

WALT WHITMAN'S ALL-AMERICAN POET

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I

EVEN A CASUAL student of American literary history comes to Walt Whitman with a prefabricated impression that he was, in some loosely defined way, the most revolutionary force in our native poetry. Here, the legend goes, was the boldest and most original voice of American letters, the writer whose practices scattered the rear guard of a waning tradition and pointed the way to a new era. In fact, of course, those practices have been long since sifted by time, and absorbed or rejected by the main stream of American culture. Today, having lost their shock value, they may seem strangely tame or dated to young contemporaries hardened to the surrealist imagery of Wallace Stevens, the formal vagaries of E. E. Cummings, and the linguistic brutalities of the Beat Generation. It is still possible to read the best of Whitman with aesthetic excitement, but the spark of controversy has gone out of his verse.

If we turn to his prose, on the other hand, we are reminded that Whitman was a prickly prophet and polemicist as well as an inventive lyricist; that a good deal of his historical importance stems, not alone from his poetic achievement, but from his compulsive efforts to describe what a valid poetic achievement ought to be. In this attempt to define his own role and that of American poets to follow he is still, as he said, "to be wrestled with." His famous prosodic eccentricities and biological candor are no longer the bombshells they once were, but his old concept of the democratic poet is still loaded. In a day when a great Russian writer must refuse a Nobel Prize on what seem to us irrelevant political grounds, the explosive opinions of our own Walt Whitman may even require public detonation to clear away misconceptions and enable us to determine how much validity remains for our time. To this end I introduce the following brief synthetic essay on modern literature, composed of Whitman samplers seasoned with one obviously experimental substitution.

. . . Many of the most literary men of England are the

advocates of doctrines that in such a land as ours are the rankest and foulest poison.—Cowper teaches blind loyalty to the “divine right of kings,”—Johnson was a burly aristocrat—and many more of that age were the scornors of the common people. . . . The impression after reading any of [Sir Walter Scott’s] fictions, where monarchs or nobles compare with patriots and peasants, is dangerous to the latter and favorable to the former. . . . Scott . . . and many others well known [here] exercise an evil influence through their books, in more than one respect. . . . What perfect cataracts of trash come to us . . . from abroad! . . . Let those who read . . . no more condescend to patronize an inferior foreign author, when they have so many respectable writers at home. . . . No great literature . . . can long elude the jealous and passionate instinct of [Soviet] standards. . . . The [Russians] of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The [Soviet] States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. . . . Of all nations the [U.S.S.R.] with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. . . . The [Soviet] bard shall delineate no class of persons. . . . They shall not be careful of riches and privilege. . . . They shall arise in [the Soviet Union] and be responded to from the remainder of the earth. . . . The [Soviet] poets are to enclose new and old, for [Russia] is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. . . . His spirit responds to his country’s spirit. . . . The poets I would have must be a power in the state, and an engrossing power in the state. . . . Its Literature, when it comes, is to be the most serious, most subtle, most solid part of [the State], . . . not a Literature on its breast, for a breastpin, or worn in the ears, for ear-rings.¹

It is not my intention, of course, to try to prove Whitman a Communist, an imputation instantly dispelled by the context from which these passages have been lifted. My purpose has rather been to expose at once his flagrant inability to separate politics from patriotism and art from politics, combinations which alarm the modern reader with the darkest implications of chauvinism and proselytizing. Undoubtedly Whitman was guilty of at least the latter of these sins, though its enormity is lessened by the fact

¹“‘Home’ Literature,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 11, 1846, in *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City, 1921), I, 122; “Anti-Democratic Bearing of Scott’s Novels,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, April 26, 1847, *ibid.*, I, 163; Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in *Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry & Selected Prose and Letters*, ed. Emory Holloway (New York, 1938), pp. 571-586 *passim*; Notes for lectures on literature, *Walt Whitman’s Workshop*, ed. Clifton J. Furness (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), pp. 66 ff.

