Northwestern University

Making a Self

Identity-building and Valuation in Lewis J. Cist's *Trifles in Verse*

Andy Steiner

English 397: Nineteenth-Century American Poetry

Professor Jay Grossman

June 10th 2021

In *The Brooklyn Daily Times'*s review of *Leaves of Grass,* which Walt Whitman included in the book's second edition, an anonymous critic writes that "To give judgement on real poems, one needs an account of the poet himself" (Whitman 360). Of course, Whitman wrote this glowing review for his own personal and professional goals in the literary field. Nonetheless, this statement captures an essential aspect of how nineteenth-century American poetry often analyzed and considered itself. For Whitman and for many of his contemporary readers and writers, the poet should be evaluated alongside the poem, and the two form a symbiotic relationship.

Lewis J. Cist's 1845 book of poetry *Trifles in Verse: A Collection of Fugitive Poems* poses questions about the validity of Whitman's statement. Whitman employs the phrase "real poem," creating a distinction between "real poetry" and what he would deem fake, unworthy, or false. But the opposite of Whitman's "real poetry" is not necessarily clear. The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was self-published, while Cist's book was released through the Cincinnati-based publishers Robinson and Jones—does the validity and reputation of the publishing process impact what makes poems "real"? (Cist *Trifles in Verse*). In this case, Lewis Cist's work has all the markings of formal poetry. Whitman's criticism also establishes a relationship between "real" poems and the identity of the poets: the poet must be worthy of "an account" to supplement his work, and this account must be fitting of the capital-P Poet. Whitman's statement argues that "real" poems can only be written by poets—but what about the vast body of literature written and circulated by individuals who do not identify solely as a poet? The existence of casual, non-poet literature and writing complicates Whitman's elevation of "real" poetry and "real" poets.

Lewis Cist, a Cincinnati-based banker, is remembered more for his extensive collection of autographs and rare letters than his efforts in literature ("The Cist Collection"). His self-

depreciating book title, *Trifles in Verse*, frames the work as a mere attempt at poetry rather than a full-hearted effort. In declaring his verses as a "Trifle," Cist immediately shifts any expectations for how to evaluate his poetry, and the negative framework devalues the entire body of poems. Cist did not see himself as a poet in the same way as Walt Whitman, whose identity is intrinsically tied to his writing. In the preface of *Trifles in Verse*, Cist writes, "Conscious of his want of those qualifications which might justify him in seeking to enter the inner temple of the sacred Nine, he has but ventured to loiter around the base of the flowery mountain" (Cist ix). Cist recognizes the presumptions behind writing. To publish a book of poems is to engage in the Western tradition of the "sacred Nine," not something to be taken lightly. Nonetheless, he refuses to inherit the mantle, and he recognizes that he is incapable of fulfilling these "qualifications." Cist widens the gates and democratizes the title of poet to the casual author. Even with a work that is self-characterized as an insubstantial "trifle," he makes his poems available without the loft and ambition of reaching the heavenly Muses. Both the book's preface and its title deliberately remove the high stakes of poetry in direct opposition to Whitman's expectations of "real poems" and real poets.

Nor was this casual attitude towards poetry-writing and reading uncommon in nineteenth-century America. Much of Michael C. Cohen's book *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* historicizes the way "poems are often more interesting for the ways nineteenth-century people did or did not read them and the ways they did or did not sweat them out" (Cohen 6). If poems can function outside of close reading or "sweating out" as Cohen claims, then writers can also exist outside of the strict confines of the identity of professional or formal poet. The tradition of "Gift Books," well documented in Stephen Nissenbaum's *The Battle for Christmas,* similarly suggests the different theory of values that guided nineteenth-century

readers, writers, and editors. Visually, gift books were "ornate, with gilt edges, lavish bindings, expensive engravings, and colored "presentation plates" (Nissenbaum 143). As a result, they have primarily been studied as objects rather than literary texts: "books were not only to be read but gazed at, fondly handled, and proudly displayed" (143). Cist's contemporary landscape of publishing valued the sentimentality of books as objects, rather than texts for "sweating out." *Trifles in Verse* rejects Whitman's stance on poets and poetry, proving that one does not need an "account of the poet himself" to evaluate a work because the pattern of close reading and high engagement with singularly genius poetry was a fallacy.

