, whose 1954 study of Civil War correspondents remains the definitive account of the bohemian press corps, described the Pfaffians in the months before the war as men "exposed increasingly to the clamour of a world beyond their ken," and noted that something was coming that would "lift these light-hearted pranksters from their subterranean retreat and whirl them in its vortex."[1] Within days of Lincoln's April 1861 call for troops, many of Pfaff's clientele had taken the field in some capacity: as soldiers, as correspondents, as officers, among them Fitz-James O'Brien and Theodore Winthrop. These Pfaffian men carried the same contradictions they had spent years encoding into fiction and concealing behind borrowed personas toward a war that would offer them the most respectable mask the nineteenth century could provide, and for some of them, the most permanent one.

Among the units that drew Pfaffians into the war, none captured the central irony more sharply than the Seventh Regiment of the New York State Militia. Known as the "silk stocking regiment," its ranks were filled with the most socially prominent names in New York: Vanderbilt, Tiffany, Hamilton, Van Buren, men whose families represented everything the bohemian underground had defined itself against.[2] It was, on its surface, everything Pfaff's was

[1] Louis Morris Starr, *Bohemian Brigade: Civil War Newsmen in Action* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 9.
[2] "New York's 'Silk Stocking' Militia Regiment Marched Off to Save Washington 150 Years Ago," *Defense Visual Information Distribution Service*, April 15, 2011, https://www.dvidshub.net/news/68802/new-yorks-silk-stocking-militia-regiment-marched-off-save-washington-150-years-ago.

not: military, hierarchical, and emphatically respectable. Yet when Lincoln called for troops on April 15, 1861, the Seventh was among the first to answer, marching out of its armory at Tompkins Market four days later, 1,050 men strong, down Broadway to the ferry slip as crowds lined the streets weeping and cheering.[3] It was the first New York State militia regiment to reach Washington, and it would eventually supply no fewer than 606 officers to the Union army.[4] Among those who enlisted and donned its grey uniform were Theodore Winthrop and Fitz-James O'Brien. Two of Pfaff's most devoted regulars, men who had spent years in the vault performing against the very conventions the Seventh embodied, now wore its uniform without apparent contradiction. Their paths to donning that uniform could not have been more different: Winthrop, a blue-blooded Yale scholar, and O'Brien, an Irish immigrant who had arrived in America nearly penniless. Yet Pfaff's had made them brothers of a kind, united less by origin than by the shared practice of wearing one face in public and showing another in the vault. The grey uniform of the Seventh was their latest costume. What it could not conceal, the war would eventually erase.

The decision to enlist carried different meanings for each man. For O'Brien, it was the ultimate performance of Americanness. He had spent a decade in New York erasing the traces of the impoverished Irish immigrant he had been on arrival, constructing in their place the persona of the gentleman soldier: the broken-nosed fighter, the wit, the man of letters who could hold his own in any room.[5] The 7th Regiment, with its blue-blood roster and its reputation as New York's most elite fighting unit, was precisely the arena that persona required. There is evidence that O'Brien may have embellished a prior military career, possibly claiming British Army service he

[3] "New York's 'Silk Stocking' Militia."; Swinton, *History of the Seventh Regiment*, 27-28.
[4] "The Famous New York Seventh, Just After Reaching Washington in April, 1861," New York State Military Museum and Veterans Research Center, accessed May 2026, https://museum.dmna.ny.gov/unit-history/infantry/7th-infantry-regiment/famous-new-york-seventh-just-after-reaching-washington-april-1861.
[5] Burke, "Fitz-James O'Brien," 31-37; Winter, *Old Friends*, 70-73.

had never performed, to shore up the gentleman soldier identity before the war gave him a real one to wear.[6] For O'Brien, enlisting was the logical conclusion to his performance: the one theater where his aggression was celebrated, and where the mask of the soldier could replace all his prior masks. For Winthrop, the impetus was different. Enlisting was consistent with his Yale pedigree, his family legacy, and the inherited obligation that had driven his early life. It was also an escape: from the vault, from the encoded desires he had spent years pressing into the pages of *Cecil Dreeme*, from the private feelings that had never found public expression and showed no prospect of finding it.[7] The war offered both men the same thing they found at Pfaff's: community, a persona, and an outlet.