that in his day political ideology was relatively innocent of the odium of nationalism, had not yet degenerated to a rallying point for international hatred and aggression. As for the chauvinism, it virtually disappears when one considers that his occasional territorial fetishism is more than offset by his higher loyalty to the universal human principle of which his country was merely the symbol. "I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms," he announced in his chief manifesto, "Democratic Vistas," in 1871. Clearly, to Whitman, patriotism was an emotion sublimated by his prophetic view of the human significance of the American political experiment—an experiment 'destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of all time.'² To be instrumental in its lasting success was his entire and avowed mission and, in his larger view, that of the American poet present and future.

This mission is really neither revolutionary nor insular, despite the passion with which he anticipates the new and the rhapsodic devotion with which he regards the United States. Again and again, it is true—in his prefaces, in his essays, in his poems—Whitman drills his readers in the gospel of Lincolnian democracy in scathing contrast to the feudal past, and preaches the New World's need of a radical literature responsive to "the unprecedented stimulants of to-day and here."³ Yet nearly as often he tempers the blast with conservative acknowledgement of the contributions of history and the influence of Old World writers. Passages which praise the right merits, and for the right reasons, of artists like Shakespeare and Tennyson, and even Poe, to name only a few, attest the essential fairness of Whitman, however roundly he may have damned them in the next sentence for their political benightedness.⁴ He can even find justice in Carlyle's testy contentions that American democracy was not all sweetness and light.⁵ His earliest

² "Democratic Vistas," Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, p. 659.

³ "A Backward Glance O'er Traveled Roads," *ibid.*, p. 863.

⁴ Whitman's writings are liberally studded with mingled praise and blame of Shakespeare. The favorable critique in "Robert Burns as Poet and as Person" is especially telling in that Whitman forces himself to confess the democratic Burns outclassed. (Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, p. 830.) Comment on Tennyson is in "A Word About Tennyson," *ibid.*, pp. 850-853; on Poe, in "A Backward Glance," *ibid.*, pp. 867-868.

⁵ "Democratic Vistas," *ibid.*, p. 671 and note. For fuller discussion see Gregory Paine, "The Literary Relations of Whitman and Carlyle, with Especial Reference to Their Contrasting Views on Democracy," *Studies in Philology*, XXXVI (1939), 550-563.

definition of the "democratic writer" took a British novelist (Dickens) for its model; it was a mature opinion of his that "the ferment and germination even of the United States to-day" was principally owing to Elizabethan England; and one of his last pronouncements on modern literature closes with the startling admission that before the European masters "a certain humility would well become us."⁶ America, despite what he calls the "moral revolutions" of the age, is nevertheless an "evolutionary" fact; it "does not repel the past, or what the past has produced."⁷ "Be radical—be radical—be not too damned radical!" is about the sum of it, whimsical and tantalizing as the remark may seem.⁸ The accentuation of the positive, of course, is plain enough on any page or in any poem. It is worth noting that the statement about America's not repelling the past is the opening sentence of the 1855 Preface, where Whitman evidently placed it in the dutiful spirit of a small boy eating his spinach before his pie—the spirit, say, in which I chose in this essay to concede the unhappy connotations of Whitman's literary opinions before discussing their rationality.

II

Even now, or at any point in the discussion, it would be difficult to demonstrate a strict rationality in Whitman's thought. The 1855 Preface is rhapsodic and often incoherent, like the poem "By Blue Ontario's Shore," which in fact is the 1855 Preface with its format changed. "Democratic Vistas," the chief expositor of the thesis, is diffuse and undisciplined. "A Backward Glance O'er Traveled Roads," though shorter and calmer, is retrospective and rambling. Nowhere do we get an orderly, dispassionate analysis of the poet's job such as Poe turned out. Part of Whitman's trouble, of course, lay in the unmanageability of his ideas, which were so big and so nebulous that they continually bedeviled him with contradictions. As a good Emersonian he refused to be overwhelmed by these contradictions ("Do I contradict myself? / Very

⁶ "Boz and Democracy," *Brother Jonathan*, February 26, 1842, in Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, pp. 548-554; "A Backward Glance," *ibid.*, p. 862 n; "Poetry To-Day in America" (1881), *Specimen Days, Democratic Vistas, and Other Prose*, ed. Louise Pound (Garden City, 1935), p. 350.