But *Trifles in Verse* still offers an argument on the relationship between poetry and making an "account" of identity. Instead of requiring an author's biographical account to supplement interpretation of his poetry, Lewis Cist's book becomes its own author's account. It is like a self-created commonplace book, curating and displaying facets of selfhood. This commodification of self-identity is distinct from an autobiography or an attempt to preserve the author's original intentions. Rather, it offers a physical encoding of his relationships, a personal emblem of his identity, his social status, and his personal value systems. Ultimately, *Trifles in Verse's* ability to serve as a maker and marker of Cist's selfhood demonstrates the often-unexplored dimension of books as social currency, overshadowed as that dimension is by the insistence upon literary or critical worth.

Like other non-poet poetry, Cist's book cannot stand in the same stratosphere as a work like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass. Trifles in Verse* is riddled with cliché and restricted by its formulaic structure. The poems blend together in their monotony, ventriloquizing formal poetry instead of creatively engaging with the form. Whitman's insistence that "one needs an account of the poet" is especially ironic, considering that *Leaves of Grass* is a non-negotiable insistence of

selfhood on its own. Finding the grains of selfhood inside a text like *Trifles in Verse* is a challenge, especially within these layers of generic language and thematic patterns. Nonetheless, the book does have an imprint of identity, however faint or generic. In *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* Donald Pease traces the historical reinterpretation of the idea of "author." Pease summarizes Michel Foucault's claims: "he defines the conditions of textual finitude—the revisionary activity of the writing process itself—as the determining cultural practice of the fundamental author" (Pease 115). However informed by existing cultural patterns, the very act of arranging the words in *Trifles in Verse* embeds the text with the selfhood of the "fundamental author." Cist's book does not nearly have the monolithic sense of identity that defines *Leaves of Grass* or other commonly studied nineteenth-century poetry. Nonetheless, it does have an identity that does not deserve the "partitioning of human subjectivity" that accompanies an analysis of authors and selfhoods in text (Pease 116). As trifling as Cist's work is, the foundational decision to label his verses as a *Trifle* already imprints a unique selfhood in the form of his humility onto the work.

Sweet and Weary: Values in *Trifles in Verse*

Throughout its poems, *Trifles in Verse* develops a unique and specific value system by creating a dichotomy between high and low—the artful, enriching, and beautiful aspects of life contrasted against the mundane, impure, and wearisome. The book builds its identity and its author's selfhood because its consistencies in both poetic language and structure promote a comprehensive vision of living.

The poems thread together childhood innocence, engagement with nature, familial love, Christian salvation, and American political independence, all becoming interchangeable positive

aspects of its value system. Two patterns emerge from the poetry's treatment of these topics. First, they all share variants of the same language, as they consistently apply the word "sweetness," across the senses, scenes, and experiences. Despite the radically different subject matter, *Trifles in Verse* unites these benevolent aspects of life with a sweeping and tangible sense of positivity. Secondly, the speaker uses elements of one value within his system to depict another, developing a kind of synesthesia between them. These values are not solely "sweet," but they are also transposable. The book's first poem, "Olden Memories," begins this pattern by describing the speaker's sentimental memories as "Sweet to hear, though sad and lone," and later, "Like the fresh'ning dew of even / To the parched and drooping flower" (2-3). Within the first few pages of *Trifles in Verse,* the speaker introduces the value of "sweetness" as a name for these high aspects of life. In addition, the text uses the tangible and nature-related language of the "parched and drooping flower" to help shape the characterization of childhood memories. One value is transposed onto another. "Our Younger, Happier Days" similarly idolizes childhood innocence with language evoking the sublimity of nature. The narrator describes "brighter sunshine," "sweeter flowers," and "unbeclouded rays" of light (47-48) to evoke sentimentality and nostalgia. "Summer Evening Melody" praises the beauty of "a night so fair…as sweet as those which erst, in Eden's paradise" (43). In this case, the poem repurposes Christian salvation and paradise as comparable for its Romantically-styled ode to the natural world. "The American in Europe" describes the "bliss garnered up in the sweet spell of home!" (53). In this poem, the narrator uses "sweetness" to tie together his national pride, the beauty of natural landscape, and nostalgic lens towards his home. Again, the positive attributes within the value system are interchangeable. Tangible, sensory, and widely applicable, "sweetness" condenses a plethora of

topics into a compact and succinct adjective. This shared description is more than an indication of the limits of the author's vocabulary; it builds the language of *Trifles in Verse's* value system.