Winthrop marched with the Seventh down Broadway on April 19, 1861, and filed a dispatch for the Atlantic Monthly that is the last clear record of his work before the war consumed him. Writing from the Representatives' Chamber of the Capitol, surrounded by what he described as "a thousand men stirring about me," he documented the march in the tone that Pfaff's had imparted to him, attentive to the human detail that military reportage often neglects.[8] Winthrop recorded the moonlit night march along the railroad track with the eye of a novelist: "It was full-moonlight and the night inexpressibly sweet and serene... every one hugged his rifle as if it were the arm of the Girl of his Heart, and stepped out gayly for the promenade.[9] Winthrop closed the dispatch in the middle of the action, mid-sentence almost, with the men still around him. It was "worth a life," he wrote of the march down Broadway. Winthrop did not know yet

[6] Burke, "Fitz-James O'Brien," 34. See also the entry for Fitz-James O'Brien in the Dictionary of Irish Biography, which notes the false claim of Trinity College Dublin attendance as part of a broader pattern of biographical embellishment.
[7] George William Curtis, introductory memoir, in Theodore Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme* (Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 14-17.
[8] Winthrop, "New York Seventh Regiment," *Atlantic Monthly* 7, no. 44 (June 1861): 744-751
[9] Winthrop, "New York Seventh Regiment," 745.

how literally he meant it. The Atlantic published the dispatch in its June 1861 issue, alongside Winthrop's obituary.[10] Winthrop was already dead when his readers first encountered the piece.

The war moved faster than either man could have anticipated. Winthrop did not live to see *Cecil Dreeme* in print. He was killed at the Battle of Big Bethel on June 10, 1861, less than two months after the Seventh marched down Broadway, among the first Union officers to fall in the war.[11] His death was immediate national news, and what followed was the transformation Pfaff's could never have produced. Overnight, Winthrop was changed for eternity from a bohemian writer with unpublished novels and encoded desires to a martyred hero of the Union cause. Yale's commencement speakers invoked him before the assembled graduates weeks after his death, and the Hon. William M. Evarts declared that Winthrop showed that 'the heart of old Yale beats as firmly today for the cause of constitutional liberty' as it had when her sons marched against the British.[12] Winthrop was a war hero now, permanently and publicly, and it was in that register that his fiction would be received. *Cecil Dreeme* appeared posthumously later that year: the novel he had spent years writing at Pfaff's, encoding same-sex desire and bohemian life into its pages with the care of a man who suspected it could never be published honestly in his lifetime. Winthrop's friend and memorialist George William Curtis recorded that when friends grew impatient with his failure to publish, his answer was simply: "I can wait, I can wait."[13] Winthrop was still waiting when Big Bethel ended the question permanently. The novel was reviewed as the work of a brave soldier, a Yale man, a son of a distinguished family who had

[10] Winthrop, "New York Seventh Regiment," 745.
[11] William Swinton, *History of the Seventh Regiment, National Guard, State of New York, During the War of the Rebellion* (Fields, Osgood, and Co., 1870), 225-226; "Major Theodore Winthrop," *New York Times*, June 10, 1861.
[12] "Yale College: The Annual Commencement Exercises," *New York Times*, July 26, 1861, https://www.nytimes.com/1861/07/26/archives/yale-college-the-annual-commencement-exercises-the-baccalaureate.html.
[13] George William Curtis, biographical sketch, in Theodore Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme* (Ticknor and Fields, 1861), 6, https://archive.org/details/cecildreeme01curtgoog/page/n12/mode/2up.

given his life for his country.[14] The *Knickerbocker* praised its truthful picture of New York club life and lamented only that Winthrop had died, "albeit gloriously," before his literary powers could fully mature.[15] In all of this adulation, the honesty of Winthrop's fiction was smothered: Densdeth, the encoded same-sex desire at the novel's center, and the relationship between Cecil and Byng. The hero narrative did not suppress the novel so much as it made the novel unreadable on the terms on which it was created. Winthrop spent years at Pfaff's building masks, and the war imposed on him one he could never remove.