⁷ "A Backward Glance," Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, pp. 861-862; Preface, 1855, *ibid.*, p. 571.

⁸ Quoted by Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston, 1906), I, 223.

well then I contradict myself"), yet they involved issues central to his concepts of the poet and of democracy, and so he spent his life talking them out—"garrulous to the very last."⁹ But perhaps it is inaccurate to speak of contradictions in Whitman or to assert that he was bedeviled by them. Rather they were paradoxes, and *he* worried *them*.

At least one of these paradoxes is worth consideration here, both for what it reveals of Whitman's method and for the light it throws on his related ideas of democracy and the poet. This is the problem of what Whitman called "Personalism."¹⁰ On the political level it arises in the question, What is democracy's object: to foster the distinction of individuals, or to consolidate the equalities of a populace? "Democratic Vistas" develops the thesis that "Solidarity," or "the principle of the safety and endurance of the aggregate," is "what democracy is for"; while "A Backward Glance" defines the stress of the poems as "counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy," and adds, "Welcome as are equality's and fraternity's doctrines . . . a certain liability accompanies them."¹¹ Whether or not Whitman resolved these polar aspects of our civilization is not in doubt; he resolved them every time he mentioned them, sometimes brilliantly, as in terming them opposite "as the sexes are opposite."¹² The point is that he played a life-long game with them, ebulliently stating and restating problem and solution. For him it was this illusory yet Olympian conflict that gave democracy the organic unity and surging energy that were so eternally fascinating.¹³

The fascination gains added point for this discussion when we see the translation of the problem to the literary level: Is the poet a diamond in a casket or a pebble on the beach? In an early passage of the 1855 Preface the ideal poet is "individual—he is complete in himself . . . he is not one of the chorus"; a few pages later the same poet "sees health for himself in being one of the mass—he sees the hiatus in singular eminence." But in the midst

⁹ "Song of Myself," Section 51; "After the Supper and Talk" (the last line of the First Annex, "Sands at Seventy").

¹⁰ For a good brief discussion with all pertinent facts see Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer, a Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York, 1955), pp. 392-394.

¹¹ Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, pp. 678-679, 870.

¹² "Democratic Vistas," *ibid.*, p. 686.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 669 and note.

of the perplexity we find the resolving factor: "the others are as good as he, only he sees it, and they do not."¹⁴ There is, in other words, an apparent or circumstantial inequality in society which only the poet can see through. This insight gives him a choice: he can take advantage of the popular illusion and withdraw to a "singular eminence," or he can be Whitman's kind of man and keep his feet on common ground because he "sees health" in it. If he chooses the latter course, he must go farther and persuade the inferior intellects around him that there is no such thing as inferiority. Another paradox! and the only way out of this one is to inspire every man to be his own poet—to teach him to see for himself the harmony of the One and the Many:

Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.

You are also asking me questions and I hear you,
I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself.¹⁵

Hence the centrality in the *Leaves*, not of the solution, but of the original unresolved problem, in contexts conducive to constructive intuitions. Hence the recasting of the original Preface into verse in 1856 under the title "Poem of Many in One" (later "By Blue Ontario's Shore").¹⁶ Hence the rearrangement of poems in 1867 and all subsequent editions so as to place first the "Inscription" which begins,

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.¹⁷

The effect of such strictly non-expository methods is an impression, in the prose and poetry alike, of mass rather than progression; yet out of the mass, for the Whitmaniac at least, emerges a conviction more powerful than any which the more linear logic of Poe can effect. The secret of the power would seem to lie in the very fact that Whitman's poetic theory is emotional and personal rather than rational and objective; that the democratic poet of his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 574, 580.

