INFORMATION TO USERS

This dissertation was produced from a microfilm copy of the original document. While the most advanced technological means to photograph and reproduce this document have been used, the quality is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help you understand markings or patterns which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting thru an image and duplicating adjacent pages to insure you complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a large round black mark, it is an indication that the photographer suspected that the copy may have moved during exposure and thus cause a blurred image. You will find a good image of the page in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., was part of the material being photographed the photographer followed a definite method in "sectioning" the material. It is customary to begin photoing at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue photoing from left to right in equal sections with a small overlap. If necessary, sectioning is continued again — beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. The majority of users indicate that the textual content is of greatest value, however, a somewhat higher quality reproduction could be made from "photographs" if essential to the understanding of the dissertation. Silver prints of "photographs" may be ordered at additional charge by writing the Order Department, giving the catalog number, title, author and specific pages you wish reproduced.

University Microfilms

300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106

A Xerox Education Company

73-6931

SULLIVAN, Donald Joseph, 1941-
TO GO UNSWORN: THE POLITICAL PILGRIMAGE OF WALT WHITMAN.

The University of Michigan, Ph.D., 1972
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, A XEROX Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan

THIS DISSERTATION HAS BEEN MICROFILMED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED.

TO GO UNSWORN:

THE POLITICAL PILGRIMAGE OF WALT WHITMAN

by
Donald Joseph Sullivan

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(American Culture)
in The University of Michigan
1972

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Joe Lee Davis, Chairman
Professor Marvin Felheim
Professor Shaw Livermore, Jr.
Assistant Professor Benjamin Franklin

PLEASE NOTE:

Some pages may have

indistinct print.

Filmed as received.

University Microfilms, A Xerox Education Company

Table of Contents

		Page
Table of Contents		ii
Chapter 1	The Political Issues	1
2	Whitman as Journalist	20
3	Two Tracts	43
4	Leaves of Grass	88
5	Late Whitman	145
6	Analysis of Whitman's Thought	162
7	Contemporary Social Criticism	186
8	Conclusion	228
Bibliography		231

CHAPTER I

The Political Issues

In his invalid's retirement at Camden, New Jersey, Whitman enjoyed the admiring services of a young amanuensis, Horace Traubel. It was Traubel's practice to lead out the old poet and carefully record his responses, not infrequently on politics - a topic close to the heart of the young Socialist Traubel. On one such occasion, in reference to the tariff question;

> "I'm afraid," said Traubel . . ., "you're no longer 'an ardent Republican.'" The old man laughed. "I'm afraid so, too," he rejoined: "if politics keep on going from bad to worse, from worse to worse again and more of it, I'm in danger of becoming an ardent anti-Republican." An ardent Democrat, in other words, Traubel hinted. No, the alternative was enough to make him shudder. "I'll have to go unsworn," he decided, "until something worthy of my ardor turns up: Japhet in search of a father."[1]

Throughout Whitman's long career this search for a satisfactory political stance was unending. Indeed, Whitman has frequently been taxed with charges of political fickleness for his frequent shifts of party allegiance and, more seriously, occasionally dismissed altogether as a fuzzy minded idealist for whom no conceivable political order could hope to be satisfactory. Both accusations rest on a presumption which would appear endemic to American tradition as viewed from the

---

[1] Newton Arvin, Whitman (New York, 1938), p.81.

perspective of two hundred years of relatively stable two-party government. For it has been endlessly inculcated, not least by politicians and by their academic confrères the political scientists, that the party system is the essence of democracy and that the dual party system is the most practicable form of governance.

But the popular mass-based dual party system was initiated during Whitman's early years and suffered a massive collapse during Whitman's middle age. Further, even when operating at near optimum in the 1840's and again in the 1870's and 1880's, issues which can be grouped under the rubric 'patronage' had disillusioned many observers. And further, as Arvin notes, "Not many men's lives, until the nineteenth century, have spanned such an historical arc as that which measures the space between the America of Andrew Jackson and the America of Grover Cleveland: the most plastic of minds might well have succeeded imperfectly in comprehending both."[2] In any consideration, then, of the tortuous path of Whitman's search for a political form suited to his vision of American democracy, the nature and problems of the political structure of a Democracy deserve special priority.

Given the problem of public popular selection of a representative form of government, numerous means are open. But what would seem inevitable is the likelihood, at some level, of the development of factions, be they based on personalities, interests, or ideologies. And given a representative chamber organized by the majority, there is an automatic division on the highest level between the 'ins' and the 'outs', the majority and the minority. But it would be a gross simplification to

---

[2] Ibid., p.82.

imply that thereby a dual party system is the sole or even the most expected outcome.

Rather, as has been widely noted, the selection of representatives by the electorate will tend to rest on strictly local factors such as fame or popularity or status, whereas the development of political alliances or factions is normally a process initiated from above, from within the representative body itself.

Such factional development was precisely the case in the early years of Congress, much to the dismay of many of the political theorists of the period. Loose coalitions for immediate aims within the Congress were no doubt inevitable, but the prospect of the solidification of such groups into permanent voting blocs, and, far worse, the spread of such partisanship to the level of the local electorate, was considered as a grave danger to the Republic. "To the men who led the American Revolution and founded the federal republic, the possibility of party conflict always seemed one of the great dangers which beset a democracy. The Founding Fathers were upper class republicans, and they sought 'to refine and enlarge the public view' by insuring that a propertied elite would rule. If political parties developed, corrupt demagogues might 'first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests of the people.'"[3]

But if the first years of the Republic saw bitter factional disputes, still these factions were more the result of the ambitions of individuals than the organized efforts of a genuine party, and in any case, their effects did not greatly touch the electorate at large.

---

[3]William Freehling, "Spoilsmen, Interests, and Calhoun," Journal of American History, L11,1 (1965), p.34.

> Here, in essence, was the difference between the unstructured, individualistic politics that had prevailed in most states before 1790 and in some as late as the 1830's. Politicians formerly consulted their own individual interests, or perhaps that of the junto or faction with which they associated. The voters, in turn, acted on the basis of personal identification with the candidates, or of attachment to locality or social group. The establishment of institutionalized political parties, however, added a new ingredient to the forces that influenced political behavior.[4]

Thus with Jackson, or more precisely with Jackson's electoral loss in 1824, everything changed. The political 'machine' or mass-based party came into being to insure Jackson's victory in 1828.

Jackson's victory in 1828 did not, of course, create a two-party system. Rather that election started a trend which was increasingly to reflect the importance of the Presidency, the widening exercise of the franchise, the organization of local interests and their orchestration into national patterns, and, above all, the deployment of massive propaganda efforts. In short, partisan political parties were a phenomena intimately linked with the rise of a mass electorate. As McCormick has noted, "Intense inter-party competition stimulated unprecedented levels of voter participation, not uncommonly rising to eighty percent of the electorate, whereas prior to 1824 in a very large number of states it was exceptional for half of the eligible voters to participate regularly in elections. Both in the comprehensiveness of their structures and in the universality of their appeal, then, the new parties could truly

---

[4]Richard P. McCormick, The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era (Chapel Hill), 1966), p.354.

be characterized as mass parties."[5]

The key to the partisan mass-based party was organization. "The widespread adoption of the convention system in the 1830's, . . made for an exceedingly elaborate and complex organizational structure. . . . the organizations which evolved in most states by the 1840's were marvels of ingenuity and intricacy and required enormous manpower to staff them."[6] At this point the structure and being of the party itself, rather than the ambitions of a national personality, became the life force of the system; the center had shifted from the leader to the organization. But if politics of deference was dead, local politics could not die, for that was the lifeblood of the organization. Hence a radical decentralization of the party system ensued. From being a fashionable clique in Congress or a vehicle of one man's career, suddenly the party became a structural device to insure office holding. Further this structure became national in comprehension, if scarcely in mutual interests. Hence, and this was to be the fatal flaw, "All of the available evidence suggests that the American party systems, viewed comparatively, have exhibited an arrested development which stands in particularly striking contrast to the extraordinary dynamism of the nation's socio-economic system."[7]

Thus the party was not, and given its tenacious and all but exclusively local and structural concerns, could not possibly be, a policy forming institution. Rather it was, as it has

---

[5]William Nisbet & Walter Burnham, eds, The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development (New York, 1967), pp.105-6.

[6]Ibid., p.107.

[7]Ibid., p.278.

ever remained in good measure, a machine for mobilizing votes, and solely that. When Madison had suggested in the Federalist Papers that factionalism would prove impossible by dint of the extent and diversity of the nation, he was surprisingly accurate and yet blind. Blind in that he underestimated the pragmatic organizational talents of ambitious men and the considerable loyalty of a well propagandized electorate. Accurate in that ideological politics was not only difficult within a national party, but in fact was taboo since it would inevitably fracture the organization. And, of course, the slavery question and its attendant ideologies were to do precisely that.

Thus by 1840 " . . . in every state politics was conducted within the framework of a two-party system. . . . The two parties were similar in structure, employed similar campaign techniques, and performed similar functions. . . . there has in fact occurred a nationalization of institutional forms and political styles."[8] In this respect it is central to Whitman's concern with Democracy that he achieved his majority in 1840 and that the party system as he came to know it raised real and troubling issues for any who chose to reflect on the democratic process.

The first and most basic issue posed by a democracy based on a mass electorate was recognized almost at once by the two most astute observers of the American scene, Alexis de Tocqueville and John C. Calhoun. The Frenchman's fears of the tyranny of the majority and the resulting suppression, if only by psychological means, of any articulate minority were echoed by Calhoun. If anything, as a politician representing a slave-holding minority section, Calhoun was even more desperate and could scarcely afford the ironic detachment of Tocqueville.

---

[8] Ibid., p.102.

Hence some means of allowing the democratic principle, majoritarianism, while safeguarding the rights and legitimate interests of opposition minorities, has to be found.

The problem had previously been addressed, though in a more abstract manner, by the Constitution in attempting to divide jurisdiction between the dual governments of the States and the Federal Union, and also by creating three autonomous centers of power within the Federal government itself. But experience had suggested in due course that a national party system was capable of rendering these constitutional safeguards less imposing, while the extension of the franchise made the writ of the governing party all the more powerful and pervasive. In fact, the only saving virtue was, as it was to remain, the lack of ideological unity within any national party. But, in face of the growing distaste for the institution of slavery, it was eminently conceivable to Calhoun that an ideological unity could come to be formed over that issue with the resulting inevitable suppression of the rights and interests of his minority.

Calhoun did not try to dismantle national parties, which was impracticable (though in fact South Carolina had managed to avoid inclusion in the national party system - though largely through restricting the franchise). Rather Calhoun's efforts focused on the preservation of the party system as an anarchic grouping of regional blocs which served from time to time to pull together for the election of a Presidential candidate and under whose aegis Congress could be organized. Thus the defection of any significant minority section of the party would serve as a veto to the imposition of an injurious majoritarianism. Though presented in positive terms as the doctrine of

'concurrent majorities,' and later to be lauded as 'American pluralism,' in reality, of course, it was government by the least common denominator. As Peter Drucker has noted, "Ever since the days of Calhoun, the advocates of pluralism have tried to dodge the question of who represents the national welfare by contending that the national interest is equal to the sum of all particular interests and that it therefore does not need a special organ of representation. . . . In practice, pluralism tends to resolve sectional interests and class conflicts at the expense of the national interest which is represented by nobody in particular, by no section and no organization."[9]

Even accepting Calhoun's solution to the problems of majoritarianism, such a theory is unworkable unless there exists a firm underlying acceptance of the basic general principles of the national interest. "A free government on the basis of sectional interest groups is possible only when there is no ideological split in the country."[10] Hence in the American context the crucial element became the sanctity of the Union and the willingness of all factions to compromise to avoid any issue which would threaten the Union. The problem for Calhoun and his successors was that minority interests tended, by accident of geography, to split along sectional lines. Still, as long as the rather anarchic national party system perdured, the Union could be preserved; the collapse of the national parties precipitated Civil War.

In addition to sectionalism, Calhoun, and also Whitman, discerned a second danger in party patronage. As Freehling

---

[9]Peter F. Drucker, "Calhoun's Pluralism," Men, Ideas and Politics (New York, 1971), pp.115-6.

[10]Ibid., p.123.

notes, "Calhoun always believed that demagogic spoilsmen could delude the rabble, control popular elections, ignore the desires of the great communal interests, and turn the political scene into a mere scramble for patronage."[11] Thus, instead of representing the natural interests of their local constituencies, the rewards available from the national party could well induce politicians to sell themselves to the highest bidder - in effect vitiating the whole notion of concurrent majorities. Further, because of control of patronage and because of the need to discover what constituted at any given time the acceptable common denominator, the real power within the party had rapidly passed from elected representatives to full-time political managers who were not genuinely responsible to the general electorate. "By 1850 the Founding Fathers' vision of a republic without political parties had been rendered hopelessly obsolete, and the age of the philosopher statesman had given way to the age of the political manager."[12]

Calhoun's solution to the patronage issue, and to some extent to the sectional problem, was to revert to an earlier ideal of politics, one which was indeed still viable in his home state and which flourished in England. "It presupposed an unquestioned ruling class with a common outlook on life. . . Given that sort of ruling class, the antagonist in an ideological system can be expected to be a 'loyal opposition,' that is, to see himself as a partner rather than as a potential challenger to civil war."[13] But such a solution, however attractive in the abstract and however workable in the United Kingdom,

---

[11] Freehling, p.26.

[12] Ibid., p.35.

[13] Drucker, p.123.

was simply not a real option in the United States. As Drucker continues, "A ruling class was incompatible with mass immigration and with the explosive territorial expansion of nineteenth-century America. It was even more incompatible with the American concept of equality."[14]

Whitman's analyses of the problems posed by national parties were strikingly similar to Calhoun's, and even his solutions have major points of comparison. Whitman is extremely reluctant to raise the issue of slavery for fear of encouraging sectionalism and thus endangering the Union. For both Whitman and Calhoun, the Union was the whole point, the very reason for the existence of any party system whatsoever. In addition, Whitman discerned in the spoils system and in the professional party manager, insidious instruments for corrupting and misleading the electorate. Finally, Whitman came in time to recognize the need for selfless and gifted leaders, the sort of men who, despite all Whitman's exuberant celebration of egalitarianism, were not dissimilar from Calhoun's aristocratic ideal.

The principle of egalitarianism, as has been widely noted, is a development which sprang originally from the notion of individualism. Tocqueville was leery of egalitarianism for fear that, in the end, the leveling of everyone would result in the dictatorship of the majority. And, in effect, such too was Calhoun's stand. But for the young idealist of the Jacksonian era such dangers to the individual were not immediately noticed in the splendid enthusiasm for the new order.

The Jacksonian era was one of expansion and nationalism. This romanticist embrace of what in previous history had normally been associated with the dominance of the State would

---

[14] Ibid., p.124.

seem at first blush a contradiction of the very ideals of individualism and egalitarianism so characteristic of the romantic spirit. In fact, however, the State was now viewed as an altogether different entity from the hierarchically organized states of the medieval or aristocratic periods. "Now the natural - and hence perfect - state will solve the old antithesis between liberty and authority. The state should be a personality common to the persons who compose it. If that which is naturally common to all men is made politically common in the state the antithesis is solved."[15] Thus, as Brinton continues,

> The spirit of expansionism prevailed through individualism. . . . There was no attempt to pulverize society. There was no aim to destroy the state in order to set up an anti-social collection of separate individuals. What individualism really did in theory was to appeal to the individuals to abandon one society and join another. . . . The individualist commonwealth is a natural society as opposed to an artificial society; it is not, however, a disordered society as opposed to an ordered society.[16]

The great revolution of the Romantic spirit, then, was that the new State was to be one composed not of orders or of estates but of equal individuals. The complex issue of how to organize such individuals into a coherent social and political order have been touched upon above, and the even deeper problem of the relationship of the individual to the whole will be extensively treated in a later chapter. But the very notion of free individuals in an egalitarian society was the core of the Romantic ideal and served to fire the imagination, poetic and politic of an entire age.