O'Brien survived his friend Winthrop by ten months. He was wounded at Bloomery Gap in February 1862, developed tetanus from the wound, and died at age thirty-three on April 6, 1862.[16] The obituary the *New York Times* published four days later told the story of a gallant officer who had "nobly done his duty in the defense of his country," a man whose comrades fired three volleys over his coffin at Greenwood Cemetery, and who had been made glad, in his last moments, by "an autograph letter of thanks from Gen. McClellan."[17] This letter described O'Brien's Irish origins, his literary career, his contributions to Dickens's *Household Words* and to Harper's, Putnam's, and the Atlantic.[18] It quoted a letter he had written from his sickbed, witty and morphine-soaked, hallucinating about fighting Beauregard in a coliseum with a trident and a shrimp-net. O'Brien was performing for an audience to the last, and then, in a single unguarded sentence, stripped the performance away entirely: "Imagine the 163-pound man you knew, down to about 120, and so weak that the falling of a book startles him as if it were the bursting of a

[14] Curtis, biographical sketch, in Winthrop, *Cecil Dreeme*, 1-22.
[15] "Literary Notices [for *Cecil Dreeme*]," *The Knickerbocker; or, New-York Monthly Magazine*, December 1, 1861, 535-536.
[16] Burke, "Fitz-James O'Brien," 36; Swinton, *History of the Seventh Regiment*, 491-492.
[17] "Funeral of Lieut. Fitz-James O'Brien," *New York Times*, April 10, 1862, https://www.nytimes.com/1862/04/10/archives/funeral-of-lieut-fitzjames-obrien.html.
[18] "Funeral of Lieut. Fitz-James O'Brien."

shell."[19] The obituary called the letter evidence of his "genial genius and calm bravery."[20] It was Fists Gammon O'Bouncer with nothing left to fight. The irony cuts deeper when set against what O'Brien had actually spent his American life concealing. O'Brien arrived in New York in late 1851 already hiding, having concealed himself on a ship bound for New York after a scandal in England, and his American friends would later testify almost without exception to his extreme reticence regarding his Irish origins and his early life.[21] The obituary's proud invocation of his Irish descent named something O'Brien had spent a decade publicly refusing to claim. The man who had encoded his interior life in fiction disappeared with the brash Irishman into a narrative of the soldier-poet, brave, loyal, and dead. The obituary did not mention Pfaff's or wondrous nights of pleasure and pain. It did not mention that the objects cataloged in *The Lost Room* were drawn from O'Brien's own possessions and his own history of displacement.[22] John P. Irish, in his 2025 analysis of the story, describes the narrator's final question, "Shall I ever find it?" as not simply a spatial inquiry but an existential lament: the cry of a man who has become "a ghost within his own narrative, hollowed out from within, shut out from without, trapped not in a haunted room but in a world without a center."[23] O'Brien died without answering the question; the war answered it for him. Pfaff's was not mentioned in his obituary; it would not be mentioned as a site of any cultural significance for the better part of a century.

While Pfaffians like O'Brien and Winthrop enlisted, Whitman did not. He went to the front not as a soldier, but as a nurse. In December 1862, he went to find his brother, George, who

[19] "Funeral of Lieut. Fitz-James O'Brien."
[20] "Funeral of Lieut. Fitz-James O'Brien."
[21] Wolle, "Fitz-James O'Brien in Ireland and England," 241, 248-249.
[22] Salmonson, "Story Notes and Sources," 255; Irish, "Darkness, Doubles, and Displacement," 200.
[23] Irish, "Darkness, Doubles, and Displacement," 207; O'Brien, "The Lost Room," in *What Was It? and Others*, ed. Irish, 95.