¹⁵ "Song of Myself," Section 46. Note also Whitman's quotation from Sainte-Beuve in "Poetry To-Day in America" (Pound, *Specimen Days*, p. 341) stating that the greatest poet is not the one who has written best but the one who has suggested most.

¹⁶ Gay Wilson Allen, *Walt Whitman Handbook* (Chicago, 1946), p. 130, n. 62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

dreams is not simply a follower of his precepts but a mystical projection of himself beyond his own felt limitations—a begetting on the spiritual level consonant with the physical begetting so prominent in his poetry. The way to a clear picture of Whitman's poet in Whitman's democracy, then, is to examine, in his terms, what he conceived his own job to be and how he wished it to be extended.

III

The opening pieces in the later editions of *Leaves of Grass* are by intention a sufficient definition of the book's purpose, dedicated as they are "To Thee Old Cause" (the cause of freedom), bequeathed "To a Historian" as "the history of the future," and recommended "To Foreign Lands" "to define America, her athletic Democracy." If a prose definition is preferred, the 1876 (Centennial) Preface is as good as any. He wrote the *Leaves*, he tells us there, as a kind of natural history of the self, "saturating them with the vehemence of pride and audacity of freedom necessary to loosen the mind . . . from the . . . stifling anti-democratic authorities of the Asiatic and European past." The book was intended as "the Poem of Average Identity, . . . as a radical utterance . . . adjusted to, perhaps born of, Democracy and the Modern," the special use of which was to fill a dreadful hiatus in the literature of the States—namely, "to show them . . . themselves distinctively, and what they are for."¹⁸ It is only in the poetry, however, that we can sense Whitman's full meaning, because it is an emotional meaning. Life in America was to him a vast crescendo of spiritual optimism—a "glad, exulting, culminating song," as he said in "The Mystic Trumpeter." The poet of such a persuasion becomes a press agent of democracy, overwhelming the world's retarded outposts with a kind of Cecil B. DeMille spectacle of the Good Life. "Who has made hymns fit for the earth?" he asks in "Excelsior"; "for I am mad with devouring ecstasy to make joyous hymns for the whole earth."

Democracy was no less than a religious intoxication with Whitman, and he was always sensible of falling short of its full and perfect expression. It is this haunting sense of failure that accounts for his continual repetitions and reworkings of his basic ideas. It is the same feeling that generates the prophecy in his professional

¹⁸ Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, pp. 731, 733-734 (note), 732.

utterances—the peering ahead for some perfect expression by a future poet who will inherit his faith and fervor and be worthy of them. In this sense Whitman's poetic theory grows out of frustration rather than accomplishment. It is not so much analysis as a yearning after something sufficiently full and coherent to be worth analyzing. All he ever requires of the American poet is that he experience the mystic revelation of democratic faith and that he express himself in his world with total honesty. There are no literary principles, only spiritual ones. The Whitman legacy is not a system but a challenge:

[from "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood"]

Brain of the New World, what a task is thine,

To formulate the Modern . . .

To limn with absolute faith the mighty living present.

. . . I do not undertake to define thee, hardly to comprehend thee,

I but thee name, thee prophesy . . .

In thy resplendent coming literati, . . . thy sacerdotal bards . . .

[from "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"]

Minstrels latent on the prairies!

(Shrouded bards of other lands, you may rest, you have done your work)

Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us,

Pioneers! O Pioneers!

["Poets to Come"]

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!

Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,

But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,

Arouse! for you must justify me.

I myself but write one or two indicative words for the future,
I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back in the darkness.

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,

Leaving it to you to prove and define it,

Expecting the main things from you.

[from "Song of Myself," Section 47]

I am the teacher of athletes,

He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my own,

He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.