---

[15] Crane Brinton, The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists (New York, 1962), p.223.

[16] Ibid., p.223.

How such enthusiasms affected Whitman if clear from the very beginning of his poetical and journalistic education. Thus, as J. J. Rubin has noted, "The depression that struck the nation in 1819 and stifled its economy for several years prepared his father's Jeffersonian sympathies, along with many other artisans, for reformers like Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen. . . ."[17] Already in Whitman's youth the waves of Romantic reform were beginning to sweep across the Atlantic. The great movements which were to agitate America in the late 1830's and through the 1840's were beginning to be noised about. "The reformers fought for equal civil rights without distinction of color; for mechanics' liens and the end of imprisonment for debt; women's legal rights; and non-sectarian, free education."[18] A proper appreciation of Whitman's apparently unrealistic approach to politics cannot be understood without a grasp of his early indebtedness to the fervor of reform.

Thus in politics the reformers first surfaced in the early 1830's, in New York City significantly enough in the Workingmen's Party. As Edward Passen notes in Most Uncommon Jacksonians, these reform theoreticians were not really Jacksonians; they were far too radical for that. Rather they might be classified as unreconstructed Jeffersonians who were faced with the coming of Industrialism and opted for equality and a rather strident anti-capitalism. Further, they were by no means necessarily committed to the Democratic party. "At a time when Jacksonians both referred to themselves and were widely referred to as the

---

[17] Joseph Jay Rubin, "Whitman: Equal Rights in the Foreground," Emerson Society Quarterly, XX (1952), p.20.

[18] Ibid.

party of the common people - in contrast to their aristocratic foes, the Whigs - the leaders of labor stigmatized both the political system in general and its major parties as 'humbug.'"[19]

In fact, the Democrats were especially dangerous in that honest voters could well be misled by their propaganda. "Since the people had the vote in this country, it was necessary for the leading parties to exercise all their wiles if they were to maintain the delusion that they were concerned with the problems of working people. Whigs and Democrats alike had proved equal to the task, with the latter if anything showing the greater mastery of the art of political deception."[20] Thus as Passen concludes, "Without exception the labor leaders regarded the American political system as a hoax, and the turbulent party struggles of the era as full of much sound and fury, signifying little for workingmen."[21]

Unfortunately, the Workingmen's Party was unable to sustain itself for any length of time and, under the leadership of William Leggett, Whitman's real political mentor, they came to rest as an uneasy left wing of the Democrats. "The Locofocos, like their earlier Workingmen, did not remain a separate unit. . . . But their credo remained a forceful legacy to Walt Whitman. From the time he was old enough to vote, his vigorous spoken and written advocacy encouraged by local leaders earned Whig enmity."[22]

Leggett, like Whitman, a journalist of considerable independence, discussed in length and frequent articles and

---

[19]Edward Passen, Most Uncommon Jacksonians (New York, 1967). p.122.

[20]Ibid., p.123.

[21]Ibid., p.124.

[22]Rubin, p.21.

editorials not only the immediate issues of the day but also the general idea of egalitarian democracy and its practical functioning. Thus in setting down his political credo in 1836 Leggett noted, "This paper will be democratic not merely to the extent of the political maxim, that the majority have the right to govern; but to the extent of the moral maxim, that it is the duty of the majority so to govern as to preserve inviolate the equal rights of all. . . . The prevailing error of political journals is to act as if they deemed it more important to preserve the organization of party, than to promote the principles on which it is founded. They substitute the means for the end, and they pay that fealty to men which is due only to truth."[23] Nor did Leggett issue these caveats only in the abstract, but attacked with dogged persistance all restrictions on trade, the granting of exclusive banking charters, and all taxes or subsidies which favored any group at all. "We have striven to show that all the proper and legitimate ends of Government interference might easily be accomplished by general laws, of equal operation on all."[24]

In an editorial of 1837 entitled "The Morals of Politics," Leggett offered an interesting and pregnant critique of the party system.

> Elections are commonly looked upon as mere game, on which depends the division of party spoils, the distribution of chartered privileges, and the allotment of pecuniary rewards. The antagonist principles of government, which should constitute the sole ground of controversy, are lost to sight in the eagerness of sordid motives; and the struggle, which should be one of pure reason, with no aim

---

[23] Theodore Sedgwick, ed., Political Writings of William Leggett (New York, 1840), vol. II, pp.109-10.

[24] Ibid., I, 275.

> but the achievement of political truth, and the promotion of the greatest good of the greatest number, sinks into a mere brawl, in which passion, avarice, and profligacy, are the prominent actors.[25]

And later, more succinctly, he asks, "Are our elections, in truth, a means of deciding mere questions of government, or does not the decision of numerous questions affecting private interests, schemes of selfishness, rapacity, and cunning, depend on them, even more than cardinal principles of politics?"[26]

Leggett's solution is pure Jeffersonian in tone. "The remedy is easy. It is to confine government within the narrowest limits of necessary duties. . . . Governments should avoid all legislation not in the fullest accordance with the letter and spirit of that glorious maxim of democratic doctrine, which acknowledges the equality of man's political rights."[27] The solution must appear simplistic in light of the changes in the political economy wrought by the Industrial Revolution, but the solution was also Whitman's.

Thus the doctrines of Jefferson, the actions of Jackson, and the interpretations of Leggett formed Whitman's trinity. In all this, it is essential to remember that Leggett was the most immediate influence, both personally and intellectually, on the youthful Whitman. Further, Leggett was no machine politician but a maverick radical and idealist who was not expecially concerned about the national party at all. Whitman was to draw heavily from this source.

The adherents of the Workingmen's Party and the Locofocos

---

[25] Ibid., II, 323.

[26] Ibid., p.325.

[27] Ibid., p.326.

were often derisively termed Fanny Wright Men, and indeed this proto Rosa Luxemburg was a central influence and inspiration to the reformers of the age and a permanent ideal to Whitman. As one standard work has noted, "A firm believer in the perfectibility of mankind, and of womankind also, Fanny Wright was quick to denounce existing evils and to plead for a better order of society. So closely, indeed, did she associate herself with the radicalism of the day that for a long time 'Fanny Wrightism' and 'radicalism' were very nearly synonymous terms."[28]

It is not necessary here to enter into any detailed exposition of Wright's views, except to note a few highlights which bear directly on Whitman's subsequent development. Frances Wright, was, of course, a champion of the feminists, as was Whitman through his poetry and prose, reaching back even to his journalistic days. Further, she was deeply involved for a time (a necessary and constant qualification in her case) in the Workingmen's Party. Here Whitman could not go as far as his bold mentor, though his constant praise of the common workingman was indicative, at least, of where his heart lay. For whereas Wright was an organizer, Whitman loathed being tied down to a programe. Further, in 1828 Wright was instrumental in the organization of Nashoba, an Owenite commutarian experiment. In fact she lost quite a bit of her funds in the project, but in her subsequent lecture tours (and Whitman heard her several times during this period), she heralded the ideal of communal life, a notion which was to reappear in Whitman's thought in the guise of 'comradeship.' Finally, and this is indeed striking, "For the Garrisonian abolitionists she had no use."[29]

---

[28] William Randall Waterman, Frances Wright (New York, 1924), p.13.

[29] Ibid., p.244.

In this she was wholly at one with Whitman. In fact her program on slavery was Whitman's also: Gradual emancipation, encouragement of repatriation to Africa, and inducements to white labor to move to the South.

In addition, Wright had, for her day, wholly radical notions on religion and theology, ideas which are perfectly mirrored some twenty years after her death in Democratic Vistas. "Theology was but idle unfortunate speculation quite unworthy of the attention of civilized man. Religion, on the other hand, correctly interpreted, was the binding, cohesive principle of society. It was the common bond of union. Theology, not religion, had been the thing attacked in writings."[30]

But what Whitman was to treasure most was a pretentious little novel of ideas by Wright, A Few Days in Athens. In this work Wright preaches a sentimental and moralistic version of Epicurean philosophy which stressed above all the nobility and ethical potency of Friendship. To his last day Whitman never ceased to preach this doctrine, often referring disciples to Fanny Wright as a worthy guide.

But if Leggett and Wright, and more distantly Paine and Jefferson, were Whitman's political lodestones, in his daily life he was exposed to the tumultuous and changeable course of contemporary politics. As Burnham aptly summarizes the quarter century preceding the Civil War, "The democratized political atmosphere, the increase in the number and variety of elective offices, and the perpetual mobilization for campaigns necessitated the emergence of the plebeian electoral machine staffed by professionals who had to be paid for their services."[31] The result was a party system which was superbly

---

[30] Ibid., p.247.

[31] Chambers & Burnham, p.294.

organized, highly vocal, and usually altogether devoid of meaningful issues. "This party system could expend great energy on presidential contests, usually involving generals of more or less heroic stature, and it could engage in interminable debates on sectionally innocuous issues of fiscal policy. But it could scarcely cope with the tariff or internal improvements, and, of course, it foundered completely when it could no longer ignore territorial expansion and slavery."[32]

With such ideals and in face of such problems, then, Whitman launched out on the stormy sea of post-Jacksonian politics. In his journalism throughout the period Whitman left a record of his enthusiasms and his disillusionments. And in the course of his progression from the Long Islander in 1838 to the Brooklyn Times in 1859, Whitman was to comment extensively on the political scene. In a lengthy but important statement Frederickson notes the basic changes in Whitman's attitude toward the party system.

> Whitman's quasi-mystical concept of democracy clearly emerged in the wake of his disillusionment with democracy as a purely political movement. As the editor of the Brooklyn Eagle in 1846, Whitman had been quite certain that 'democracy' meant the Democratic Party. . . . By 1856, however, Whitman was through with parties and rejoiced at the collapse of the Whigs and the disorganization of the Democrats which had resulted from the slavery controversy and the growing sectionalism of politics. Although as a 'free-soiler' he had some sympathy with the aims of the Republicans, he now denied on theoretical grounds that there was any value in an established system of political parties. All parties would inevitably go the way of the Democrats, who had betrayed their inner spirit by placing more reliance on the party as an institution or organization

---

[32] McCormick, p.353.

than on democracy as a spiritual force.[33]

As Frederickson implies, Whitman's devotion to the ideals of Democracy did not waver, and indeed grew, during his progressive disillusionment with the partisan party system. But, as this paper will have reason to develop at some length, Whitman, although acknowledging the usefulness of parties once they could be curbed by the power of the independent voter, did not wish to remain at the halfway house of the independent voter choosing among the candidates preferred by the parties. Nor was he advocating some Utopian anarchy. Whitman throughout his career was seeking a New Order which would most fully comprise Democracy.

And in the effort to understand Whitman's attempt to ground and organize a mass democracy, it is necessary to start, as did he, with the given of the post-Jacksonian parties and follow his slow and tortuous course through his initial disillusionment to his temporary advocacy of an 'independent electorate' and on to his ultimate vision of his ideal Democracy.

---

[33]George M. Frederickson, The Inner Civil War (New York, 1965), pp.20-1.

CHAPTER II

Whitman as Journalist

The decades of the 1840's and the 1850's were momentous not only in the macrocosm of the national scene but also in the microcosm of Walt Whitman's personal life. Indeed Whitman's uncanny ability to reflect in his own life the life of the nation was enhanced during this period of crisis by his daily editorial reflections. For during these twenty years Whitman was primarily a journalist and editor.

Although no stranger to the printing world, Whitman began to make his mark in journalism in the spring of 1842 when he assumed the post of editor of the Aurora. Then, after stints with the Evening Tattler and the Long Island Star, Whitman edited the Brooklyn Daily Eagle from March 1846 to February 1848. After a brief but important Southern excursion in 1848, Whitman returned to Brooklyn and edited the Freeman from September 1848 to September 1849. After a hiatus of several years, a time filled with odd jobs and great creative output, Whitman returned to journalism in the spring of 1857 and edited the Brooklyn Times until the summer of 1859.

Four papers then comprise the bulk of Whitman's editorial work: Aurora, Daily Eagle, Freeman, Times. Separated by ten years, Whitman's editorials in the Daily Eagle and Times afford a good view of his changing views of democracy and America, as well as reflecting the changed political situation over the

period. The Aurora provides a glimpse of Whitman as he is just starting his editorial career. The most polemical and, possibly, the most interesting paper, the Freeman, which was an organ of the 'free soil' advocates, is unfortunately unavailable. No extent copies are known, save, ironically, for the first issue.

At the age of twenty-two, Whitman came to the Aurora, a two penny daily established only a few months before by Anson Herrick and John F. Ropes.[1] As Allen has noted, "The young man arrived almost exactly a year after the beginning of one of the hottest newspaper battles in the history of American journalism, the effects of which would be felt for many years."[2] The great battles between James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald and Park Benjamin's Evening Signal opened the way for individualistic and highly aggressive journalism. "The most important result of these journalistic developments was the growth of the independent press and the rapid multiplication of daily papers in New York City."[3] In these days of intense competition and fierce rivalries, a bit of capital and an editor with a clever and not infrequently vitriolic pen were all that was necessary to enter the journalistic lists.

During his stint at the Aurora, Whitman became deeply exercised over the city elections in the spring of 1842. The issue involved Irish Catholic pressures on Tammany with regard to the perennially vexacious issue of public support for

---

[1] Joseph Jay Rubin and Charles H. Brown, Walt Whitman of the New York AURORA: Editor at Twenty-Two (University Park, Pa., 1950), p.1.

[2] Gay Wilson Allen, The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman (New York, 1960), p.41.

[3] Ibid., p.42.

parochial schools. Whitman's response to Archbishop Hughes' use of interest group pressures within the political party system was sulfurous indeed.

"The bulwark of truth - the 'unterrified democracy,' ruled by a tattered, coarse, unshaven , filthy, Irish rabble: Americans, high in reputation, degrading themselves worse than the slavish nobles who of old kissed the tow of the triple crowned?"[4]

While Whitman was undoubtedly upset by the massive introduction of a foreign born and non-Protestant element among the electorate, it would be unfair to consider this the whole or even the principal cause of his resentment. Rather Whitman seems at odds with the political party system as it was developing into a mass-based organization. What he feared above all was the growth of factions within the party.

"It is a fearful thing that our country has arrived at a pass where parties will openly sell their influence to cabals."[5] And indeed when the Whigs captured a majority of the City Council, Whitman almost sees it as a divine retribution for the 'sins' of Tammany.

> We were never brought up to rejoice at the defeat of democratic candidates. Yet our republican schooling has taught us that there are duties far higher and holier than devotion to the local interests of party. There are times, too, when overthrow is better than conquest. A sudden pulling of the reins, though it thrills through the structure of the body politic with startling shock, may teach no unneeded lesson.[6]

In an editorial some one week later, Whitman even more

---

[4] Rubin and Brown, p.67.

[5] Ibid., p.71.

[6] Ibid., p.78.

clearly reveals his growing suspicion and bias toward the party system. Writing of the unduly lengthly and verbose sessions of Congress, the lack of moderation and sensibility among the representatives, and their munificent self-reward "to the tune of eight dollars a day," Whitman calls upon "the PEOPLE" to change all this:

> The fact is, in regard to electing members of the House of Representatives, a few leaders pull the wires, and the mass are deluded into support, because their candidates profess to belong to the same party with themselves. And yet who constitute the men they support? Why, a parcel of designing fellows, that look as much to the general interests of the people of the United States, as the followers of the Great Mogul.[7]

Just how the people were to nominate their own choices Whitman does not say, though doubtless a system of primaries would have appealed to him.

As Allen has noted, "Anyone who has taken the time to study Whitman's later editorials, or his mature poetry and prose, will be astonished at the number of his seasoned convictions that first appeared in the Aurora."[8] Indeed in his reliance on "the PEOPLE," in his suspicion of political parties, and in his brash rhetoric, the youthful editor of 1842 is astonishingly similar to the mature polemicist of 1872.