had been wounded at Fredericksburg.[24] At the Lacy House, which had served as the hospital receiving the worst cases from the battle, he saw bodies covered only by what he called a "brown woolen blanket," fresh graves marked with "pieces of barrel-staves or broken boards, stuck in the dirt."[25] Whitman recorded in his notebook that he could not see that he did much good to the wounded and dying, "but I cannot leave them."[26] Whitman wrote to his sister-in-law that he wished she could see "the rows of wounded young men," a hundred of them in one long whitewashed shed, one among them "very much prostrated, and groaning with pain."[27] Whitman traveled back to Washington with a government transport of the wounded and the dying, and by the middle of January 1863, he had decided to remain[28]

Whitman found work as a copyist in the Army Paymaster's Office and spent the rest of the war in the hospitals.[29] Historian Kenneth M. Price argued that those wards created a space where male affection could be openly and freely expressed in ways that ordinary nineteenth-century life did not permit.[30] What the hospitals offered that Pfaff's could not was the cover of a national emergency, and Whitman understood this from the first days. He later followed a nineteen-year-old Confederate captain from Mississippi from the Lacy House to Emory Hospital, visiting him repeatedly as the young officer recovered from an amputation.[31] Whitman reported

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[24] The *New York Herald* of December 16, 1862 listed a "First Lieutenant G. W. Whitmore" among the wounded at Fredericksburg; the Whitman family recognized the misprint and Walt left New York the same day. Loving, "Caresser of Life," 76; *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman*, ed. Jerome Loving (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 78.
[25] Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War* (Camden, NJ: Author's Publication, 1875), quoted in Loving, "Caresser of Life," 67.
[26] Whitman notebook entry, December 1862, in *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 2:503; quoted in Loving, "Caresser of Life," 68.
[27]Whitman to Martha Mitchell Whitman, January 1863, in *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 1:62; quoted in Loving, "Caresser of Life," 79-80.
[28] Loving, "Caresser of Life," 80; *The Correspondence*, 1:61-68.
[29] Loving, "Caresser of Life," 80.
[30] Kenneth M. Price, "Walt Whitman and Civil War Washington," *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014): 132.
[31] Loving, "Caresser of Life," 71; *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963-1964), 1:32-33.

to friends in Brooklyn that the boy would, when Whitman rose to leave, "put his arm round my neck, draws my face down, &c.," and described their attachment as "our affection is quite an affair, quite romantic."[32] Whitman wrote to Nathaniel Bloom and John F. S. Gray in March 1863 that the hospitals had opened a new world to him, giving "closer insights, new things, exploring deeper mines than any yet."[33] Whitman told them he believed no men had ever loved each other as he and the wounded loved each other.[34] Jerome Loving, reading this evidence, proposed that what Whitman sought in the hospitals was not lovers but sons, the old desire of the "Calamus" poems "sweetly solemnized by death."[35] But the arm around the neck and the face drawn down are not the gestures of a man seeking a son, and Whitman's own language does not support a fatherly emotion. The war did not change what Whitman wanted; it changed what the world would tolerate watching him do. He carried that language into print. Barbian, Sledzik, and Reznick, examining Whitman's hospital work through the objects and records he left behind, recover a moment of attachment so direct it required almost no encoding: "I loved the young man, though I but saw him immediately to lose him."[36]

The *New York Times* covered Winthrop's death in June 1861 through the lens of dynasty and sacrifice: the first gallant officer Connecticut had offered in the field, with no mention of the novels, the vault, or the interior life the war had permanently ended.[37] It covered O'Brien's death the following year in the same tone: gallant soldier-poet, loyal Irishman, genial genius, with no