The book constructs its negative attributes just as concretely as its positives, threading together the realities of adult life with the narrator's feelings of confusion, impurity, purposelessness, and exhaustion. "Our Younger Happier Days" decries the "bewildering maze" and "weight of weary hours" that characterize life beyond innocent childhood (47-48). Even in the poem's title, the book's network of values is at play, directly associating "Younger" with "Happier." "Summer Evening Melody" contrasts the narrator's peaceful immersion in nature with the "noise and turmoil" and "hum of busy life" (42). The daily world is loud—constantly distracted by noise, hum, and weariness. "Thus Would I Die" connects "the heartless crowd" of the urban world with Christian "retreats of Sin" and the loud "revel and song" (40-41). The city is the locale for sinfulness, distraction, and loss. In "To a Child at Play" the child's blissfulness arises because he is "from every shade of care, / And heart from sorrow free" (72). Again, adult responsibility, urban living, and loudness weave together as the alternative to the narrative of "Sweetness." Just as it builds its benevolent characteristics, *Trifles in Verse* uses a network of shared attributes to articulate the unfavorable facets of its world.

However simple or dichotomous, this constant characterization of good or bad, sweet or weary, creates a world of ethics and moral values within the book. This system is distinct from the author's perspective—it does not matter whether this judgement of innocence as "sweet" or city life as "wearisome" arises from Lewis Cist or the poem's speaker. Either way, the system of morality is a sign of selfhood. By encapsulating a specific worldview, the poetry builds out an identity. Furthermore, the moral system is consistent throughout the entirety of the poems. "Sweetness" continuously signifies the same aspects of the world, while urban life continues to

evoke burden and exhaustion. From the book's opening poem "Olden Memories" to its conclusion with "Ode and Dirge," the book's characterization of the world remains consistent in what it deems positive or negative—the worldview does not change because it arises out of a solidified and well-defined selfhood. Unyielding and evaluative, *Trifles in Verse's* network of language reflects the selfhood encapsulated in the text.

The book's value system builds selfhood in more than just the assignment of positive and negative aspects of life. The poems follow a similar structure in which the light aspect gives solace to the dark. In "Mary's Love," the "nobler prize of Mary's Love" consoles the narrator despite his "ills in life" (76); the narrator's nostalgia serves as "the refuge of the weary" in "Olden Memories" (14); "The Land Beyond the Sky" suggests that faith in heaven and God's omniscience aides against "Grief's dark clouds" or "Fortune's frowns" (33-34). A large group of poems in *Trifles in Verse* follows this structure—the narrator, worn down by the burdens of a negative attribute, seeks asylum within the positive. Often, this structural similarity narrows down to the stanza composition: the first sets of lines depict the complication, and the final line posits its resolution ("The Land Beyond the Sky," "Olden Memories," "Mary's Love," "A Mother's Love," "Thus Would I Die").

The poem is the meeting point between the dichotomous view of the world, a confrontation between its high and lows. The vast majority of the poems follow this thematic structure, creating a space where the system of values becomes dynamic. The positive and negative attributes become increasingly dimensional when placed in tension with each other. Worldview is a core facet of identity. Ultimately, the worldview is intrinsic to the book—the selfhood and identity that arise out of these poems is built around the repetition of this structure, in constant turmoil between sweetness and weariness, peace in nature and urban exhaustion.

Ultimately, the identity that arises out of this network of positives and negatives transcends the book. Outside the language of the poems, the perspectives that the textual identity creates persist.

In Orbit: Relationality Circling *Trifles in Verse*

No selfhood exists in a vacuum. *Trifles in Verse* builds a world of relationality, anxiously concerned with the terms of engagement with its audience. By compiling and preserving various relationships within its poetry, the book adds an additional dimension to its display of selfhood, defined by its interactions with its outer world.