Despite his anti-Tammany strictures, Whitman was not at a loss for positions on Democratic papers. Indeed in 1844 he edited the New York Democrat. "This must have been an exciting and arduous summer, for Whitman used the paper to advocate the nomination of Silas Wright for governor, in defiance of the political "bosses" of the city. Wright was one of the most

---

[7] Ibid., p.101.

[8] Allen, p.52.

remarkable men in American politics at that time, able, honest, almost worshiped by liberal Democrats of his state, but hated by the Conservatives, or 'Old Hunkers,' as their enemies called them."[9] Wright received the nomination and easily won the Gevernorship, in the process insuring New York State's crucial electoral votes for Polk. Whitman, however, was less fortunate. "No copies of the New York Democrat for 1844 are known to exist, and we can only guess, therefore, at the exact circumstances of Whitman's removal from the editor's chair, but there can be little doubt that he was ousted by the 'Old Hunker' politicians, the first of several defeats that he would suffer at their hands."[10]

In 1846 Whitman assumed the editorship of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle at a time when the sudden acquisition of immense new territory was about to present serious problems both to the political parties and to the Union itself. But in the heady excitement of spreading Democracy, American style, into the Southwest and Mexico, Whitman was seemingly blind to the chain of events these conquests were to put in motion. Indeed, from today's viewpoint, Whitman was embarrassingly the unabashed imperialist. "The editor of the Eagle not only supported the war, he had unlimited faith in the benefits that the American government could bestow upon the peoples of any territory conquered."[11] And it was, of course, precisely the spread of democracy, not the glory of military conquest, which fired Whitman's enthusiasm. "Whitman, though editor of a party newspaper, did not think of Texas, Oregon, or California expansion

---

[9] Ibid., p.64.

[10] Ibid., p.65.

[11] Ibid., p.84.

in terms of politics, but as the means of extending the benefits of democracy to more people."[12]

But by August of 1846 the issues involved in the new acquisitions came to a head. David Wilmot of Pennsylvania attached an amendment to the money bill which was to settle Mexico's claims. The Wilmot Proviso, which would have forbidden slavery in the new territories, was the signal for vast upheavals in the parties and the nation. Heretofore the issue of slavery had not been allowed to arise directly on the national scene, save for the propaganda efforts of a few 'fanatics.' Now, however, slavery was suddenly become a major, indeed the major, overt political issue. It had immediate impact in furthering the factionalism of the already badly fractured Democratic party.

Whitman, as he had done in 1844, enthusiastically backed Silas Wright for re-election as Governor of New York. The opposition of the Hunker or Conservative wing of the New York Democrats, and the open secret of Wright's support of the Wilmot Proviso, made the campaign a most confused and turbulent one which ended with a Whig victory. These events prompted Whitman to use the pages of the Daily Eagle for an extended and ruminative examination of Democracy and the Democratic Party.

In a spirit which almost seems to suggest that he was writing more to assuage his own doubts than to realistically appraise the situation of the country and the party, Whitman wrote in early November of 1846; "The Democracy of this country never can be over thrown. . . . Nor can the Democratic Party become essentially corrupt, either. For true Democracy has written itself a perpetual spring of health and purity. In its

---

[12] Ibid., p.86.

very nature it is at war with all selfishenss and wickedness."[13] Citing the example of Jefferson's uphill fight for democratic principles, and his full reliance on the courage and moral stamina of the people, Whitman concluded:

> We stand here the inheritors of their principles and opposed to the same foe - the foe of equal rights. Democracy must conquer again as it did then - and more certainly than it did then. We think so from two simple facts. One is that the great body of workingmen are more powerful and more enlightened now than they were in those days. The other is, that there is a mighty and restless energy throughout the length and breadth of this nation, for going onward to the very verge with our experiment of popular freedom.[14]

This, of course, is simply the standard theme of the left wing faction of the Democratic party - the rhetoric of William Leggett, Whitman's real political mentor.

Thus in an editorial which cites Leggett be name, Whitman expresses his satisfaction with the accomplishments of universal suffrage, and his belief that further egalitarian developments were both necessary and beneficial.

> Here, we have planted the standard of freedom, and here we will test the capacities of men for self-government. We will see whether the law of happiness and preservation upon each individual, acting directly upon himself, be not a safer dependence than musty charters and time-worn prerogatives of tyrants.[15]

It might be noted here, in passing, the stress placed on the role of the individual "acting directly upon himself." Such a stress tends to act counter to the normal political process of

---

[13] Cleveland Rogers and John Black, The Gathering of Forces, I (New York, 1920), pp.6-7.

[14] Ibid., pp.9-10.

[15] Ibid., p.11.

combining to effect political and social goals.

The following spring Whitman was still sufficiently depressed by the Whig triumph to offer a profession of almost religious faith in the Democratic party.

> The Democracy must still succeed. Even the intelligent Whigs will probably acknowledge this; and with all their distrust of the "common people" and of the integrity and intelligence of the masses, will hardly so degrade their own judgment, as to deny the liklihood of those masses, and the party they attach to, wielding political sway in the aggregate.[16]

Once again Whitman stresses his faith in "the masses," and, instructively, his distrust of those "who think that everything is to be regulated by law."[17] His faith would seem to be based more on an organic unity of those he terms "the lover of his fellows," than on statutary and organized political instruments.

But it is in his editorial of 2 April, 1847, that Whitman most arrestingly declares his vision of the American democracy. Excited by the new acquisitions in the West, and brusquely writing off the dangers of the South ("The slave States are confessedly either stationary, or on a very slow progress, or in actual decline"), he goes on to state:

> In plain truth, 'the people expect too much of the government.' Under a proper organization, (and even to a great extent as things are,) the wealth and happiness of the citizens could hardly be touched by the government - could neither be retarded nor advanced. Men must be 'masters unto themselves,' and not look to Presidents and legislative bodies for aid. In this wide and naturally rich country, the best government indeed

---

[16] Ibid., pp.24-25.

[17] Ibid.

is 'that which governs least.'[18]

Given such a negative view of government, it easily follows that politicians are a contentious and meddling lot who are constantly interfering with the harmonious fraternity of the citizenry. To such a mind, the political party system could appear not merely superfluous, but even dangerous.

If Whitman had not foreseen the problems which were to ensue from the Western territorial expansion, he did not flinch from facing them when they arose.

"On December 21, 1846, he urged the Democratic party to come out for 'free soil.' The following February he stated: 'We believe the Brooklyn Eagle was the very first Democratic paper which alluded to this subject in a decisive manner,' and he thought, mistakenly, that all Democratic papers had since followed suit."[19] However, Whitman's stand on the Wilmot Proviso was not as radical as it might seem, and in any case it was grounded on traditional Jeffersonian-Jacksonian principles. The entire rationale, at least for a New York editor attached to the Democratic Party as the party of egalitarianism and the friend of the workingman, is aptly stated in his lengthy editorial of 1847:

> The voice of the North proclaims that labor must not be degraded. The young men of the free States must not be shut out from the new domain (where slavery does not now exist) by the introduction of an institution which will render their honorable industry no longer respectable.[20]

It is precisely the fear that a small farmer could not meet

---

[18] Ibid., p.52.

[19] Allen, p.89.

[20] Rogers and Black, I, pp.205-6.

the competition of cheap slave labor which lies at the heart of Whitman's 'free soil' policy. It is once again the yearning for a nation of Jeffersonian yeoman farmers, and the concomitant suspicion of 'bigness,' in this case, the plantation system.

That Whitman's free soil program had little or nothing to do with slavery per se is evident from this passage from the same editorial.

> Tens and hundreds of thousands more like the original pioneers, from the East, North and South, will be eager to occupy the new territory which may be acquired from Mexico, if they can go and not find themselves the equals only of negro slaves. Where the land is cultivated by slaves it is not also cultivated by freemen.[21]

Indeed, Whitman was particularly careful to make his position painfully clear and distinct from the abolitionist cause. Although the careful discrimination between the newly acquired Mexican land and the land of the slave-holding States must have seemed spurious not only to the abolitionists of the day but also to the foreign observer, in making this distinction Whitman was, as usual, being quite faithful to the sentiments of the majority of New Yorkers, and of the nation in general. Ironically, it was the Southerners who failed, quite logically, to see the distinction.

The problem, quite simply, as the less ideological, more 'political' wing of the Democrats clearly understood, was that to raise the issue of 'free soil' at all was to alienate the Southern Democratic chieftains and severely weaken the party. Indeed, the Hunkers, or Conservative Democrats in New York, aided by the unexpected death of Silas Wright, moved quickly

---

[21] Ibid., p.205.

to take control of the New York party and thus mollify the Southern politicos before the 1848 election. The result of this manoeuvring was less than happy. The 'free soil' faction was recalcitrant and were in due course read out of the party.

Whitman's reactions to all of this were characteristically outspoken and prompt. In his editorial of 3 November, 1847, just prior to the State elections, Whitman urged the free soil faction not to sit out the election in pique over the Hunker victory in seizing the State party machinery.

> Differences of opinion may honestly exist in members of the same party, on many subjects - but, for one, we recognize no distinction on the point we allude to above, except the distinction between Whig and Democrat. A man has, of course, a right to be a Whig, if so it pleaseth him; but no man has a right to call himself a Democrat, and either wish for, or do for, the triumph of the Whig.[22]

This line of argumentation shows Whitman still to be attached to the uses, values and practices of the traditional political party system. It was however, to be something of Whitman's last stand.

On the following day in an editorial commenting on the Whig victory, Whitman feels free to take a bolder stance, and one less tied to the principle of party unity. The loss of the election, Whitman writes, lies not in "those once derided, but now widely worshipped doctrines which the great Jefferson and the glorious Leggett promulgated," but in the fact that "our party has not been, of late, sufficiently bold, open and radical, in its avowal of sentiment. We never in the world succeeded so well as when we take this bold, unflinching,

---

[22] Ibid., p.216.

and radical ground."[23] Having seized the initiative, Whitman does not hesitate to press on and detail the explicit policies which he believes essential to the fulfillment of the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian ideal.

> . . . we look for the ultimate attainment of the perfectest possible form of government - that will be where there is the least possible government, so called - when monopolies shall be things that were, but are not - when the barbarism of restrictions on trade shall have passed away - when, (and this 'when' we transfer to the present tense,) the plague spot of slavery, with all its taint to freemen's principles and prosperity, shall be allowed to spread no further . . .[24]

The parenthetical expression here is crucial, for it indicates Whitman's full adoption of the free soil stand, and implies a condemnation of slavery in principle. And yet, Whitman was still enough of a party man to hope that, at least within the New York State party, the differences could be resolved.

> "Is he a barn-burner, or an old hunker?" says the Star, in relation to us. Neither, most curious and venerable friend. We are ambitious of neither of those nicknames. We consider that enough sourness and bad blood have already been caused by persons in the Democratic Party ranging themselves under those designations; and are certainly not at all ambitious of either appellation. We are a Democratic-Republican.[25]

At this time he can not envision a break with the regular party machinery, much less a break with party politics in general.

Thus in an editorial in the spring of 1847 Whitman wrote:

> We must have parties in this country; and the question is, shall we go with the Democratic? or shall we aid the

---

[23] Ibid., p.218.

[24] Ibid., p.219.

[25] Ibid., p.225.

> Conservative - call it Federal, Whig, or by whatever of its various names you like? These are the two great divisions. That all the movements and details of the Democratic organizations are immaculate, we don't pretend to say; but that true liberty could not long exist in this country without our party, we do say. And it is important that it should triumph in the local elections-notwithstanding we have specious arguers for a "no party party" among us. All such play into the hands of Whiggery. . . .[26]

In this crucial article, Whitman clearly backs a two party political system for he strongly fears that any split in the Democratic party would hand the government to the conservative, anti-egalitarian forces. The depth of his fear of and loathing for the Whigs is evident and is a good sign of the revolutionary hopes which the Democratic party embodied during the Jacksonian era. Whitman plainly cannot conceive of the nation without the party.

With the split of the New York State Democratic party over the free soil issue, in the winter of 1847-48, Whitman found his editorial chair very uncertain, for his publisher belonged to the regular Democrats, the Hunkers. And in fact by mid January 1848, Whitman having been branded a 'Barnburner,' was out of a job. Party factionalism had once again directly touched Whitman's career.

After a stint on the New Orleans paper, the Crescent, and a lengthy tour of the Mid-West, Whitman returned to Brooklyn and edited a free soil paper, the Freeman, from September 1848 to September 1849. In his absence the free soil issue had continued to play havoc with the Democratic party.

> The Barnburners and the Old Hunkers had sent delegates from New York to the Baltimore Convention, but the Democratic majority had refused to take any stand on the

---

[26] Ibid., pp.40-41.

> free-soil question and both New York groups (after they had each won the right to be seated) walked out in disgust. The Democrats then nominated General Cass, arch opponent of the Wilmot Proviso, to head their national ticket. The Whigs simply nominated General Taylor and Millard Fillmore without bothering with a platform. Anti-slavery men in both parties were disgusted, but especially the "radical" Democrats of New York.[27]

A movement was initiated to form a new party to support free soil principles and Whitman was chosen as a delegate from Brooklyn to attend the convention of this new group at Buffalo in early August of 1848. There Van Buren was nominated for President and Charles Francis Adams for Vice-President. Given his long tradition of party loyalty, Whitman was indeed taking a major step in supporting a third party which inevitably drew most of its strength from Democratic defectors. General Taylor, the Whig candidate, carried New York State, and the election. And indeed Whitman must have been further discouraged with his role as publicist for the third party when the dissidents returned to the Democratic fold in 1849. " . . . by the end of the summer the leaders of the Old Hunkers and the Barnburner faction had made peace and Whitman saw that he would no longer have political support for his paper. Consequently he resigned his editorship and published his last issue on September 11, 1849."[28]

In the next years Whitman largely left the field of journalism, contributing only occasional free lance pieces to various New York publications. In 1855 the first edition of Leaves of Grass was published and in 1856 the second edition. Further in 1856 Whitman wrote but did not publish an

---

[27] Allen, pp.101-102.

[28] Ibid., p.103.

extraordinary essay attacking the American political party system, "The Eighteenth Presidency." This essay will be considered later in this paper.

However in the spring of 1857 Whitman returned to editing, this time the Brooklyn Times. "Although nominally an independent newspaper, the Times had supported Fremont in the 1856 election. . . . Whitman's political attitudes were right for the Times. . . . "[29] For Whitman, ever the lover of his metropolis, much of his editorial efforts were focused on Brooklyn and New York City politics. But in 1857 the politics of New York City, at least from Whitman's perspective, were shockingly shoddy, corrupt and opportunistic. And since Whitman could never bring himself to doubt the ultimate virtue of mass electoral democracy, the rise of the unscrupulous to political power was due, Whitman maintained, precisely to the political party system itself. In one of his most celebrated editorials in the Times, "The Dead Rabbit Democracy," Whitman identifies the cause of the sickness of the body politic.

> There has been a gradual tendency, (who can deny it?) for many years, of all the most abominable elements of city population, toward the little and large caucuses and regencies of the democracy, doubtless because those elements think they can make the most that way. The hungry hordes of office seekers, the fighting men, the shysters, the pro-slavery crowders, the Brookses, the invaders of Kansas, and that strange gathering, the Cincinnati Convention of a year ago, with Mayor Wood, Alderman Wilson, etc., in New York City,--these now stand as "the party." They have compelled the others to do homage to them. And they are "the Dead Rabbit Democracy."[30]

---

[29] Ibid., p.208.

[30] Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwartz, eds, I Sit and Look Out (New York, 1932), p.93.