[32] Whitman to friends in Brooklyn, in *Prose Works 1892*, 1:32-33; quoted in Loving, "Caresser of Life," 71.
[33] Whitman to Nathaniel Bloom and John F. S. Gray, March 19, 1863, in *The Correspondence*, 1:81-82; quoted in Loving, "Caresser of Life," 67.
[34] Whitman to Nathaniel Bloom and John F. S. Gray, March 19, 1863, in *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 1:142.
[35] Loving, "Caresser of Life," 81, citing Emory Holloway, *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 198.
[36]Lenore Barbian, Paul S. Sledzik, and Jeffrey S. Reznick, "Remains of War: Walt Whitman, Civil War Soldiers, and the Legacy of Medical Collections," *Museum History Journal* 5, no. 1 (2012): 7-28.; Whitman to the mother of Frank Irwin, in *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:103-104.
[37] "The Late Major Winthrop," *New York Times*, June 23, 1861.

mention of either Pfaff's or of what he had spent a decade masking.[38] When the *Times* reported Whitman's death in March 1892, it named him as a poet who had “the courage to speak out,”, described his hospital attachments as continuous with his poetry, and made no excuses for either.[39] Pfaff's went unmentioned even there, but Whitman had made the record on his own terms, openly claiming his true persona. What the Times could not name, he had already encoded in a body of work too large and too beloved to suppress. Winthrop was not so fortunate. Fifty years after Big Bethel, the Times published a retrospective that opened by identifying him entirely as a soldier, "Major Theodore Winthrop, military secretary to Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, was shot through the heart by a Confederate bullet," and noted that his novels, once widely read, were "now all but forgotten."[40] The same retrospective acknowledged that critics had identified Densdeth in *Cecil Dreeme* as based on Winthrop's intimates from the vault, and dismissed the charge in four words: "Nobody heeds it now."[41] Winthrop and Hurlbut, the man Winthrop had encoded as Densdeth, had, the Times observed, “alike passed into history.”[42] The novels were forgotten. The vault was forgotten. The interior life encoded in both was forgotten. Winthrop and O'Brien took their interior lives to the grave, forever masked as war heroes. Whitman was able to carry his into print, concealed by the acceptability of war service. Winthrop had written, "I can wait, I can wait." O'Brien had written, "Shall I ever find it?" Whitman wrote, "our affection is quite an affair, quite romantic," sent the letter, survived the war, and the world absorbed it without comment. The difference between the three was not courage; it was survival. And what

[38] "Death of Fitz-James O'Brien," *New York Times*, April 10, 1862.
[39] "Walt Whitman's Career," *New York Times*, March 27, 1892, 10.
[40] "Theodore Winthrop," *New York Times*, June 10, 1911.
[41] "Theodore Winthrop," *New York Times*, June 10, 1911.
[42] "Theodore Winthrop," *New York Times*, June 10, 1911.

survived, in the end, was not the men but the fiction they made in the one place that allowed them to make it honestly.

For these men of the Round Table, contradiction was not merely the life they led but a condition of survival. They navigated irreconcilable things for years: private desire and public persona, bohemian rebellion and social aspiration, encoded interior lives and performative masks. The Civil War was merely the largest and most public dichotomy they ever inhabited. The war did what Pfaff's never could: it permanently resolved the contradictions. The fallen soldier is the most complete concealment the nineteenth century had to offer: public, heroic, masculine, and socially beyond question. The vault at Pfaff's had sheltered their contradictions while they lived. A hero's grave is also a vault; the difference is that no one leaves it.

The war did not simply end their lives, it laundered them. For Winthrop and O'Brien, their hero's deaths retroactively replaced their encoded interior lives with a single legible narrative: gallant, loyal, and above reproach. What had been masked became, in death, the only persona anyone cared to acknowledge. For Whitman, the mechanism was the same, but the direction reversed: the war legitimized his interior life, clothing his coded language in the sanctioned grief of a nation at war. All three men were remade by the same conflict: two came out of it as monuments; one came out of it as America's Poet.