A variety of the poems engage in direct address, written with an explicitly named target audience. The dedication or intended audience binds the poem to a specific relationship. Some, like "To My Mother," make this address clear immediately. The poem begins with the exclamation "Mother!", at once announcing its audience and setting the intimate tone of an address to one's family (16). The speaker's usage of the second person further curates the tone of familial affection as the narrator recalls "Mother dear, I played upon thy knee!" (16). By solidifying the narrator's sentiments toward his mother, the poem preserves the intimacy of their relationship. It builds out the identity of the book by tethering to the specifics of his relationship with his mother, from the collage of childhood memories to a son's loving concern for his family's health. "To My Mother" is the second poem in *Trifles in Verse*. Within the first few pages of the book, it extends beyond the confines of the pages through its incorporation of the familial relationships that grow into an identity. The positioning of this poem establishes a precedent for the book's expansion of selfhood through relationships.

Another direct address poem, "Elegiac," contains a dedication before its first stanza: "In Memory of John Newton Wilson" (27). The poem is one of the most cliché moments in the

book, uninspiringly mourning the death of John Newton Wilson. The speaker's language is imprecise and unspecific, unable to cultivate creative or innovative perspectives towards mourning. It wallows in its melodrama, "Another stricken from the roll of life!" (27), and later, "We weep / That we shall see his face no more!" (28). Despite these compositional issues throughout its body, the poem still engages in audience-building through the dedication of its title. Regardless of the context of John Newton Wilson and his life, the poem incorporates an external relationship that otherwise would have left it aimless and insignificant. While the poem is a conventional Christian elegy, it expands the personhood and identity of its narrator through its development of a tangible relationship to an external figure.

One of the most notable instances of direct address is "Birth-day Stanzas." The poem begins with the dedication, "Inscribed to My Best Friend," followed by a quotation attributed to the narrator's diary (44). Through the reference to the speaker's "best friend," the text expands its network of individuals that orbit around the poetry in a similar vein to "Elegiac" and "To My Mother." However, the key moment is its citation of "My Diary." The relationality of *Trifles in Verse* extends beyond direct address poems because it opts to include alternative texts, drafts, and versions. The poem brings attention to its intended audience (the speaker's "best friend") in addition to its prior iterations. The phrase "My diary" calls attention to a selfhood outside of the formal language of the poem and this selfhood's position as a writer of texts. The poem moved through a state of cultivation—growing from the speaker's diary to its published and printed form. In addition, the possessive word "My" draws attention towards the ownership of texts by individual subjectivities. This ownership is distinct from an authoritative authorship. Instead, the possessive word "My" indicates a meta-awareness of selves-as-texts. The identity imprint within the coding of the diary has a belonging. In both its direct address to a friend and its elusive call to

the narrator's outside diary, "Birth-day Stanzas" further develops the identity that *Trifles in Verse* instills.

The book's variety of occasional poems similarly build relationality by connecting the text with both specific relationships and a temporal moment. The final poem of the book, "Ode and Dirge," contains the brief preface, "Written for the consecration of Spring-Grove Cemetery near Cincinnati" (180). Independently, the poem is another widely applicable and generic meditation on the reality of death. The narrator laments that "Rich or poor, or high or low,-- / Learned or wise, it matters not; / To this end alike we go" (184). However, the annotation to the poem recontextualizes these contents. Due to its connection to a temporal moment, the poem expands out of the text from a self-contained unit to dynamically engaged with its community. Selfhoods do not exist alone, and *Trifles in Verse* captures the reality of defining identity by its relationship to the world around it. The occasional nature of "Ode and Dirge" builds out the selfhood of the book through this relationality to a specific moment and setting. In the line, "And here, at many a dewy morn," "here" becomes identifiable, personal, and geographic (183). Regardless of the author's presence at the consecration in the Cincinnati cemetery, the identity that the poem constructs now has a positionality and setting. Like the influential location of the introductory poem "To My Mother," "Ode and Dirge" concludes *Trifles in Verse* with a reminder of the worlds of relationality bundled into the identity of the text.

Trifles in Verse's relationality often includes a relationship between the selfhood and his country. The narrator dedicates another occasional poem, "Glory, Freedom and Fame," as an "Ode for the Anniversary of Washington's Birth-day" (149). By nature, occasional poetry is hyper-conscious of its own purpose, and this poem is no exception. Its usage of "Our" in describing "Our fathers" and "our fair Vessel of State" (149-150) assumes the American identity

of its audience, and it seeks companionship with their politics. As a result of the political and national assumptions built into the poem, another level of relationality develops in regard to the book's selfhood. *Trifles in Verse's* identity can increasingly be defined by allegiance and patriotism, as well as a self-conscious need to display this patriotism.