And what will be the office of this literary messiah? He will, carrying the theory of democracy to its apotheosis, stand between Nature and the Soul of Man,

tightly holding hands,
Which he will never release until he reconciles the two,
And wholly and joyously blends them.¹⁹

He will indicate to men "the path between reality and their souls," and in a "new rhythmus" fitted for the soul write "poems bridging the way from Life to Death."²⁰

The prophet and the bard,
Shall yet maintain themselves, in higher stages yet,
Shall mediate to the Modern, to Democracy, interpret yet to them,
God and eidólons.²¹

This was Whitman's vision—no more than a spirit and a direction, but a spirit and direction almost literally Miltonic, as he himself recognized with some misgiving.²² Unlike Milton, however, he felt no pall of loneliness in bearing the awful responsibility of his mission. He heard the tramp of all posterity at his heels. If he feared anything, it was not failure in himself, but rigidity and atrophy in them.

I charge you forever reject those who would expound me, for
I cannot expound myself,
I charge that there be no theory or school founded out of me,
I charge you to leave all free, as I have left all free.
After me, vista!²³

IV

In a sense, Walt Whitman got his wish, though he might be more astounded than gratified by the grudging and finally incongruous discipleship of such successors as Hopkins and Pound. Certainly through writers of their original stamp we have inherited "vista"

¹⁹ "When the Full-Grown Poet Came."

²⁰ Preface, 1855, Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, p. 574; conclusion of "Proud Music of the Storm."

²¹ "Eidólons."

²² "A Backward Glance," Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, p. 872.

²³ "Myself and Mine."

of a sort quite inaccessible through School-of-Whitman poets like Benet and Sandburg. In the end, whatever he meant by "vista" is quite as incalculable as he could have wished. Each reader's field of vision defines it differently across a broad scale tapering off into illusion at both extremes. To D. H. Lawrence, for instance, it was the ultimate view into "the blue hollow of the future," and there was, "ahead of Whitman, nothing."²⁴ At the opposite pole academic conservatives like F. B. Gummere, too, have seen only a void beyond Whitman, but a void bleak with the anarchy of personal license. "Here is individual freedom, leaving Wordsworth's early doctrine far behind in a short and comprehensive formula: say what you will, of what you will, how you will."²⁵ If the objection rings quaintly from the critical "right," it is at least a responsible reaction for its time and may still serve as a convenient framework in which to test those controversial aspects of Whitman's thought which even today have power to distort the whole.

On at least three counts his vision may be called in question. Ideologically, Whitman is liable to dismissal by those for whom, artistic considerations aside, he represents political lawlessness and philosophical optimism—a world, as Gummere unsympathetically pictures it, in which "man shall jostle man in a glad turbulent mob."²⁶ Evaluation is at best elusive in the case of a man for whom Real and Ideal are equally vital and their incompatibility is the only tragic fact of life. His restless spirit, shifting like Frost's metaphysical bear from one emphasis to its opposite, resists static portaiture. But the judicious reader will take into account the recognition, in "Democratic Vistas," of law as the implicit soul of freedom, and the moving sense of evil that darkens the letters and poems of the war years.²⁷

From an aesthetic point of view Whitman is open to a second major criticism on related grounds. He is, as he has been from the first, the *bête noir* of those, like Poe and James, for whom a dithyrambic style is an abdication of the responsibilities of craftsmanship.²⁸ Perhaps the most favorable perspective from which to view the "spontaneous me" concept of art is that which has been

²⁴ *Studies in Classic American Literature* [1922] (New York, 1953), p. 183.

²⁵ Francis B. Gummere, *Democracy and Poetry* (Boston, 1911), p. 115.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁷ A good brief discussion of these points is in F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), pp. 591, 623-625.