Charles Ignatius Pfaff, the man who had kept what the *Times* called "the favorite resort of all the prominent actors, authors, artists, musicians, newspaper men, and men-about-town of the time," died in April 1890.[43] The obituary named Pfaff's regulars as the "Knights of the Round Table" and listed among them John (sic)Winthrop, Walt Whitman, Fitz-James O'Brien, William Winter, Richard Henry Stoddard, and Artemus Ward.[44] It was the only obituary in the public

[43] "Death of Charles I. Pfaff."
[44] "Death of Charles I. Pfaff."

record that remembered Winthrop and O'Brien as bohemians, not Union heroes. Two years later, the Times published Whitman's death notice under the headline "Death of Walt Whitman" spare, factual, noting the hour of death, the tomb he had selected himself in a grove at Harleigh Cemetery, and his final words to his attendant: "Warry, shift."[45] The men Whitman had loved were neither in the room nor in the record. The obituary that followed the same day under the headline "His Was a Striking and Most Singular Figure" described Whitman as a poet who had the courage to speak out.[46] It did not name what Whitman had been speaking out about; the courage the Times praised in 1892 had been visible for nearly forty years.

Winthrop died, and the hero narrative made *Cecil Dreeme* unreadable on his terms. His obituaries named his Yale pedigree, his family's charter, his gallant death, and nothing else. O'Brien died still searching for the room just beyond his sight. O'Brien's obituaries mentioned only his gallantry, his genial genius, and his loyalty to his adopted country. The man who had spent a decade refusing to acknowledge his Irish origins was claimed by them in death. What remains of Winthrop and O'Brien exists only in the fiction they left behind: their encoded interior lives, ignored by the contemporaneous records of their lives. Pfaff's was the only space these men ever found where their contradictions did not have to be resolved.

[45] "Death of Walt Whitman." *New York Times*, March 27, 1892neither in the room nor.
[46] "Walt Whitman's Career," *New York Times*, March 27, 1892, 10.

Chapter 6: Out of the Vault

The war ended in April 1865. Pfaff sold the Broadway establishment the following spring, and with that sale, the vault that had sheltered New York's bohemian community for more than a decade passed out of the hands of the man who had built it into something more than a beer cellar.[1] Between those two dates, the world that had made the vault necessary and the vault's role in nurturing these men disappeared from the public record with a completeness that looks, in retrospect, like intention. It was not intention; it was simply the functionality of a culture that had no framework for what Pfaff's had been, no language for what these men had done there, and no interest in creating them. The hero narrative that the war imposed on Winthrop and O'Brien was the only story available, told so many times and in so many registers: in obituaries, regimental histories, Yale commencement addresses, and Harper's elegies, that it became the only story anyone remembered. What the vault had sheltered while these men lived, the war buried when they died. What the war buried, history forgot. What history forgot, a handful of scholars spent the better part of a century trying to find. This is the story of what they found, and what it means that they found it at all.

The physical vault at Pfaff's did not survive. The sale notice appeared in March 1866, and with it, the space that had sheltered New York's bohemian community for more than a decade passed out of existence as a cultural fact.[2] What did remain was harder to name and slower to be recognized: the work these men made inside it, the habits of concealment and

[1] Blalock, "'Go to Pfaff's,'" 44.
[2] Alan Helms, "Whitman's 'Live Oak with Moss,'" The Walt Whitman Archive, 1992, https://whitmanarchive.org/item/anc.00154.

expression the space required of them, and the fiction through which they encoded what the public record could not hold. This thesis has traced that survival across five chapters, from the social architecture of the vault itself through the literary production it sheltered, to the war that dispersed its community, and across the long silence that followed. The conclusion it reaches is not only that Pfaff's mattered to American literary history but also that it mattered in a specific, documentable way. It was a laboratory in which alternative modes of expression, identity, and intimacy were developed under conditions of deliberate concealment, and it was also the mechanism by which those modes survived long enough for scholarship to find them.