The book's world of relationships expands beyond individual people, occasions, or moments; the poems use allusions, quotations, or references to associate with other literature. "To Her of the Hazel Eye" begins with an excerpt from William Wordsworth's "She Was a Phantom of Delight" (96); "An Epistle to Kate" includes a few lines from *Taming of the Shrew*; a quotation from Coleridge begins "A Mother's Love" (19). The relationship between these quotations and the poems themselves is often unclear and insubstantial. Coleridge's language alludes to Mary and "the Heavenly father" while the subject of the poem stays familial (19). "To Her of the Hazel Eye" misquotes much of Wordsworth's poem, pulling different lines together in a compilation of the work instead of an accurate excerpt. "An Epistle to Kate" takes the role of a character in *Taming of the Shrew,* begging Kate for her unconditional love and expanding on their tumultuous relationship. However, it fails to reinvent the story in any innovative way. Awkward and tangential, these allusions do little for the works themselves. However, they help to define the selfhood of the text by building relationality with other works, authors, and the literary canon in general. The identity of *Trifles in Verse* expands not only as a writer of texts but as a reader of them. Some poems make allusions to ambiguous or unnamed poems: "I Care For Nobody" lists a brief verse from an "Old Song" (107), and "Summer Evening Melody" includes a poetic verse from an unlabeled source (42). The subjectivity of the book engages outside of the confines of its pages, building relationality by cross-referencing extraneous texts that are both

canonical and unknown. The book builds its own identity by establishing itself as an absorber of other literature.

In addition, the references to outer texts build a clear picture of *Trifle'*s socioeconomic status given which texts it chooses to incorporate. Since the book frequently pulls from canonical texts like Shakespeare as well as contemporary favorites like Wordsworth and Coleridge, it indicates its status as well-read and socioeconomically established. The connotation of these authors gives social weight towards these poems. The identity and selfhood of *Trifles in Verse* is not just a reader of texts but a well-informed and educated one. Other poems similarly promote extra-textual relationships that affirm this class status. In "Letter Congratulatory, To Queen Victoria on Her Marriage," the speaker displays his diplomacy by addressing the Queen of England. The speaker's boldness in directly addressing a global figure like the Queen of England relates his self-identification as elite and possibly aristocratic. "Mort De Napoleon" states without a source that Napoleon's "last words, uttered in a state of delirium, on the morning of his death, were –"Mon file,'" (144). The speaker has a sophisticated political awareness and engagement that accompanies higher socioeconomic status. The text expands its relationality through its interactions with the contemporary Western political landscape of its time. Ultimately, *Trifles in Verse* builds its sense of selfhood by establishing itself as educated, well-informed, and cosmopolitan.

For a book as repetitive and formulaic as *Trifles in Verse,* it finds a multitude of opportunities to engage with its outer world. This capacity to fossilize relationships in text, tether itself to occasions and moments, and ultimately demonstrate its readings of other texts all contribute to its relationality. The relational nature of the text makes it a self—fostering

connections with its own world, capable of multiple dimensions, simultaneously a reader and interpreter of texts on its own.

On its title page, *Trifles in Verse* names its subtitle as "A Collection of Fugitive Poems." The descriptor of "Fugitive" seems like an unlikely pairing for the poems. The poems do not have the sense of urgency or desperation that "fugitive" typically signifies. The subject-matter does not address a specific topic of being a fugitive or on the run. However, two historical definitions of the word illuminate this framing. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "fugitive" could refer to something "Of immaterial things: Evanescent, fleeting" and "Concerned or dealing with subjects of passing interest" (OED Online). The topics of *Trifles in Verse* primarily focus on these "passing interests," as the book collects relationships, occasions, and moments. But the book's encapsulation of identity matches the first definition. Subjectivities or selfhoods are fleeting and intangible. Arguably, written language is the closest form an identity can take to reject its fugitiveness and solidify. Th scattering morsels of selfhood across the breadth of the poems give the text its sense of impermanence and fugitive identity.

Who Says This Book is a Trifle?