And then, in a tone strikingly familiar to contemporary New York City residents acquainted with Reform Democratic Club rhetoric, Whitman asks, "The question comes up, these times: Will the Dead Rabbits succeed in forcing the whole of their party, the unwilling ones with the rest, to take sides with them? Will they continue to be the organization, - the regulars - all others forced to cave in, -- either to withdraw or else sing hosannas to them and their "issues"?"[31]

It is of considerable interest that Whitman in this editorial, while excoriating the "regular" party, does not seem opposed to the concept of political parties per se. Even after, or perhaps because of, his experience with the Free Soilers and the Buffalo convention of 1847, Whitman's approach to the Democratic Party is still basically one of a reformer and not one of a radical. Why, one wonders, if Whitman was willing to join a splinter party in 1848 and to write a tract in 1856 denouncing political parties altogether, why did he in 1857 return to the rather benign position of an anti-boss reformer?

Two reasons can, perhaps, be advanced. The first is the simple fact that the 1856 tract, "The Eighteenth Presidency," was not published. And though it may well have represented Whitman's more private emotions and personal thoughts, his duty as editor of a major non-partisan paper called for a more 'practical' approach. The second reason is grounded in a strange split which had developed in Whitman's political allegiances - a split which had its roots in his defection of 1848 and which was to culminate in his joining the Republicans in 1861.

---

[31] Ibid., pp.93-94.

Writing in the 12 October, 1857, issue of the Times, Whitman notes,

> The great bane of our local elections is, that there are many persons, and not a few newspapers, which closely ally themselves with one political party, refusing to believe that there can be any evil in the party or any good in another; carrying their predilections and prejudices into local elections, extolling every man of their own ticket, down to the assessor or constable, as a pattern of virtue, and denouncing every candidate of the opposite party as a scoundrel.[32]

Here Whitman is making two statements: the value of a non-partisan press, and the distinction between local and national politics. Whitman had always been sufficiently a maverick to value his editorial freedom, but the implication of the second statement is a more profound indication of the evolution of Whitman's political philosophy. As he baldly states at the conclusion of this editorial, "The best feature of this Fusion movement is, that it is founded on the true assumption that men who do not see eye to eye in Federal politics may yet consistently agree on the merits of candidates for local office."[33] It is an indication of Whitman's, and indeed of the nation's, confused state that a man as knowledgeable on American politics as Whitman could hope to cling to the standard and traditional positions of the National Democratic Party, while rather blithely undermining its power in the crucial electoral state of New York.

It was precisely because the eternal round of machinations among the New York Democrats was being played out against the increasing divisions within the National Democratic Party

---

[32] Ibid., p.36.

[33] Ibid., p.37.

that Whitman in April of 1858 expanded his critique of the party and identified the three cardinal sins to which the Democrats were subject: ". . . the cohesion of public plunder, the order of slavery propagandism, and the blind following obedience of large masses of adopted citizens."[34]

The first of these, "the cohesion of public plunder" was, of course, precisely what Whitman had been railing against, in season and out, in his attacks on the New York Democratic "regulars." And "the public plunder" was intimately associated with the party's ability to produce massive bloc votes among the immigrant population, the "blind following obedience of large masses of adopted citizens." As has been noted above, this belief that the immigrants were the unwitting corrupters of the democratic electoral system had been an idée fixe of Whitman's from the start of his journalistic career.

Both the "cohesion of public plunder" and the "blind following obedience" were problems more apparent in the large Northeast coastal cities than elsewhere, and were probably somewhat amenable to reform campaigns within the Democratic party and the selective use of Fusion tickets which crossed party lines. The other issue, however, the "order of slavery propagandism," was national in scope and infinitely more complex and dangerous.

Whitman's ire was less directed, on the national scene, at the Southerners, than at those members of the Democratic party who relied on Southern support in Congress. For as Whitman stated in his editorial of 23 April, 1858, scathingly entitled "Sneaking Politicians:"

---

[34] Ibid., p.95.

> . . . whatever may be said about your Southerner, he has an open, aboveboard, independent way of carrying himself and giving out his opinions, quite different from the deferential, secretive, civilized Northerner. This is one reason that leading Southerners get the Presidency so often, and, though they are few, somehow they come to subordinate the many.[35]

Here two common attitudes are expressed. First, there is suggested, in the mystique of the conspiratorial tradition so prevalent in American politics, a cabal of astute Southerners who consciously plotted to control the government. And second, Whitman suggests that the Northern politicians of the Democratic party subtly and deviously accomodated their Southern brethren. The latter charge was undoubtedly more substantial than the former.

There can be little doubt that large numbers of Northern citizens were fully convinced of the Southern control of Congress, of the Democratic party, and, in the case of Pierce and Buchanan, of the Presidency. Hence Whitman had no hesitation in accusing the Democratic party of installing a minority rule. Therefore, he appealed to the Democrats to be honest, and purge themselves of toadying to Southern interests. And in this campaign he called upon the average Northern voters, the very "blind obedient masses" whom he had just excoriated.

> But the greatest danger to the race of sneaking politicians (who have mostly grown up in the Democratic party,) is from the fact that they are now pretty throughly exposed, whether in official station or not; that the people understand them, and that every successive season sees greater and greater enlightenment, and a steady advance of political knowledge among the masses.[36]

---

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p.96.

In light of Whitman's hopes for the revitalization and reform of the Democratic party, it is of some interest to note his attitude toward Steven Douglas. "He looked to Douglas to lead the moderates, North and South, and admired him because of his ability as a popular orator and his courage in crossing swords with President Buchanan himself, for whom Whitman had no good word to write."[37]

In the Illinois Senatorial contest of 1858, Douglas, Whitman's current hope, was pitted against Lincoln, Whitman's future hero, in a series of debates which were nationally reported and, even at the time and despite the complexity of the issues, recognized as analogues of the national situation. Though one may well suspect that the voting public was swayed more by rhetorical tropes than constitutional points, and despite the fact that the issues were so involved as to all but preclude a rational assessment, still these debates served both to acknowledge Douglas as the leading Democratic statesman and to rocket Lincoln to national prominence. For as Whitman honestly noted:

> The contest now waging in Illinois with Senator Douglas, the Administration, and the Republicans, headed by Lincoln and Trumbull as the combatants, is exciting great interest. Of the two, Mr. Lincoln seems to have had the advantage thus far in the war of words. This method of debate in politics where the antagonists have, each of them, their say before the same audience, is a good one, and ought to be more frequently adopted.[38]

Whitman was a strong backer of Douglas - less because of any opposition to Lincoln, to whom he scarcely seems to have

---

[37] Ibid., p.21.

[38] Ibid., p.96.

adverted, than because Douglas's victory would mean the defeat of Buchanan's policy and some hope of resolving both the Party's corruption and the nation's sectionalism. Thus in his editorial of 8 September, 1858, he writes, "The President is as cute an old gentleman as ever pulled wires in political intrigues. He means, if his life is spared, to retain his chair of office until 1864, and hence his first object was to get rid of his formidable opponent, Senator Douglas. . . . Thus Douglas was left to conduct single handed his contest for Senatorship, with the Republicans against him in front, and the Administration assailing him in the rear."[39]

Near the end of his tenure at the Brooklyn Daily Times, Whitman wrote one of his most personal and revealing editorials. He referred to dropping in at one of his old drinking haunts and noting the portraits on the walls. In quiet but eloquent terms, Whitman acknowledges his allegiance to that doomed fine figure of the mid-nineteenth century. Looking about the walls with their blazoned portraits, Whitman notes:

> Significant it is, that while the other portraits have the names appended, the stalwart shoulders and massive features of the Little Giant are left to be recognized without the assistance of subjoined letter press. . . . Even the strongest Lecomptonists admit, sotto voce, that the issue in 1860 is between the two D's -- Douglas, or Defeat.[40]

And then Whitman makes his appeal - his last indeed for his old party. "Every Congressman from New York City and every Tammany man who visits Washington during the next session of

---

[39] Ibid., p.97.

[40] Ibid., p.185.

Congress, will do his part toward convincing the blatant Southern rights gentry that they must take Douglas or submit to the inevitable success of the Republican candidate."[41]

Whitman could not permit himself to conclude this strong editorial without expressing his ambivalent hopes and strong loyalty to the Party. The Party is corrupt, but it still loves the Union; the Party manipulates the people, but in some way it also truly represents them.

> The democrats of the North love the South much, but they love the spoils better, hence they will not endure disunion which would leave them forever an insignificant minority. Rely on it, they will find means to cause the South to swallow the Popular Sovereignty dogma and its great champion. Disunion is impossible, Defeat is unbearable; ergo, Douglas is the inevitable.[42]

Alas for Whitman, Douglas was not inevitable - rather Lincoln and Civil War were.

The pre-war stance of Walt Whitman was altogether consonant with his basic political philosophy. Born and bred a New York Jacksonian, influenced by Frances Wright and William Leggett, Whitman was well versed in the politics of the original mass machine party. But as a descendant of the old stock, he was repelled by the frank exchange of favors for votes, and he was horrified by the widening gap and increasing ideological stances of the opposing sides in the slavery debate. In all of this, he was, of course, the typical Jacksonian 'liberal.'

Whitman's attitude toward the party system was developed through experience and was indeed both cautious and cautionary. What he personally was to express in his tracts and poetry was

---

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

reflected only in the integrity of his editorial positions. He had long been privately suspicious of the political party governance, but his public expression of such opinions was delayed both by his sense of duty toward the Jacksonian tradition and by his extreme reluctance to be party to the disillusionment of the Union. Once that crisis had been broached, however, Whitman was willing to cast out on his own.

The experiences of the War years were crucial, both psychologically and consequently politically. And yet, the Whitman of 1872 as revealed in Democratic Vistas was, when all is said and done, only the private person of 1856 "The Eighteenth Presidency" made public.

CHAPTER III

Two Tracts

Whitman wrote two major tracts on political belief, "The Eighteenth Presidency" (1856) and Democratic Vistas (1871). The former was a highly rhetorical piece which was not published in Whitman's lifetime. The latter was a combination of two journalistic efforts published over the course of two years, and a third article which had not been published at all. These were published in final form in 1871. Democratic Vistas, which borrowed in good measure from the important Preface of 1855, and which also was a response to certain fulminations by Thomas Carlyle, is widely recognized as one of Whitman's most important writings and, with the possible exception of the 1855 Preface, his most important prose work. Thus Democratic Vistas has garnered the lion's share of critical commentary and political exegesis.

"The Eighteenth Presidency," however, has not enjoyed so widespread a reputation and indeed was not even published until Furness did so in 1928 in Walt Whitman Workshop.[1] The work is both bold and well situated within the rhetorical tradition of the times. And further, "The Eighteenth Presidency" is one of Whitman's most clear and most outspoken expositions of his thought on the operation of an ideal American democracy.

---

[1] C.J. Furness, Walt Whitman's Workshop (New York, 1928).

As such it deserves a far higher reputation within Whitman's literary corpus, and all the more so since it was written during the peak of his creative inspiration.

In this regard, it is helpful to consider what F.O. Matthiessen has written on Whitman's prose style and its debt to mid-nineteenth century political oratory. In American Renaissance Matthiessen notes, "In looking now at his notebooks, which, starting in 1847, belong mainly to the period between then and the first Leaves, it is often impossible to tell whether passages of loosely rhythmical prose were originally conceived for a speech or as a draft towards a poem. As a result of going over these notes and arranging them for publication, Bucke believed it certain that Whitman's first intention, some years before Leaves of Grass had been thought of, was to publish his ideas by lectures."[2] Indeed, Whitman's notebooks, occasionally his prose, frequently his poetry, and certainly the famous 1855 Preface, appear to be less fully articulated and orchestrated logical argumentation than a series of notes toward a final, but undelivered, oratorical address. In short, they are notes for the extemporaneous speaker, a sort of file card of phrases on which the speaker may, for memory's sake, rely, and out of which he will spin his discourse.

The love and lure of public declamation in mid-nineteenth century America is well known. A politician, or preacher, or even a journalist was expected to be able to mount a platform and viva voce move his audience through the means of classical rhetoric. Daniel Webster, for one, achieved national

---

[2] F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York, 1941), p.550.

prominence by his grandiloquent oratory, as did, in a plainer style, Lincoln, who most probably would have remained a provincial figure but for his debates with Douglas. In an era splendidly deprived of television, and in many cases even of literacy, oratory was the medium by which one conveyed the message. As Matthiessen aptly notes:

> Whitman's deep concern with oratory can be dated back to his active membership in debating societies when he was sixteen, to his well known habit, which had developed by then and which lasted to his old age, of shouting declamatory pieces, or lines from Shakespeare, to the accompaniment of the waves as he walked along the shore. The two strongest personalities that impressed his boyhood both moved him as public speakers. Not only did his reminiscences of Hicks always dwell on the Quaker's force of natural eloquence, but also when he came to recite, in 'A Song of Joys,' the joys of the orator, he was still very close to Frances Wright's idea of the qualities essential to that great role. His continued devotion to the most popular art form of his day is clear from the terms in which he phrased his late tribute to Father Taylor as the 'one essentially perfect orator' he had ever heard, as 'this first-class genius in the rarest and most profound of humanity's arts.'[3]

Indeed, as will be shown elsewhere in this paper, the very poetry of Whitman and his conception of the role of the poet is precisely that of the public speaker - the man who by virtue of his gifts can shout aloud what others only inarticulately dream.

"He told Burroughs that between the ages of twenty and thirty while he was working on various papers, he had sometimes gone into the country 'delivering political addresses.' His brother George remembered that the social agitation that had led Walt from orthodox Democrat to Barnburner and finally to

---

[3] Ibid., pp.550-1.

Black Republican had caused him to write 'what mother called barrels of lectures.'"[4] And one of these, the most important and one of his last was "The Eighteenth Presidency."

"The Eighteenth Presidency" has not infrequently been dismissed as a youthful and hotheaded attempt to evade the responsibilities of political life. But Whitman's journalism, poetry, and later political tract, Democratic Vistas, all are very much in the same vein. What is startling about "The Eighteenth Presidency" is the outspoken plainness of the solution proposed. This solution takes a negative cast in the tract of 1856 - the disillusion of political parties; the positive element which was to fill the void left by the demise of the political parties was to be ambiguously and hesitatingly advanced in Whitman's subsequent poetry. Rarely again would Whitman be as bold - but then rarely again would the times call for such boldness.

"'The Eighteenth Presidency' expresses Whitman's response to the furious controversy of the campaign summer of 1856."[5] The issue of course was the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and its host of attendant controversies. As Grier aptly summarizes:

> Concerning the complicated question of the Bill, it is sufficient to point out that not only the transference of such a decision from Congress to the people of the territories but also the loosely drawn terms of the Bill created a most serious Constitutional problem and aggravated the slavery controversy, which had disrupted the moral, economic, and political unity of the nation for thirty-five years.[6]

---

[4] Ibid., pp.551-2.

[5] Edward F. Grier, ed., The Eighteenth Presidency, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1956), p.1.

[6] Ibid.

Before considering the virtually unanimous critical disapprobation of Whitman's political thought in "The Eighteenth Presidency," a detailed examination of the text itself is in order.

Much in the manner of the French Revolution which dated history from the overthrow of the ancien regiéme, and indeed in the tradition of the government of the United States which dates its official documents from the year of Independence, Whitman loved to date by what he termed the "Presidentiads." His title, then, "The Eighteenth Presidency," refers to the four year term to begin in 1856. The seventeenth Presidency, held by Franklin Pierce, a Northern Democrat whose election was due to his acceptability to the Southern wing of the Democratic Party, had been notable for Executive weakness, Congressional feuding, and increasing sectional bitterness. The previous Presidency, the sixteenth, was nominally that of General Taylor, the Mexican War hero and very much Whitman's 'Manifest Destiny' man. In fact, by virtue of Taylor's death early in his term, the sixteenth Presidency went to Millard Fillmore, a nonentity from Buffalo, a man more notable for his prejudices than his prescience. Hence after eight years of drift toward disillusionment and disillusion, Whitman hoped for better things from the eighteenth Presidency.