²⁸ See Gummere, pp. 124-125; Matthiessen, pp. 578 ff.

provided by sculptors and architects rather than poets—notably, Horatio Greenough, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Whitman, possibly under the direct influence of Greenough,²⁹ clearly felt that form follows function, in importance if not in causality. Like Melville, he adopted his “condor’s quill” in almost instinctive response to a “mighty theme.” The trouble is that, in Whitman’s verse, form may be thought to follow function at too great a distance: “The words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything.”³⁰

Finally, on the psychological level, Whitman is sometimes seen as an artistic “primitive,” an advocate of the autobiographical concept of creative imagination, a flouter of what Gummere has called “the convention of artistic disguise.”³¹ The issue is sharply defined and sharply joined. “Those who have turned to Whitman as one of their masters,” wrote Matthiessen, “have believed the aim of art to be the expression of the artist’s personality.”³² Opposed to this position are a majority of modern writers, ranging from James and Flaubert in Whitman’s own time to T. S. Eliot, currently the most Mosaic spokesman for the doctrine of impersonality in poetic expression.

In effect, Whitman’s critical assumptions seem about as unpopular in our day as in his own, though in quite different circles and for quite different reasons. He is a god in retirement, an elder statesman whose opinions it is decent to honor but unfashionable to espouse. Yet principles are more durable than fashions, and American criticism would be hopelessly impoverished by the abandonment of the principles underlying his embattled notions. If our classic nay-sayers like Melville and Hawthorne are more earnestly attended in a disillusioned age, it is nevertheless the affirmer who has established the tone and direction of life, subject to their modifications.³³ Whitman, as even Gummere recognized, “stood for fundamental truths”; he worshipped, not the fact of America, but the dynamic potential of the system it represents.³⁴ Too many modern writers, having stripped the national life of what Howells called its “smiling aspects,” have nothing left to show us.

²⁹ Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, pp. 109-111. An excellent general discussion of Greenough’s influence is in Matthiessen, pp. 144-149.

³⁰ “Shut Not Your Doors.”

³¹ Page 126. See also Matthiessen, p. 539.

³² Page 594.

³³ Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (New York, 1958), p. 7.

³⁴ Gummere, p. 130; Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, p. 390.

Even on technical grounds Whitman's ideas have continuing relevance. In his alleged contempt for the restraints of form he has been the victim of his own overstated and dramatized case for a Psalm-like freedom of structure. As a result, he is most forcibly remembered for his diametrical opposition to Poe's "intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess."³⁵ Too little known is the professional conscience that labored a lifetime with the file and that led him to judge *Drum Taps* "superior to *Leaves of Grass* . . . as a work of art, being adjusted in all its proportions, & its passion having the indispensable merit that though to the ordinary reader let loose with wildest abandon, the true artist can see it is yet under control."³⁶ In a day when technique is either next to Godliness or a substitute for it, it is salutary to be reminded that while art is not nature, it must grow from it and reflect its structural rhythms. The organic principle, as Whitman promulgated it, is open to absurd abuses, some of which he unwittingly illustrated; but it is a fine counterbalance to the formal absolutism behind so much of contemporary artistic absurdity.

At the very wellspring of art, where Whitman conceived the basic personification which put his self at the center of his poetic message, lies the ultimate principle. It certainly does not require—may even be incompatible with—autobiography in every line; but it does require total sincerity of purpose, without which the objectivity so indiscriminately worshipped today becomes a mere mask of cynicism. Conviction, like technique, is a product of experience. The poet can make a work of art, as Matthiessen puts it, "only from materials to which his own senses have responded."³⁷ He might have added, "to which his own heart has responded." The great poetry in Walt Whitman is still alive with such felt imagery—of nature, of cities, of the daily occupations of men and women. America's poets could find worse programs to work by.

³⁵ "Edgar Poe's Significance," Holloway, *Walt Whitman*, p. 769.

³⁶ Letter to William D. O'Connor, January 6, 1865, *ibid.*, p. 949.

³⁷ Page 570.