Trifles in Verse will never be on a syllabus. Cist's book is perpetually buried beneath more significant and creative literature from the nineteenth century. The poems can be found in older regional anthologies, and there is a scattering of references to them in literary and historical criticism. But for the most part, they are unstudied, un-canonized, and unremarkable. To find value in a text like this is a difficult process considering the quality of its writing. Even more challenging is constructing an identity out of the scarce traces of selfhood across the body of work. The process is almost an excavation, cultivating and piecing together the facets of identity

that make this text valuable. *Trifles in Verse* does not reward close reading because it creatively uses language, but for its uncovering of this intra-textual web of connections. Ultimately, the framework of the text as a preservation of selfhood provides a different kind of value than what literary studies typically engages with. In doing so, it challenges the theory that underwrites much of how texts are deemed "valuable" or "literary."

Barbara Herrnstein Smith's essay "Value/Evaluation" provides useful critical guidelines for investigating *Trifles in Verse* as a valuable object and piece of literature. She dissects the meaning of "literary value:"

> "This special value, often referred to as the text's "essential literary value," or its "value as a work of literature," is sometimes said to reside in the text's purely "formal" as opposed to "material" qualities, or its "structure" as opposed to its "meaning," or in its "underlying meaning" as opposed to any obvious "theme," "subject," or ostensible "message" (179).

Herrnstein Smith argues that the definition of "literary value" is inherently imprecise—constantly shifting the defining factor from structure to meaning to underlying meaning. "Value" is a powerful term, capable of honoring a work to the status of canon or demoting it to a forgotten text. Yet, for such a dangerous word, its critical definition is ambiguous. And as a result, books like *Trifles in Verse* suffer. Later in her essay, Herrnstein Smith describes how "current conceptions of evaluation also emphasize the significance of the *tacit assumptions* evaluators make when producing value judgements. Thus, when someone says "*Jane Eyre* is great," it is always possible for someone else to ask… "at what? Compared to what? For whom?" (183). *Trifles in Verse* could be labeled as bad poetry given contemporary reader's standard for innovation, reinvention, and creativity. But perhaps with different underlying theories of value, this perspective can shift. Its repetitive formulaic structure could be seen as

rhythmic and comprehensive across the span of the book; the speaker's plaintive word choices are honest and clear; its generic simplicity democratizes the critical process of analyzing poems.

Little information exists on the immediate valuation or reception of *Trifles in Verse* upon its publication. An 1860 anthology called *The Poets and Poetry of the West: with biographical and critical notices* includes a handful of Cist's poems, primarily taken from *Trifles in Verse* as well as a brief biographical description of the author (337-347). According to this description, "the poet's book was received with words of fair encouragement by influential reviewers" (337). The word "fair" is tepid and unenthused. Critical perspectives saw the book as a starting place, encouraging more work from Cist rather than praising the existing one. Despite this glimmer of critical potential, the book was not widely praised nor panned. Instead, the text was simply forgotten. This anthology, one of the only traces of critical reading on *Trifles in Verse,* leaves more ambiguity on the structures of value and evaluation at play. The poems were valued enough to be included in an anthology from twenty years after their publication; they were valued enough to be read by "influential reviewers;" but they also hold some limiting factor that prevents them from ever transcending past this. But the idea of literary value is as unclear during its release (Who are the "influential reviewers" that read Cist's book? What does it mean to call a text "fair?") as it is now. Cist himself seemed uncomfortable with the monolithic idea of "literary-ness," and his book deconstructs the traditional notions of value that comprise this monolith.

Outside of the grey area of "literary value," *Trifles in Verse* has value as a preservation of identity and document of life. To simultaneously demote the work with the name *Trifles in Verse* while also going through the process of printing and publishing is paradoxical. Nonetheless, this paradox depicts Cist's earnest respect for the idea of "the literary" in general—Lewis Cist

admires writing and poetry enough to want to participate in his own right while consciously recognizing his limitations. This respect for literature is the ultimate sign of identity stamped across the text.

Afterword

I am not sure whether I'm proud or a bit disappointed that the very last paper of my English major, or of any class in my undergraduate career at Northwestern, is on Lewis Cist's *Trifles in Verse.* Earlier this week, I turned in my other final for my last quarter on Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* I have had the pleasure of studying some of the most critically important and foundational texts of the English language, taking classes on canonical authors like Chaucer, James Joyce, Milton, and Shakespeare. And yet, the longest and most substantial paper I will have written is a deep dive into an unknown nineteenth century Cincinnati businessman's after-work hobby. There is some very subversive irony at play.