But it took little political awareness to see that in a contest between Buchanan and Fillmore, neither candidate, and indeed neither party which fielded such bland and banal candidates, was likely to be bold enough to strike a path which would be acceptable to the nation as a whole, while yielding nothing either to abolitionists or to Southern expansionists.

Hence Whitman in the safe seclusion of Brooklyn penned a political call to arms, one of the mightiest since Paine's.

One suspects that Whitman was well aware that he had little likelihood either of an audience or of a political future. But then at least he vented his emotions and in so doing gave a diagnosis of the national ailment and an exciting insight into his own political belief.

"The Eighteenth Presidency" is subtitled, in the usual grandiloquent Whitmanian manner, "Voice of Walt Whitman to each Young Man in the Nation, North, South, East, and West." This subtitle is expressive of several of Whitman's themes. First, Whitman calls attention to his "Voice." Whitman the bard, the speaker, the Voice of the People; it is not Whitman the journalist or the leader or the politician - but the voice. It is almost as though Whitman saw himself as the megaphone of the masses, the articulator of their desires, the expressor of their hopes. It is, strangely but typically, the humility of prominence, the rhetorical noblesse oblige. And then the Voice is directed to a specific element of the population - "to each Young Man." Women, not having the vote, would, of course, be excluded - but why, one wonders, only to young men rather than to men of good will. The narrowness of this appeal is in part due, no doubt, to the sense that the political parties were not, as they had been in Whitman's youth, the bubbling heady brew of men aflame with egalitarian ideals, but rather had become the secure resting places of political careerists. And then too, there is the perennial American belief that youth and innovation are somehow mysteriously conjoined. But more importantly this appeal to youth foreshadows the central theme of Whitman's ideal Democracy as he was to suggest it in his poetry of the next four years. And finally, with Whitman's usual inclusiveness, he addresses the youth of all the nation. And in 1856, given the antagonisms between North and South

and their mutual competition for a West quite different from them both, this is indeed a universal appeal.

"The Eighteenth Presidency" is an indictment, an accusation that the political parties, specifically the Democratic Party, have failed to be egalitarian majoritarian popular parties. Hence Whitman argues, at a minimum the Democratic party must be changed, and, more radically, the reliance upon a party system must be ended. The entire tract is so reminiscent in structure of the Declaration of Independence that Whitman almost certainly is using that work as a paradigm. Indeed in one section of "The Eighteenth Presidency," in an astonishing foreshadowing of contemporary revisionist historians, Whitman favorably contrasts the Declaration to the Constitution. Be that as it may, the tract is an eloquent and fluid work combining detailed accusations and high idealism, vitriolic abuse, political pragmatism, and above all egalitarian visions. Portions of the work compare well to Whitman's poetic evocations of the immensity and diversity of his nation, while other sections rival the most splenetic journalism of his day. Throughout, however, there is the guiding vision of mass egalitarian democracy -- but a democracy constrained by constitutional norms and beset by Machiavellian politicians. If logically "The Eighteenth Presidency" fails to hang together, emotionally it is worthy to stand with the Declaration as a truly visionary, if inflammatory, tract.

This eccentric work comprises forty-six paragraphs in Holloway's edition. In fact, as Grier's edition has made clear, Holloway has omitted the final paragraph. This work then of forty-seven paragraphs begins boldly with a statement

of the grounds of its thesis (1-5). Proof of this thesis is offered (6-18), and then an appeal to the emotions on the previous grounds is rendered (19-22). At this point Whitman offers his solution to the problem of political parties in an egalitarian state (23-26). This latter is the core of his essay and the core of his indictment. So concludes the first section of "The Eighteenth Presidency."

The second section (27-37) deals with specifics and may be divided into the standard three parts: introduction (27-28), general indictment (29-34), and specific issue at hand (35-37), namely the Fugitive Slave Law.

What follows is a leap of logic sustained by the emotional underpinning provided in the previous two thirds of the essay. For at this juncture Whitman switches from a limited defense of the Fugitive Slave Law and of States' Rights to a call for a new political organism which can supersede the weaknesses of the Constitution and restore the ideals of the Declaration. This third section is more emotional and fluid than the second section and proceeds with a breathtaking pace. First Whitman outlines what he sees to be the ideal political course (38-42). Then he notes the obstacles to this development (43-44). Hence he proposes solutions to these obstacles (44-45). And what remains is a general conclusion (46), and a specific conclusion (47).

Given the central importance of "The Eighteenth Presidency," and with the above over-all view in mind, it is now necessary to dissect this extraordinary work in detail, for not only does it provide an intimate perspective on Whitman's political thought, but also it offers some of Whitman's most exciting political rhetoric.

Whitman begins his treatise with a bold declaration of

political principle:

> There is more rude and undeveloped bravery, friendship, conscientiousness, clear-sightedness, and practical animus for any scope of action, even the broadest and highest, now among the American mechanics and young men, than in all the political persons in These States, . . .[7]

Having offered a bold Jacksonian premise, Whitman subsequently offers demonstrations of his thesis. As he notes apropos of the party system.

> To-day, of all the persons in public office in These States, not one in a thousand has been chosen by any spontaneous movement of the people, nor is attending to the interests of the people; all have been nominated and put through by great or small caucuses of the politicians, or appointed as rewards for electioneering; and all consign themselves to personal and party interests.[8]

This is a short taste of a long passage of vitriol beyond measure. But more important for the purposes of ascertaining Whitman's political philosophy, it is noteworthy that he discovers populist movements to be excluded from the party system as it was in the 1850's, and that the political party system seemed more to control the electorate than be controlled by it.

At this point Whitman chooses to recite in most vivid language the iniquities of the Fillmore and Pierce administrations. "History is to record these two Presidencies as so far our topmost warning and shame. Never were publicly displayed more deformed, mediocre, snivelling, unreliable, falsehearted men! Never were These States so insulted, and attempted to be betrayed!"[9]

It is important to note that Whitman is not here condemning

---

[7] Furness, p.93.

[8] Ibid., pp.94-5.

[9] Ibid., p.96.

the ordinary deals and machinations of the political machine, but rather the use to which this machinery had been put - namely, as Whitman saw it, the extension of slavery into the Western territories and thereby the diminution of the opportunities of free but poor workingmen of the Northeast.

At this point in what might appear a pessimistic diatribe, Whitman asserts his belief in the power of the people. "The young genius of America is not going to be emasculated and strangled just as it arrives toward manly age. It shall live, and yet baffle the politicians and the three hundred and fifty thousand masters of slaves."[10]

Rejecting Fillmore and Buchanan, Whitman heartily asserts:

> Such are the nominees that have arisen out of the power of the politicians, but another power has also arisen. A new race copiously appears, with resolute tread, soon to confront Presidents, congresses and parties, to look them sternly in the face, to stand no nonsense, American young men, the offspring and proof of these States, the West the same as the East, and the South alike with the North.[11]

And in this Whitman is asserting both the corruption of the political parties and the salvific influence of the tradition of the Jeffersonian "yeoman-farmer" and the tradition of the Jacksonian egalitarian "mechanic." The question of the conflict between such Rousseauvian forces and the Hobbesian phalanax of organization, capital, and brute emotion seems to have completely escaped Whitman's ken.

At this point in "The Eighteenth Presidency," Whitman settles into a descriptive analysis of the political party

---

[10] Ibid., p.98.

[11] Ibid.

of his day. And, given his ultimate distrust of such mechanisms as a means of democratic rule, this analysis is of considerable interest, both by virtue of its chronological setting and by virtue of its lasting impact on his thought.

> Whence then do these nominating dictators of America year after year start out? From lawyers' offices, secret lodges, backyards, bed-houses, and bar-rooms; from out of the custom-houses, marshals' offices, post-offices, and gambling hells; from the President's house, the jail, the venereal hospital, the station-house; from un-named by-places where devilish disunion is hatched at midnight; from political hearses, and from the coffins inside, and from the shrouds inside of the coffins; from the tumors and abcesses of the land; from the skeletons and skulls in the vaults of the federal almshouses; from the running sores of the great cities; thence to the national, state, city, and district nominating conventions of These States, come the most numerous and controlling delegates.[12]

The similarity of this passage both to the violent rhetoric of the items and to the "listing" of Whitman's poetry is both striking and evocative. It is, indeed, not surprising that Whitman failed to find a publisher or to privately print such a telling, if not slanderous, indictment of the products of that party system within which he had been nurtured and to which he had, over long years and arduous contests, devoted his talents.

But Whitman is not one to despair. If Buchanan and Fillmore, the Presidential nominees, were jaded hacks, still there was, as ever, the mystique of the electorate.

> Two galvanized old men, close on the summons to depart this life, their early contemporaries long since gone, only they two left, relics and proofs of the little political bargains, chances, combinations, resentments of

---

[12] Ibid., pp.99-100.

> a past age, having nothing in common with this age, standing for the first crop of political graves and grave-stones planted in These States, but in no sort standing for the lusty young growth of the modern times of The States.[13]

And, indeed, one of the major objectives of Whitman is to plant seeds of emnity between these political whitened sepulchers and their constituencies. For Whitman sees the electorate of farmers and mechanics as free and easy souls, open and trusting and guileless. Their so called leaders, however, he sees manipulators, barely better than liars, and frequently simply political whores. As he notes, addressing himself to the mechanics of America: "A parcel of windy northern liars are bawling in your ears the easily-spoken words Democracy and the democratic party."[14]

In the central statement of "The Eighteenth Presidency," Whitman, having noted the corruption and deception of the political parties, boldly asks:

> Are not political parties about played out? I say they are, all round. America has outgrown parties; henceforth it is too large, and they too small. . . . I have said the old parties are defunct; but there remains of them empty flesh, putrid mouths, mumbling and squeaking the tones of these conventions, the politicians standing back in shadow, telling lies, trying to delude and frighten the people; and nominating such candidates as Fillmore and Buchanan.[15]

Such this paper maintains is the sum and substance of Whitman's repulsion toward traditional party politics. Whitman might well have been more content with the pattern

---

[13] Ibid., p.100.

[14] Ibid., pp.101-2.

[15] Ibid., pp.104-5.

of ideological parties. And indeed most "intellectuals" have a congenital distaste for the compromise political deals of a dual party political system. Nonetheless, given the superlative ineptitude of the two party system in mid-nineteenth century America to deal with the crisis of sectionalism and slavery, it is little wonder that Whitman chose, perhaps for inadequate reasons, or at least for poorly articulated reasons, to reject the political party system altogether. The issue at stake is less the reason for rejection than the fact of rejection and, more importantly, less the negativism and utopianism of approach than Whitman's identification of those elements, however bizzare, which might replace the party system as the basis of mass electoral democracy. In the present chapter one is viewing Whitman's critique of the traditional mechanism of a democratic system; in later chapters, those ideals and mechanisms which Whitman chose to substitute for the hurly-burly of political parties will be considered. And in any case, Whitman's strictures against the devastingly obtuse and ineffective party organizations of the ante-bellum era can scarcely be gainsaid.

For, as Whitman most astutely notes in the subsequent section of "The Eighteenth Presidency," there is an implicit contradiction between the two documents of the Lex Fundamentalis of the American Republic.

> The Federal Constitution is the second of the American organic compacts. The premises, outworks, guard, defense, entrance of the Federal Constitution, is the primary compact, sometimes called the Declaration of Independence; and the groundwork, feet, understratum of that again, is its deliberate engagement, in behalf of the States, thenceforward to consider all men to be born free and equal into the world, each one possessed of inalienable rights to his life and liberty. . . . This is the

> covenant of the Republic, from the beginning, now and forever.[16]

As Whitman forcefully notes, if all men are created equal then slavery is unjust; if the Declaration is correct, then the Constitution is, at least in part, tainted.

Claiming the unconstitutionality and inequity of the Fugitive Slave Act, Whitman concludes, as did many Northern observers of the day, that the South, through control of the Democratic party, was in fact in control of the organs of government and was engaged in a conspiracy to deprive the majority of free citizens of their rights. The prime example of this conspiratorial strategy at the time was, of course, the issue of Kansas. But Whitman sees Kansas as the straw which would break the back of the conspiracy by forcing full public awareness of the conspiracy. And Whitman, amazingly enough, sees himself as the voice which will arouse the nation of free citizens against this usurpation by the 350,000 slave holders. "From my mouth hear the will of These States taking form in the great cities. . . . What is done, is done; henceforth there is no further compromise."[17]

At this point Whitman makes a touching and perhaps naive plea "to editors of the independent press, and to rich persons."

> Circulate and reprint this Voice of mine for the workingmen's sake. I hereby permit and invite any rich person, anywhere, to stereotype it, or reproduce it in any form, to deluge the cities of The States with it, North, South, East and West. . . . I am not afraid to

---

[16] Ibid., p.106.

[17] Ibid., p.111.

> say that among them I seek to initiate my name, Walt Whitman, and that I shall in future have much to say to them.[18]

It has been said poets are the legislators of mankind; Whitman was well aware of his duty and his opportunity. Unfortunately, however wide an audience Whitman was to earn in succeeding generations, his voice reached very few in his own lifetime. And indeed "The Eighteenth Presidency" never saw the light of day at all until 1928.

There remain just two paragraphs in this remarkable tract. The penultimate is a standard peroration noting the ripeness of the times for change. The last paragraph, in answer to the question, "Who shall play the hand for America in these tremendous games?" Whitman concludes, "A pretty time to put up two debauched old disunionist politicians, the lees and dregs of more than sixty years! A pretty time for two dead corpses to go walking up and down the earth, to guide by feebleness and ashes a proud, young, friendly, fresh, heroic nation of thirty millions of live and electric men.!"[19]

"The Eighteenth Presidency" is an unquestionably superlative piece of nineteenth century political rhetoric. It indicts the villains, grapples with the issues, and exhorts men of good will to action. And all this it effects in stirring and eloquent, at times grandiloquent, language. Alas, it does not really offer a solution. But the tract does offer a clear exposition of two of Whitman's fundamental ideas. The first, his disgust with the political parties,

---

[18] Ibid., p.112.

[19] Grier, p.44.

is a theme Whitman will elaborate in his second tract Democratic Vistas. The second, the vision of the artist as propagandist and politician, rhetoric and poetry as "agitprop," was first expressed in the Preface of 1855, and was one of Whitman's most enduring themes.

Indeed, the notion of the political poet had sprung in large measure from the "Young America" movement which began in 1837 with the establishment of the Democratic Review edited by John L. O'Sullivan. As Allen notes:

> O'Sullivan had not only attracted much of the best literary talent of the time, but his attempt to launch a movement to encourage a more intense literary nationalism had not been without success. . . . They wanted not only to liberate American literature from its British heritage but to make it genuinely democratic and a living force in achieving the social and political ideals of Jefferson and Jackson.[20]

Such, of course, was to be Whitman's ideal. Unfortunately, the storms of the early 1850's dampened much of the enthusiasm of the reform group and eventually swept the group apart. Indeed, amid the pessimistic literary offering of the 1850's, Leaves of Grass must have seemed rather old fashioned and outdated in sentiment, if hardly in form.

But, as the poetic orator of American democracy, Whitman had graver difficulties than merely the evaporation of the Young America movement. On the mere level of vocal endowments, "the consensus indicates that his voice was too high pitched for strength and was frequently almost inaudible."[21] As Matthiessen has noted, despite Whitman's frequent self-exhortations to take up a career as a public lecturer, " . . . it is apparent that he was far less capable

---

[20]Allen, p.128.

[21]Matthiessen, p.552.

than Emerson of attaining success in what they both agreed with their time in regarding as the art pre-eminently fitted for democracies."[22]

Whitman knew that Buchanan, Pierce and Fillmore were failures, and he knew that the political party system was in some measure responsible. But the connection between the particulars and the universal was a strained and at times an illusory one. As for solutions, "The Eighteenth Presidency" did not advocate any specific replacement for Buchanan, for Whitman was not even supporting Fremont in the 1856 campaign; for Fremont was an abolitionist. And Whitman was even less sure what to put in the place of the party system. When the solution came it was to be more metaphysical than political - another American leap from the blade of grass to the cosmic universe.