The evidence assembled here points consistently in one direction. Walt Whitman drafted *Live Oak, with Moss* in the years he spent at the vault, and the language he developed there, phrenological in its borrowed vocabulary and radical in its application, circulated through the Fred Gray Association in correspondence that encoded same-sex intimacy with a precision the public world had no sanctioned vocabulary to match.[3] Theodore Winthrop set *Cecil Dreeme* in his own apartment building and populated it with the people he knew, encoding same-sex desire and the vault's contradictions into a novel he believed he could not publish honestly in his lifetime.[4] Fitz-James O'Brien wrote *The Lost Room* two years into his time at Pfaff's, encoding the specific terror of a private self-discovered and displayed by strangers.[5] All three men carried what the vault made them into the Civil War, and the war resolved their contradictions with a permanence Pfaff's never could. The fallen soldier was the most complete concealment the nineteenth century had to offer. Winthrop and O'Brien did not survive it. Whitman did, and he

[3] Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to His Life and Work (Oxford: Wiley, 2005); Folsom and Price, "Biography," The Walt Whitman Archive, https://whitmanarchive.org/whitmans-life/biography.
[4] Theodore Winthrop, Cecil Dreeme, ed. George W. Curtis (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1861).
[5] John P. Irish, "Darkness, Doubles, and Displacement: Uncanny Structures in O'Brien's 'The Lost Room,'" American Gothic Studies 1, no. 2 (2025): 190–200.

carried the language of adhesiveness into the hospital wards of Washington under the sanctioned cover of national emergency, practicing in public what the vault had required him to practice in secret.[6]

The obituaries that followed told a different story. Winthrop became a Yale man and a Union hero, his encoded desires unreadable beneath the martyr's narrative imposed on *Cecil Dreeme* before it had been in print a season.[7] O'Brien became a gallant soldier-poet, his Irish origins claimed by death after a decade of deliberate erasure, his *Lost Room* unread on its own terms.[8] The vault went unmentioned in both. What the public record buried in 1861 and 1862, it kept buried for the better part of a century, until Fredson Bowers reconstructed *Live Oak, with Moss* in 1950 and published his findings in 1953, and scholars, including Ed Folsom, Kenneth Price, Stephanie Blalock, and John P. Irish built the critical infrastructure that made it possible to read these works on the terms their authors intended. That recovery was not passive. Scholars made choices about what was worth finding, and those choices accelerated alongside the LGBTQ rights movement, which supplied at last the critical vocabulary the nineteenth century had never developed, and the twentieth century had been slow to extend to its own literary history.

What remains after that recovery is a thesis that can state plainly what the evidence supports. The vault at Pfaff's played a pivotal role in shaping American culture by serving as an intellectual hub that nurtured alternative networks for artists, writers, and the queer community. That claim is not a generalization. It is the specific, documented record of what happened in a

[6] Major Theodore Winthrop," New York Times, June 10, 1861; "Funeral of Lieut. Fitz-James O'Brien," New York Times, April 10, 1862.
[7] Death of Fitz-James O'Brien" and "Funeral of Lieut. Fitz-James O'Brien," New York Times, April 10, 1862., Helms, "Whitman's 'Live Oak with Moss.'"
[8] Irish, "Darkness, Doubles, and Displacement," 190–200.

subterranean beer cellar on Broadway between 1855 and 1866: a community of writers who encoded their interior lives in fiction, developed a private language for forms of love the public world had not named, survived a war that either killed them or laundered them, and left behind a body of work that preserved what the record suppressed precisely because fiction could claim plausible deniability.[9] The vault taught these men that survival required concealment. Concealment, in their hands, produced art. Pfaff's literary laboratory was the mechanism of survival. Whitman understood this before anyone came looking. The inscription in the notebook of *Live Oak, with Moss* reads: Fit to be perused during the days of the approach of Death.[10] He wrote it knowing the sequence could not be published in full in his lifetime and knowing that someone would one day come searching. This thesis is one of those people: the vault is gone; the men are gone. What they made in one place that allowed them to honestly create it remains.

[9] Stephanie Blalock, "'Go to Pfaff's,'"; Justin Martin, Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America's First Bohemians (Da Capo Press, 2014).
[10] Walt Whitman, New York Notebook, Thomas Biggs Harned Collection, Library of Congress, 1861.

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