This essay would not be complete without an explanation for why I chose *Trifles in Verse*, and why I spend so much time arguing for its selfhood. Cist may not always have the strongest grasp on creating memorable poetry, but to me, there is a genuine humility in labelling a book a "*Trifle."* There is a long-standing poetic tradition of modesty; poets and authors adorn their books with dedications, thank-yous, and prefaces that subvert the value of their word. But if Cist is unique for anything, it is for his self-consciousness at the heart of his work.

After studying *Trifles in Verse* for so long, I believe that he was self-aware—Cist knew he did not always have the strongest grasp on poetry as a mode for creativity or expression; he knew this book would never meet certain expectations of literary value; and yet, he overcomes it and seeks to publish. I find it truthful and noble for Cist to recognize this self-consciousness in

his literature. He is honest with himself and his audience unlike any other author I have read. It seems a misjustice to Cist's vulnerability and integrity to entirely bury this book in dust, and then open it up and proclaim it worthless. I do not suggest a course-long close reading on *Trifles in Verse*—it will never be rewarding in this fashion. But for English majors and canon-makers alike, it poses a unique challenge to find value in what time has deemed forgettable.

By the end of this essay, I have come to forgive Cist for his cliché. To me, he has become a sort of amalgam for a good, earnest attempt. As I complete my undergraduate degree and transition to a new phase of life, there is value in holding Cist's fascination with poetry, language, and the nobility of a hearty and well-intended trifle.

Works Cited or Consulted

Childress, Boyd. "Charles Cist, Philadelphia Printer." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, vol. 85, no. 1, Mar. 1991, pp. 72–81. *EBSCOhost*, https://www-journals-uchicago-edu.turing.library.northwestern.edu/doi/10.1086/pbsa.85.1.24302970.

Cist, Charles. *Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1851.* W.H. Moore & Co., 1851. *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0107550639/SABN?u=northwestern&sid=SABN&xid=6f9bd28d&pg=2.

Cist, Lewis Jacob. *Catalogue of the Valuable Collection of Autographs Including Many of the Rarest American and Foreign, Arranged in Groups and Classified into Sets, the Property of Lewis J. Cist to Be Sold at Auction [by] Bangs & Co*. 1887. HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044080272040&view=1up&seq=7.

Cist, Lewis. *Trifles in Verse: a Collection of Fugitive Poems*. Cincinnati, Robinson and Jones, (Printed by J.A. Robinson & Co.), 1845.

Coggeshall, William. "The Poets and Poetry of the West: with Biographical and Critical Notices." *Sabin Americana 1500-1926,* Follett, Foster and company, 1860. https://go-gale-com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/ps/i.do?p=SABN&u=northwestern&id=GALE%7CCY0103920446&v=2.1&it=r&sid=SERVICE_ID

Cohen, Michael C. *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

Flanagan, John T. "Poetic Voices in the Early Middle West." *The Centennial Review,* vol. 24, no. 3, 1980, pp. 269-283. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/23739567.

"fugitive, adj. and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/75264.

Herrnstein Smith, Barbara. "Value/Evaluation." *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, University of Chicago Press, 1995, 177-185.

Nissenbaum, Stephen. *The Battle for Christmas*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.

Miller, John C. "An Unpublished Poe Letter." *American Literature*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1955, pp. 560-561. *JSTOR,* www.jstor.org/stable/2921859.

Pease, Donald E. "Author." *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, University of Chicago Press, 1995, 105-117.

Robinson & Jones' Cincinnati directory for 1846. Containing the names of the inhabitants alphabetically arranged; their occupations, places of business, and dwelling; a list of the streets and alleys of the city ; an alphabetically list of the advertisers and subscribers to this directory ; an index to all public institutions and buildings ; also, A new complete map of the city and surrounding districts. Robinson and Jones, 1846. *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0112432791/SABN?u=northwestern&sid=SABN&xid=a13b4f0e&pg=1.

"The Cist Collection." *Graphic Press,* vol. 6, no. 11, 11 Sept. 1881, pp. 167. *Cincinnati & Hamilton County Public Library,* https://digital.cincinnatilibrary.org/digital/collection/p16998coll17/id/42076.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass.* 2nd Edition, Brooklyn: Fowler & Wells, 1856.