But "The Eighteenth Presidency" stands as one of Whitman's most incisive political writings, and one of his best expressed. "This is one of the most revealing documents that Whitman ever wrote - one of the most eloquent and yet also pathetic in its naivete."[23]

"The Eighteenth Presidency" was condemned to limbo at birth, and even when at last it appeared in public it was accorded little critical attention. Democratic Vistas, however, as Whitman's major prose work, has from the start attracted copious attention and critical commentary.

As Allen notes in his Walt Whitman Handbook, "Many of the ideas in Democratic Vistas were first expressed in the 1855 Preface, and touched upon in many poems, such as

---

[22] Ibid., p.553.

[23] Allen, p.199.

Song of Myself, Salut au Monde!, Song for Occupations, and Starting from Paumanok. . ."[24] But this is scarcely surprising for "The political considerations in this essay were not freshly conceived theories but a culmination of Whitman's thought for the past two decades. . . ."[25] Whitman's major themes remained basically the same throughout his career, though subject to subtle changes of emphasis. What may be of greater import in the gestation of Democratic Vistas was Carlyle's essay entitled "Shooting Niagara, and After?" which appeared in the August 1867 issue of Macmillan's Magazine. Whitman was an omnivorous reader of periodicals and he would scarcely have failed to notice this critique of American democracy. And in any case Horace Greely, with his usual eccentricity, had published Carlyle's essay in the Tribune. Of greater moment, however, was Whitman's deep respect for and ambiguous relation to the British author - a subject which will be dealt with at greater length in a later chapter.

Carlyle's work, and his distrust, not to say opposition, to mass-elected democracies was familiar to Whitman. In his essay of 1867, Carlyle warns of the dangers of mass enfranchisement proposed by Disraeli's Reform Bill. As his title implies Britain was about to follow the United States over the precipice of demagoguery and populism. In reply to Carlyle's bold attack, Whitman wrote two essays which appeared in the New York magazine, Galaxy. The first of these was entitled "Democracy" and appeared in 1867; the following

---

[24]Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook (New York, 1946), p.187.

[25]Clara Rising, "Vistas of a Disillusioned Realist," WW Review, VII (1962), p.63.

year "Personalism" was published.

It is astonishing to note how closely Whitman adheres to the major points raised by Carlyle, how he approaches Carlyle's strictures with the umbrage of the outraged democrat but in the end comes to conclusions strikingly similar to his elitist adversary, and even how similar the essays are in their apparently haphazard organization and seemingly ranting style.

Carlyle is basically comparing the enfranchisement of the American slaves to that of the British factory workers. In both cases he doubts their ability to resist demagogic appeals by men far shrewder and more cunning than these guileless masses. Indeed, Carlyle sees the Negro emancipation as opening the blacks for further and more unscrupulous manipulation than was their lot in their former state. ". . . three million absurd Blacks, men and brothers (of a sort), are completely "emancipated"; launched into the career of improvement, -- likely to be 'improved off the face of the earth' in a generation or two!"[26]

Carlyle, ever the admirer of class, rank and order, is fearful that a government which must rest not on natural talent and inherited duties but on the ability to win mass popular approval will inevitably pander to the lowest common denominator - a situation which he sees less as a condemnation of the mass than as a corruption of the elite. And should this happen, ". . . then indeed it is all ended: national death, scandalous 'Copper Captaincy' as of France, stern Russian Abolition and Erasure as of Poland; in one form of another, well deserved annihilation, and dismissal from

---

[26]Thomas Carlyle, Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, Vol.5 (New York, 1899), p.7.

God's universe, that and nothing else lies ahead for our once heroic England too."[27]

Hence what Carlyle seeks to discover among the ruling classes, the Establishment as it were, is a saving remnant which will refuse to pander to popularity and will maintain true standards of justice and equity.

> Will there, in short, prove to be a recognisable small nucleus of Invincible Aristoi fighting for the Good Cause in their various wisest ways, and never ceasing or slackening till they die? This is the question of questions, on which all turns; in the answer to this, could we give it clearly, as no man can, lies the oracle-response, "Life for you," "Death for you!"[28]

The nature of this essential aristoi, in light of Whitman's commentary on Carlyle, is of special interest. The aristoi are, of course, geniuses, the heroic men for whom Carlyle had so long done battle. But there are two types of these gifted men: the practical and the artistic. The practical Aristos is the man, in Carlyle's eyes, who spurs reform, who swims against the stream, who is not tempted by the freshly minted riches of the Industrial Age.

> Is Industry free to tumble out whatever horror of refuse it may have arrived at into the nearest crystal brook? Regardless of gods and men and little fishes. Is Free Industry free to convert all our rivers into Acherontic sewers; England generally into a roaring sooty smith's forge? Are we all doomed to eat dust, as the Old Serpent was, and to breathe solutions of soot?[29]

And in all of this, plainly, Carlyle is raising some very important and troubling questions. This Whitman is

---

[27] Ibid., pp.21-2.

[28] Ibid., p.22.

[29] Ibid., p.47.

quick to acknowledge, for he writes in a footnote in Democratic Vistas:

> I have since read it again, not only as a study, expressing as it does certain judgments from the highest feudal point of view, but have read it with respect as coming from an earnest soul, and as contributing certain sharp-cutting metallic grains, which, if not gold or silver, may be good hard, honest iron.[30]

But if Democratic Vistas is merely a more full working out of Whitman's long held beliefs, as all critics agree, and if the proximate inspiration for its composition was Carlyle's article, still there was another more practical and more pressing motive at work in the last years of the 1860's and the first years of the 1870's. The Civil War had meant vast dislocation in American society and life. Beyond the torrents of blood shed and the destruction of wide areas of the South and the amassing of great fortunes by the army suppliers, there came in the immediate post war years the plunder of the South and the turning of the immense industrial capital developed to support the war toward the equally lucrative markets of the large cities and the newly conquered frontier. It was an age of political frustration from the collapse of the radical Reconstruction, to the political ineptitude of Johnson and the political turpitude of Grant's administration. After the oceans of blood, something better than this, one might have thought, would eventuate.

> The Civil War had promised to wash away the corruptions of the 1850's, but postwar America had become a mockery of his dream. The war had saved the Union and

---

[30] Floyd Stovall, ed., Whitman: Prose Works (New York, 1964), II, p.375.

> had proved that Americans on both sides were men, but it was time for a man who thought of himself half-consciously as a prophet to speak: to condemn and to encourage. .[31]

And Whitman, who had been associated with the government through the war and the period of reconstruction, was not unaware of the falling off from his ideal, and, indeed, the desertion of the original impulse which had rallied the Union in Lincoln's day. Thus, Whitman's comments on this period strike at the very ground both of his disillusionment and of his ideal of democracy. Out of the turbulence of the late 1860's, Whitman created his ultimate statement on democracy in America. The circumstances were charged with passion and remorse, and the language was convoluted and repetitive, but the sentiment was powerful indeed.

The common complaint about Democratic Vistas is its apparent formlessness and repetitiousness. With this stricture this paper takes exception. Like the structure of "Song of Myself" or numerous other extended pieces of Whitman's writing, Democratic Vistas is both a pastiche of earlier notes and drafts, and undoubtedly does employ the Whitmanesque devices of repetition and apparently verbose development. But beneath the somewhat baroque surface there lies both a steely analytical framework and a subtle unfolding of development. And in any case, since Democratic Vistas is so central a work to the thought of Whitman and indeed one of the last important works of his career, it merits detailed examination.

---

[31]Edward F. Grier, "Walt Whitman, the Galaxy, and Democratic Vistas," American Literature, XXIII (1951), p.343.

Democratic Vistas is best divided into three sections, each of which is a more detailed presentation of the previous. The first section may be labeled 'The Riposte to Carlyle.' The second section is Whitman's consideration of Democracy as a mass phenomenon and the role of the individual in Democracy. The last section deals largely with literature, its ideals and its idealization (and here the term is used in the Hegelian sense).

The first section opens with Whitman's standard hymn to the plurality, that is the diversity, of Democratic America. Whitman is stressing that unlike the stratified world of Carlyle, his world is a pluralistic one of many competing worths. "As the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe are perhaps the lessons of variety and freedom, the same present the greatest lessons also in New World politics and progress."[32] Variety creates freedom, and that variety is one in which "an infinite number of currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures, and cross purposes, whose ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart brings constant respiration and vitality,"[33]

But the success of a pluralistic society is the variety and beauty of its flowers - the arts. "I say that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists, or that has been produced anywhere in the past, under opposite influences."[34] And by "the arts" Whitman, like Carlyle, means not merely the fine

---

[32] Stovall, II, p.361.

[33] Ibid., p.362.

[34] Ibid., p.365.

arts, but the whole sum of human endeavor and activities. But as a norm of all this, Whitman accepts Literature as the standard. "Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance,) of American democracy."[35] This enthronement of literature springs from the capacity of literature to embody and to inspire the Spirit, or in Whitman's Hegelian terminology, the Idea.

Whitman goes on to argue that the pluralistic greatness of American democracy is showing fruits wholly derived from material success and wholly devoid of Spirit or Idea.

> I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results.[36]

Thus in the first section of Democratic Vistas, the supposed riposte to Carlyle, Whitman concludes by largely agreeing with his adversary.

The middle section of Democratic Vistas is Whitman's most comprehensive analysis of his theory of Democracy. As Asselineau notes, "Dans cet ouvrage, il s'efforce avent tout de réconcilier et d'unir les deux thèmes qu'il avait entrelacés dans les Feuilles des Herbes: le 'moi' et la masse; il essaie de résoudre le problème de l'intégration harmonieuse de l'individu dans la société."[37] Whitman opened

---

[35] Ibid., p.366.

[36] Ibid., p.370.

[37] Roger Asselineau, L'Evolution de Walt Whitman, (Paris, 1954), p.439.

an extremely difficult issue of the role of the individual in a mass-based society - a problem which de Tocqueville had seen quite early on. This main section of Democratic Vistas then, which originally was the essay "Personalism," is, after a brief introduction, devoted to a consideration of the People en masse or ensemble and to a consideration of the Individual.

Whitman carefully states his theme and his problem in the introductory section.

> First, let us see what we can make out of a brief, general, sentimental consideration of political democracy, . . . We shall, it is true, quickly and continually find the origin-idea of the singleness of man, individualism, asserting itself, and cropping forth, even from the opposite ideas. But the mass, or lump character, for imperative reasons, is ever to be carefully weigh'd, borne in mind, and provided for. Only from it, and from its proper regulation and potency, comes the others, comes the chance of individualism. The two are contradictory, but our task is to reconcile them.[38]

As Whitman notes, some degree of "cohesion" is necessary for the existence and good order of the country, and yet the ultimate goal of the state is to establish an environment in which "individual personal dignity" can flourish. Hence for Whitman the aggregate exists for the benefit of the individual, a notion in the tradition of Jefferson and Jackson. Whitman's stress on the theoretical primacy of the individual discerns as the central and motivating principle of democracy. "The principle of democracy . . . is . . . to illustrate at all hazards this doctrine or theory that man, properly train'd in sanest, highest freedom, may

---

[38]Stovall, II, p.373.

and must become a law, and series of laws, unto himself, surrounding and providing for, not only his own personal control, but all his relations to other individuals and to the State. . . ."[39]

This having been postulated, Whitman now considers this aggregate, the People ensemble, and defines the notes of this idea: equality, community, and brotherhood. For the ensemble of the People to be meaningful and organic, it must arise from the mass of individuals themselves and such unity can not be imposed upon them from above. Hence equality is the central condition, the sine qua non, of community.

> But to become an enfranchised man, and now, impediments removed, to stand and start without humiliation, and equal with the rest; to commence, or have the road clear'd to commence, the grand experiment of development, whose end, (perhaps requiring several generations,) may be the forming of a full-grown man or woman - that is something. To ballast the State is also secured, and in our times is to be secured, in no other way.[40]

And, as Whitman has noted, this equality is not an absolute or moral state, but rather, surprisingly, merely the limited equality of suffrage. ". . . the democratic formula is the only safe and preservative one for the coming times. We endow the masses with the suffrage for their own sake, no doubt; then, perhaps still more, from another point of view, for community's sake."[41] Thus as all are equal in the making of the law, all are equal in their duty toward it.

But as Whitman recognized, such a bloodless equality can not either account for the solidarity of the People, nor

---

[39] Ibid., p.375.

[40] Ibid., p.380.

[41] Ibid., p.481.

for the spiritual dimensions of the People en masse. Hence he assumes that equality in action generates a bond of brotherhood, a bond which he terms "adhesiveness or love." "Not that half only individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making races comrades and fraternizing all."[42] The precise nature of this "adhesiveness," which is central to Whitman's political thought, will be extensively examined later in this paper.

Thus, Whitman concludes, unlike the class structure upon which Carlyle and other followers of the "feudal" tradition based their analysis of democracy, his analysis by stressing the equal individual lays the true basis for "Solidarity." "The liberalist of to-day has this advantage over antique or medieval times, that his doctrine seeks not only to individualize but to universalize. The great word Solidarity has arisen."[43]

With the end of the 'aggregate' defined, Whitman now turns to the means and obstacles to that end. The greatest means to the establishment of a true aggregate lies in the ownership of property - and hence the availability of cheap Western land is America's best hope for the future of her Democracy. "The true gravitation-hold of liberalism in the United States will be a more universal ownership of property, general homesteads, general comfort - a vast, intertwining reticulation of wealth."[44]

---

[42] Ibid., p.381.

[43] Ibid., p.382.

[44] Ibid., p.383.

Whitman waxes more strongly on the obstacles to attaining the aggregate - which obstacles can be largely summed up under the rubric "political parties." "I have noticed how millions of sturdy farmers and mechanics are thus the helpless supple-jacks of comparatively few politicians. And I have noticed more and more, the alarming spectacle of parties usurping the government, and openly and shamelessly wielding it for party purposes."[45] But with his usual faith in the People, Whitman concludes: "I know of nothing grander, better exercise, better digestion, more positive proof of the past, the triumphant result of faith in the American people, than a well-contested American national election."[46] Hence, despite the parties, an independent, cautious and shrewd electorate can win out for the People in the end. For Democracy for Whitman is more than mere politics.

> Did you, too O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest form of interaction between men, and their beliefs - in religion, literature, colleges, and schools - democracy in all public and private life, and in the army and navy.[47]

Democracy then, is a way of life, a Culture which nourishes the individual and hence strengthens the aggregate.

Having considered the role of the People en masse, Whitman now turns to the other half of the equation - the individual.

---

[45] Ibid., p.386.

[46] Ibid., p.382.

[47] Ibid., p.389.

> For to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, is surely join'd another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensible to it, opposite, (as the sexes are opposite,) and whose existence, confronting and ever modifying the other, often clashing, paradoxical, yet neither of avail without the other. . . . This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself -- identity -- personalism. . . . It forms, in a sort, or is to form, the compensating balance-wheel of the successful working machinery of aggregate America.[48]

Whereas Whitman did not offer a philosophical basis for the role of the People en masse, such is his stress upon the Individual that he does offer a most interesting philosophical analysis of the concept of the Individual. "There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity - yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me."[49]

Hence the root of all individuality is identity, or more precisely the consciousness of identity - the fact of the One. In a paragraph pregnant with leading notions, Whitman writes:

> The quality of BEING, in the object's self, according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom and thereto - not criticism by other standards, and adjustments thereto - is the lesson of Nature. True, the full man wisely gathers, culls, absorbs; but if, engaged disproportionately in that, he slights or overlays the precic · idiocrasy and special nativity and intention that i ·, the man's self, the main thing, is a failure, howeve. ide his general cultivation.[50]

---

[48] Ibid., pp.391-2.

[49] Ibid., p.394.

[50] Ibid.

As Whitman here explicitly states, civilization, that is the products and states which derive from the interaction of men, is a detriment to the consciousness of Identity and hence to the development of Individuality. The Rousseauian concept of man, does much to explain, one suspects, both Whitman's wariness of the political process as exemplified in the political party system, and also his embrace of the concept of the experiential.

In any case, having defined 'Personalism,' Whitman now undertakes to discuss various facets and aspects of his doctrine, to suggest modes by which the Individual could attain greater 'Personalism,' more deeply conscious Identity.

> The problem, as it seems to me, presented to the New World, is, under permanent law and order, and after preserving cohesion, (ensemble-Individuality,) at all hazards, to vitalize man's free play of special Personalism, recognizing in it something that calls ever more to be consider'd, fed, and adopted as the substratum for the best that belongs to us, (government indeed is for it,) including the new esthetics of our future.[51]

This vitalization of man's free play of special Personalism is best furthered, Whitman suggests, first by the development of a popular Democratic culture, second by the development of a unique Conscience fitted to the task of creating Individuals who can aptly play their role in the ensemble of the People, and third by making special efforts to acknowledge and include women as equals in the ensemble-Individuality equation. Hence, Whitman is here advocating his traditional triad - democracy, equality, and women's rights.

Whitman's exortation on women's rights is his standard plea for women to be considered as integral and productive

---

[51] Ibid., p.396.

members of society. The section on Conscience, is central to the thesis of this paper. Whitman defines Conscience as "the primary moral element," that vital quality without which "our triumphant modern civilizee, with his all-schooling and his wondrous appliances, will show himself but an amputation."[52] In short, progress is only the deadly accumulation of material unless Conscience be the vivifying spirit. And to Whitman's mind, as the total democrat, the finest and fullest exercise of Conscience was the electoral process. But here Whitman issues a most significant caveat, for though it is every man's duty to participate in the processes of Democracy, the poet advises a limited and special form of participation.

> As for you, I advise you to enter more strongly yet into politics. I advise every young man to do so. Always inform yourself; always do the best you can; always vote. Disengage yourself from parties. They have been useful, and to some extent remain so; but the floating, uncommitted electors, farmers, clerks, mechanics, the masters of parties -- watching aloof, inclining victory this side or that side -- such are the ones most needed, present and future.[53]

For Whitman discerns the dangers to American Democracy not from without, but from within - namely from an opportunist political party system whose power derives from the greed and blind loyalty of its adherents.

> But these savage, wolfish parties alarm me. Owning no law but their own will, more and more combative, less and less tolerant of the idea of the ensemble and of equal brotherhood, the perfect equality of the States, the overarching American ideas, it behooves you to convey yourself implicitly to no party, nor submit blindly to their dictators, but steadily hold yourself judge and master over

---

[52] Ibid., p.398.

[53] Ibid., p.399.

all of them.[54]

In this careful and considered indictment of the political party, it is of value to note the specifics of Whitman's charge. First, the parties are seen as willful, that is not attuned to the needs and desires of the People en masse. Second, like Madison, Whitman fears the combativeness, that is the devisiveness, of the party system which could fragment and fracture the cohesiveness of the aggregate. Hence with the factionalization of the ensemble, it becomes ever easier for one faction to attain dominance at the expense of other factions, setting up a type of caste system which would mean the end of political equality and hence of any meaningful form of brotherhood. Thus Whitman appeals to "every young man, north and south, earnestly studying these things," to hold aloof from parties, to be a floating uncommitted electorate.

This notion, whose antecedents will be dealt with later in this paper, clearly rests on Whitman's theory of Personalism in which the sovereign individual is most integral and valuable to the aggregate to the extent that he is precisely the identity-conscious Individual. And as an Individual, his political choices would be based not on personal gain or on party loyalty, but would be grounded precisely on Conscience.

Just how Conscience, which is apparently so individualized an element, works to the good of the aggregate is not here explained. But in the concluding paragraphs of this central section of Democratic Vistas, Whitman does point to the vision of what equal individuals working in aggregate could achieve in a new Democratic culture. "As we have shown the New World including in itself the all-leveling aggregate of democracy,

---

[54] Ibid., p.400.

we show it also including the all-varied, all-permitting, all-free theorem of individuality, and erecting therefor a lofty and hitherto unoccupied framework or platform, broad enough for all."[55] Nor does Whitman leave his ideal of the new Democratic culture floating in the empyrean but envisions it at work in what can only be termed a real political context.

> I can conceive a community, to-day and here, in which, on a sufficient scale, the perfect personalities, without noise meet. . . . I can conceive such a community organized in running order, powers, judiciously delegated - farming, building, trade, courts, mails, schools, elections, all attended to; and then the rest of life, the main thing, branching and blossoming in each individual, and bearing golden fruit. I can see there, in every young and old man, after his kind, and in every woman after hers, a true personality, develop'd, exercised proportionately in body, mind, and spirit. I can imagine this case as one not rare or difficult, but in buoyant accordance with the municipal and general requirements of our times.[56]

The third and final section of Democratic Vistas is derived from Whitman's unpublished essay "Orbic Literature," and is the most eccentric, if altogether typical, section of the work. In line with his preoccupation with the role of the poet as the educator and the embodiment of the new Democratic culture, Whitman delivers himself here of a treatise whose major points were laid down in the 1855 Preface and whose basic inspiration is clearly derived from the Young America movement of his youth.

But in the course of a not always convincing attempt to portray literature in the role of national "archetype" (a good

---

[55] Ibid., p.403.

[56] Ibid., p.402.

example of Whitman's prescient use of unusual vocabulary,) Whitman touches on several themes which further elucidate the major points of his essay.

The first of these is the oft commented upon section in which Whitman projects the three stages of growth by which America is developing into "a sublime and serious Religious Democracy."[57] These are: "The First stage was the planning and putting on record the political foundation rights of immense masses of people"; "The Second stage relates to material prosperity, wealth, produce . . ."; "The Third stage, rising out of the previous ones . . . and by a sublime and serious Religious Democracy sterning taking command, dissolving the old, sloughing off surfaces, and from its own interior and vital principles, reconstructing, democratizing society."[58]

All of this, of course, sounds remarkably Hegelian and on that account has had vast quantities of critical twaddle expended on it. But Whitman was no professional, or even amateur, philosopher - nor do his qualities of mind seem apt to struggle through the prolix density of Hegel. Rather it may be assumed that as a man very much au courant Whitman was generally aware, as were most thinking people of his time, of the theory of the triadic and inexorable progression of things from matter to spirit, from the abstract notion to the concrete idea to the spiritualized Idea - each developing from the former yet including the former in the new hypostasization. And as Chase has noted, "Whitman's second-hand Hegel is indistinguishable from the loose transcendentalist dialectic he had found in Emerson, and perhaps Carlyle, and had 'promulgated' in 'Song of

---

[57] Ibid., p.409.

[58] Ibid., pp.409-10.

Myself.'"[59] So much can be said, but little more.

What is of infinitely greater importance to understanding Whitman is to see how he employs this triadic progression in his interpretation of American Democracy. The age with which Whitman is dealing is the application of stage one to stage two, which in due course should eventuate in stage three. In short, the abstract democratic principles of the Declaration and the Constitution must be brought to be the vivifying and elevating force within the material progress of the nation, just as from the dialectical point of view the realization of those democratic ideals was rendered possible only by virtue of the material progress of the nation. Now it is precisely the elevating and spiritualizing force of Literature which Whitman sees as the cutting edge of this transformation. "Bear in mind, though, that nothing less than the mightiest original non-subordinated SOUL has ever really, gloriously led, or ever can lead. (This SOUL -- its other name, in these Vistas, is LITERATURE.)"[60]

At this point in his argument Whitman launches into a topic which is of the utmost importance in understanding Whitman's idea of Democracy. The ideal which Literature is to foster, the finest expression then of SOUL, is "intense and loving comradeship."

> Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man - which, hard to define, underlies the lessons and the ideals of the profound saviours of every land and age, and which seems to promise, when throughly develop'd, cultivated and recognized in manners

---

[59] Richard Chase, Walt Whitman Reconsidered (New York, 1955), p.155.

[60] Stovall, II, 413.

> and literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States, will then be fully express'd.[61]

And lest the reader be tempted to overlook the importance of this paragraph, Whitman for once clarifies and defines this comradeship in a crucial footnote.

> It is to the development, identification, and general prevalence of that fervid comradeship, (the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it,) that I look for the counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American democracy, and for the spiritualization thereof. Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inferences; but I confidently expect a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown - not only giving tone to individual character, and making it unprecedently emotional, muscular, heroic, and refined, but having the deepest relations to general politics. I say democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself.[62]

(As will be noted when discussing Whitman's poetry where the term is much more used, 'adhesive love' is the phrenological term for friendship while 'amative love' refers to heterosexual love.)

The two key points Whitman makes here are the explicit founding of politics upon the base of adhesive love and the belief that true democracy is "incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself," on any other basis. In short, that which binds together the radically equal and radically

---

[61] Ibid., p.414.

[62] Ibid., pp.414-5.

separate Individuals into the People en masse is comradeship or adhesiveness. A fuller discussion of this interesting doctrine will be deferred until the end of this paper.

At this point Whitman reverts to the concept of Conscience which is also portrayed as developed and inspired by Literature. Conscience, as has been noted, was earlier defined as the supreme vivifying and moral force - both the dynamic by which the triadic sublation is achieved and the final state in which it comes to rest. But Conscience, as Whitman makes plain, is, as Sartre would term it, "false-conscience" unless it is imbued with Adhesiveness.

> . . . Conscience, too, isolated from all else, and from the emotional nature, may but attain the beauty and purity of glacial, snowy ice. We want, for these States, for the general character, a cheerful, religious fervor, endued with the ever-present modifications of the human emotions, friendship, benevolence, . . .[63]

After this heady flight, Whitman comes down to the realities of the late nineteenth century America and warns of the dangers along the road to his true Democracy.

> Shift and turn the combinations of the statement as we may, the problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast. Pride, competition, segregation, vicious willfulness, and license beyond example, brood already upon us. Unwieldy and immense, who shall hold in the behemoth? who brible the leviathan? Flaunt it as we choose, athwart and over the roads of our progress loom large uncertainty, and dreadful, threatening gloom. It is useless to deny it: Democracy grows rankly up the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all -- brings worse and worse invaders -- needs newer, larger, stronger, keener compensations and compellers.[64]

---

[63] Ibid., p.416.

[64] Ibid., p.422.

Although, and here surely he is correctly analyzing the coming of the Gilded Age, as Whitman remarks, it is less the party system *per se* than the immense opportunities for obscenely vast wealth which lay at the root of the corruption of the political process.

> I say of all this tremendous and dominant play of solely materialistic bearings upon current life in the United States, with the results as already seen, accumulating, and reaching far into the future, that they must either be condemned and met by at least an equally subtle and tremendous force - infusion for purposes of spiritualization. . . .[65]

But predictably enough, it is the political party system for which Whitman reserves his wrath.

> Even to-day, amid these whirls, incredible flippancy, and blind fury of parties, infidelity, entire lack of first-class captains and leaders, added to the plentiful remembrance of meanness and vulgarity of the ostensible masses - that problem, the labor question, beginning to yawn like an opening gulf, rapidly widening each year - what prospect have we? We sail a dangerous sea of seething currents, cross and under-currents, vortices - all so dark, untried - and whither shall we turn?[66]

But in face of the merely political, Whitman opens his vistas to the large scene, the entire culture of the post Civil War world, and like most other observers, Henry Adams to name one, Whitman finds the prospects, despite the inexorable Hegelian dialectic, less than optimistic. And in this Whitman best reveals the motives for the composition of *Democratic Vistas* and for its evangelistic energy and urgency.

In preparing the edition of *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman

---

[65] *Ibid.*, p.424.

[66] *Ibid.*, p.422.

employed his editorial skills - in particular to stitch his three articles into a single essay, and to remove from the text certain paragraphs. In general, none of these deletions is vital to the argument, but two of them merit consideration as underlining some of Whitman's major themes in Democratic Vistas.

Whitman like Disraeli, advanced the argument that the best way to obviate urban unrest was to open wide the franchise. "By all odds, my friend, the thing to do is to make a flank movement, surround them, disarm them, give them their first degree, incorporate them in the State as voters, and then - wait for the next emergency."[67]

But Whitman, no less than Carlyle, was scarcely overjoyed by mass suffrage - especially when applied to the immigrant hoards and the newly freed slaves - is evident from a passage in his notebooks written in 1874 and first published in Holloway's Uncollected Poetry and Prose.

> As if we had not strained the voting and digestive calibre of American Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with the millions of ignorant foreigners, we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and calibre (in the mass) as so many baboons.[68]

The root of this unease lies in Whitman's fear of demagoguery on the part of unscroupulous politicians.

> I have had occasion in my past life - I therefore know that trial to one's ear and brains from divers creatures, alluded to by sample, and well-hatchelled in this diatribe, crow-cawing the words Liberty, loyalty, human rights, constitutions, etc. I too have heard the ceaseless braying, screaming blatancy (on behalf of my own side), making

---

[67] Ibid., p.750.

[68] Emory Holloway, ed., The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman (New York, 1921), II, 57.

noisiest threats and clatter stand for sense.[69]

Hence for all Whitman's thunderous affirmations of the ideal Democracy, Whitman is more anxious and ambivalent about the democratic state than might be assumed at first. " . . . Whitman, like his classical counterpart (Plato), suffered recurring doubts concerning the capacity of the masses to rule themselves. Disillusioned with the malevolent consequences of a Cerberistic materialism, he reviled the resultant society as 'cankered, crude, superstitious, and rotten,' and again like Plato he felt the need for a class of 'philosopher kings' to both tutor and tether the masses."[70]

Hindus here may, however, be somewhat overstating his case since the object of the Whitmanian philosopher-king, the divine literatus, is not to rule but to teach and inspire. For with typical American faith in the educability of the common man and his equal and infinite capacity for moral progress, Whitman is aiming not at a class society ruled by an elite, but rather at a form of utopian socialism in which all men are equally members of the elite. "Whitman in 'Personalism' sees that democracy also is dependent on supermen for its survival, but whereas Carlyle believes only a few men can qualify for this class, Whitman, through the science of Personalism, aims at making millions aristocrats by nature."[71]

However, so apparent is Whitman's distaste for the operations of the democracy as he sees it about him, that many

---

[69]Stovall, II, 750.

[70]Milton Hindus, "Whitman and Morality in the Democratic Republic," WWR, VII, 3(1962), p.54.

[71]Alice L. Cooke, "Whitman as Critic," WWR, IV, 2(1959), p.93.

commentators are inclined to agree with Rising's conclusion, " . . . that he was a democratic poseur (perhaps deceiving even himself) who ill-concealed in his Vistas his disillusionment in the American common man. . . ."[72] This disillusionment stems, of course, from the failure of the American political system to be renewed by the struggle of the Civil War and to live up to the bloody sacrifices made on its behalf. Thus the seeming elitism, not to say quirkiness, of Whitman's heralding of the divine literatus can be understood only if the literatus is seen as a substitute for the orator-politician. Unlike the pre-war Whitman, the author of Democratic Vistas is unconcerned with political parties and even with politicians. The central figure of the democratic scene has now become the "floating, uncommitted electorate" whose mind and conscience are reflected in and formed by - not the public orator arguing for his party or his candidate - but by the divine literatus. In short the poet has supplanted the Jacksonian party as the guardian of Democracy.

As Asselineau has admirably summarized:

> La solution lui paraît résider dans ce qu'il appelle d'un nom qu'il semble avoir forgé lui-même, le "Personnalisme." Il ne définit le mot nulle part, mais il est clair qu'il entend par là, non pas l'individualisme, mais son dépassement. Le personnalisme affirme en effet l'appartenance de l'individu à une réalite cosmique. L'individu est à la fois une "identité" distincte et une partie du Tout. La conséquence sur le plan politique de cette conception métaphysique est que chacun est en même temps une personne humaine separée de toutes les autres et un citoyen, membre inséparable d'une certaine société. Son idéal est "un sain personalisme moyen" que seule la démocratie lui parait capable d'atteindre. Car le démocratie permettre, avec le temps, de fondre l'individualisme et le "patriotisme" (ou sens de la solidarité de l'indivdu avec l'ensemble de sons

---

[72] Rising, p.65.

> pays); elle est la promesse de la réconciliation, ou plutôt de la synthèse de ces deux contraires. (Nous retrouvons ici l'influence de la dialectique hegelienne.)[73]

Like Plato, Whitman was wrestling with the problem of the One and the Many - the concept of one's simultaneous identity as a discrete self and yet part and parcel of all humanity. "The essence of this double identity is the consciousness of the two selves: one's separate self and the self that is part of a continuum."[74]

This dual identity, or more aptly this dual aspect of Identity, is most commonly discussed by Whitman as analogous to the relationship of the States and the Union. Thus in another deleted portion of "Democracy," Whitman wrote: "There is . . . a thought or fact, I must not forget - subtle and vast, dear to America, twin-sister of its Democracy . . . It is the thought of Oneness, averaging, including all; of Identity - the indissoluble sacred Union of These States."[75] Indeed Whitman's intense, almost mystical, concern with the Union is based, one is led to believe, on his belief that American Democracy would be impossible without the Union, just as the full and equal Individual could not be achieved without the People ensemble. But, and this is of some importance, first, both poles are termed Identities and, second, the ontologically primary pole is the Individual Self and not the ultimate Unity. In his stress on the individual Whitman was stating nothing new to the American tradition, rather it was his recognition and emphasis of the other pole, the en masse Identity, which is novel.

---

[73] Asselineau, p.440.

[74] Albert D. Van Nostrand, Everyman His Own Poet: Romantic Gospels in American Literature (New York, 1968), p.49.

[75] Stovall, II, 750.

This last aspect of Whitman's thought should give the lie to those numerous critics who see him as overly preoccupied with the Self. It was, indeed, one of the virtues of the Transcendentalists' thought that it succeeded to some slight degree in overcoming the radical individualism of mechanistic rationalism upon which so much of American political and social thought was based. Where Whitman is more open to the charge of Self-centeredness is in his creation of the magisterial role of the divine literatus, the sort of figure dear to the hearts of all Romantics and surprisingly close to the creation of that admirer of American Transcendentalism, Nietzsche. As one critic rather tartly remarks, "Whitman sought to control the mass through Personalism, the spiritual development of each individual, and through Culture. Culture in turn would be subject to a select group of 'divine literati.'"[76]

The Individual Identity was, in Hegelian terms, to be spirit concretized and personalized; it was to be the fulfillment of the self, or in contemporary psychological terms, the socialization of the person. Such a development is, of course, impossible to effect outside of a community. And here Whitman is strangely ambivalent and sadly unhistorical. The community which Whitman relies upon to nurture the Individual is a culture disembodied from the political ligaments which alone can give it life and substance.

This democratic Culture was not as yet, apparently, on the scene and its development awaited the arrival of the divine literati. All that was deemed necessary, then, for this creative outpouring was a firm and profound belief in the merits of Democracy. History and tradition would seem to play a small role

---

[76] Rising, p.64.

in fostering this Culture. And just how so uncontextual a Culture was to unify Individuals into a grand Democratic People ensemble is never really made clear in Democratic Vistas. As Chase has noted, "Not having anything like so clear an intuition of society or of history as he has of the self, he believes only in the self and asks it to do what society ought at least assist in doing. Thus "personalism" not only discovers and asserts the personal; it also, in some unspecified realm of being, 'fuses' men into 'solidarity.'"[77] And, of course, in relying so heavily on literature and in all but equating it with Culture, Whitman lacks the breadth of, say, an Arnold.

> Whitman of course asks too much of literature, as he does of "personalism", when he seems to hope that it can resolve the contradictions of democracy by furnishing archtypal images of perfect democratic persons and exploring the modes of human community. The literatus of democratic times, he says, has an even higher calling than the epic poet and prophet of 'feudal' times.[78]

But if the notion of Culture is inadequately treated and if the figure of the divine literatus is at best presumptious, and at worst manipulative, Whitman's stress on the dual aspects of Identity is of great value. Here he has seen the problem in its ramifications and subtleties. For as each citizen grows in his self-consciousness of his Democratic equality and identity, he affirms the Democratic creed common to all.

> . . . if Democracy is not a pretentious sham, a merely temporary form of social organization, produced by a favorable and quite exceptional conjunction of circumstances, and doomed to collapse under the pressure of any positive

---

[77] Chase, pp.160-1.

[78] Ibid., pp.162-3.

> demands on its assumed morality, then there must be latent in its citizens a real fund of common and unshakable religious conviction. Every member, or at least the majority of its members, must be deeply persuaded of the infinite worth of others as well as himself.[79]

Thus as Murry continues, ". . . Democracy is the development, in the further field of social organization and material opportunity, of the message of Christ that the nature of the individual soul is so transcendent that it sets all men on a common level. Democracy is the implementation of the equality of souls proclaimed by the founder of Christianity."[80] Hence it is that this commonality engenders the sort of empathy which enables the self-conscious Individual to project himself into the Identity of others and than finally to join himself to that other Identity - the People ensemble.

And yet as Chase aptly notes:

> Like most Americans of his time, Whitman, although capable of understanding unity as consisting in a commonality of tradition and experience, could not understand that this felt unity must express itself in laws and institutions evolving in history, that it must be made practicable by the social intelligence.[81]

Unlike Plato who moved from the Parmenides to the Laws, Whitman was forced to flesh out the political and social bonds of his Democracy with the strange and elusive notion of Adhesiveness.

---

[79] J. Middleton Murry, Unprofessional Essays (London, 1956), pp.132-3.

[80] Ibid., p.141.

[81] Chase, p.157.

CHAPTER IV

Leaves of Grass

Whitman in partial fulfillment of his duty as editor was adept at producing occasional poetry which was used as fillers and which was quite indistinguishable from the mass of newspaper poetry that abounded at the time. (Indeed one suspects that the impetus for Leaves of Grass came from his dabblings in oratory rather than his jejune efforts at standard verse.) But in any case Whitman's first venture into a more serious type of poetry was political in origin and content.

As was noted earlier, the period of the late 1840's was particularly disillusioning for Whitman. All this was being played out against the background of the tragic failures of 1848 European revolutions - movements bright in democratic and romantic hope, but doomed. And then came the Compromise of 1850 which seemingly was more interested in evading problems than in reaching workable solutions, and which in time would be discovered to bear the seeds of yet more devisive arguments.

> Moreover, it is extremely interesting that it was the desperate 1850 Compromise that . . . incited Whitman to write poetry for the first time - at least to write in the peculiar style which we now regard as Whitmanesque. In 1850 he wrote a whole series of political poems. One, called "Dough-Face Song," was printed in Bryant's Evening

Post on May 2.[1]

This poem is a witty satirical attack on the 1850 Compromise. The "dough-face" is, of course, the unprincipled and weak Northern politician. Whitman's attacks are his standard ones of accusing the party men of acquiesing to Southern pressure, less out of fear for the Union than for sake of personal security.

"That same year (1850) he wrote the first Leaves of Grass poem, 'Resurgemus,' which was printed in The Daily Tribune, June 21, 1850, and afterwards included in Leaves of Grass as 'Europe, the 72nd and 73rd Years of These States.'"[2] This particular poem is important for two reasons. First, it is Whitman's earliest effort to be permanently incorporated in Leaves of Grass. Second, it is the first poem in which Whitman gives full vent to his unique and original style. In short, despite its incoherence, brevity and rhetorical tendency, it does genuinely represent the first indication of Whitman's poetic style and of his poetic genius.

"Resurgemus" is an incidental and political poem inspired by the 1848 revolutions. Entitled "Europe: The 72nd and 73rd Years of These States" in the Leaves of Grass, the poem recounts the ups and downs of the revolutionary spirit. One passage is most revealing both of Whitman's state of mind in 1850 and of his future course. "Liberty, let others despair of you - I never despair of you."[3] This line stands alone - almost constituting a stanza in itself. Here we have the Whitman so

---

[1] Frederik Schyberg, Walt Whitman (New York, 1951), p.58.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition (New York, 1965), p.268.

familiar to the reader of Leaves of Grass - optimistic, defiant, but above all the person of the author, castigating, admonishing, exhorting. Here for the first time in his poetry Whitman's Walt stands forth.

In a fragment of poetry entitled "Respondez!" written some twenty years after "Resurgemus," Whitman notes:

> (Stifled, O days! O lands! in every public and private corruption!
> Smother'd in thievery, impotence, shamelessness, mountain-high;
> Brazen effrontery, scheming, rolling like ocean's waves around and upon you, O my days! my lands!
> For not even those thunderstorms, nor fiercest lightnings of the war, have purified the atmosphere;)[4]

Clearly Whitman's true Democracy is no nearer in 1870 than it was in 1850. It is a constant dual theme in all of Whitman's poetry touching upon politics that he sees clearly the failure of American democratic practice, but he also never doubts both the glory of the ideal and the fact of its ultimate attainment.

With these poems as an introduction to the consideration of Whitman's political statement as revealed in his poetry, this chapter will consider his work in three parts: the topical poetry which deals with specific political events, the poetry of patriotism in praise of America, including the semi-poetical 1855 Preface, and lastly the personal poetry which reveals Whitman's vision of the role of the individual in mass egalitarian Democracy.

Whitman's incidental poetry is usually brief, often in more standard verse form, and almost always inferior work.

The crucial third edition of Leaves of Grass which

---

[4] Ibid., pp.591-2.

appeared in 1860 included several topical political poems. In one of these Whitman offers his judgment of the government of the United States over the previous twelve years in condemning the administrations of Fillmore, Pierce and Buchanan - surely an unprecedented succession of weak mediocrities.

"To the States"
To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad

Why reclining, interrogating? why myself and all drowsing?
What deepening twilight - scum floating atop of the waters,
Who are they as bats and night-dogs askant in the capitol?
What a filthy Presidentiad! (O South, your torrid suns!
O North, your artic freezings!)
Are those really Congressmen? are those the great Judges? is that the President?
Then I will sleep awhile yet, for I see that these States sleep, for reasons;
With gathering murk, with muttering thunder and lambent shoots we all duly awake,
South, North, East, West, inland and seaboard, we will surely awake.[5]

Whitman here catches well the sense of foreboding which must have prevailed in 1860 - but strangely he seems not to fear the awakening, even though such an awakening be accompanied by thunder and lightning. The brief but vile images of corruption are effective, and indeed the first four lines constitute the most praiseworthy section of the poem.

Among Whitman's uncollected poems of this period is one entitled "Of the Democratic Party 58-59-60" which speaks in no uncertain terms of the incipient demise of the Democratic party. "They think they are providing planks of platforms on which they shall stand - Of those planks it would be but retributive justice to make them coffins -"[6] And if the party

---

[5] Ibid., pp.278-9.

[6] Ibid., p.680.

was dooming itself by failing to stand firm for the right, the President was by the same niggardly spirit of compromise and procrastination assuring his own defeat. For as Whitman wrote in "To a President":

> All you are doing and saying is to America dangled mirages,
> You have not learn'd of Nature - of the politics of Nature you have not learned the great amplitude, rectitude, impartiality,
> You have not seen that only such as they are for these States,
> And that what is less than they must sooner or later lift off from these States.[7]

Thus as one critic has written, ". . . in 'To a President' from Messenger Leaves Whitman's position on the political corruption and on Buchanan's wavering, ignoble attitude on campaign issues is clear. This poem, directed to Buchanan, was an expression of the same pessimistic mood which had made Whitman compare himself to a meteor in a year of meteors. America had no leader. Whitman dreamed of being one, but had given it up and relinquished hope of seeing anyone else in his place."[8]

This poem is followed in Leaves of Grass by a poem which splendidly reveals Whitman's personal mood amid the rapidly disintegrating political situation of 1860. "I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and upon all oppression and shame."[9] Whitman then details this oppression and shame, starting from secret and domestic wrongs and working his way through natural disasters to social ills culminating in the

---

[7] Ibid., p.272.

[8] Schyberg, p.179.

[9] Blodgett and Bradley, p.272.

plight of the slaves. But his attitude to this catalogue of evils is for Whitman the editor, poet and polemicist, startling. "All these - all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out upon,/ See, hear, and am silent."[10] This is as close to despair as one will find in Whitman.

One of Whitman's more puzzling poems, "Respondez!," first appeared in the 1856 edition. But in 1881 Whitman dropped the poem -- but salvaged brief sections for two minor poems, "Reversals" and "Transpositions." "Respondez!" constitutes the longest and most detailed of Whitman's pessimistic poems - and one of the few in which irony is effectively employed. What the poet proposes is a complete reversal of roles.

> . . . I pronounce openly for a new distribution of roles;
> Let that which stood in front go behind! and let that which was behind advance to the front and speak;
> Let murderers, bigots, fools, unclean persons, offer new propositions!
> Let the old propositions be postponed!
> . . .
> Let the people sprawl with yearning, aimless hands! Let their tongues be broken! let their eyes be discouraged! let none descend into their hearts with the fresh lusciousness of love![11]

Thus for more than sixty lines beginning with "let," Whitman catalogues his inverted world of madness: "Let there be no God!/ . . . Let the slaves be masters! let the masters become slaves!/ . . . Let shadows be furnish'd with genitals! let substances be deprived of their genitals!/ . . . Let death be inaugurated!"[12]

---

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., p.591.

[12] Ibid., pp.592-3.

The bleak tenor of the poem and the inclusion of the post-war references are indicative of Whitman's view of the dark side of American democracy. But even more revealing was the exclusion of the poem in the 1881 and following editions. As Schyberg has noted, " . . . Whitman sensed the conflict between this poem and the whole tone of his book, and in the final edition split in into two meaningless fragments, with the titles 'Reversals' and 'Transpositions.'"[13]

The third edition of Leaves of Grass has always held a special place; even in terms of critical recognition, this edition was crucial. "This edition is most important because through it Whitman got the attention of his future public. It was the 1860 edition that determined his fame in England and thereby his world renown."[14] Despite the great stylistic breakthrough of "Song of Myself" in the first edition and the power and perfection of certain poems published in post-war editions, one constantly returns to the third edition, drawn if only by its mysteriousness. This writer agrees with the Danish critic Schyberg that the third edition is unique in the corpus of Whitman, both for its pessimism and for its passion. The especially vexatious issue of the love poetry will be dealt with later in this chapter, but it must be noted here that the poems of the third edition are different and how one interprets Whitman's overall thought is largely determined by how one interprets the third edition poems. Nor does biographical evidence provide any clues for this period, for as Schyberg notes, "Biographical information is almost nonexistent. Whitman himself destroyed everything - a fact which in itself is

---

[13] Schyberg, p.136.

[14] Ibid., p.152.

significant."[15] And again, "Walt Whitman's private life was concealed in darkness; with unique and admirable consistency he had destroyed everything which could throw light on the puzzling and - for poetry - decisive periods of his life around 1848, 1859, and 1865."[16]

Thus, as poems such as "I Sit and Look Out" make plain, in a strange way Whitman's life and role were indeed prophetic. despite all the posing and bardic yawpings. For the ups and downs of his life, at least during his great creative period, are strikingly similar to the course of his country as a whole. ". . . There were many indications that Whitman himself was losing his grip at the very time when America was moving toward dissolution and chaos, But so closely was this man's development and fate linked to that of his country that the decisive historical events of 1860-61 were also crucial for him."[17]

Two other poems, which though they do not mention the political situation of 1860 explicitly, are deeply imbued with the atmosphere of impending crisis, "Yet, Yet, Ye Downcast Hours" and "Thought." These poems deal metaphorically with the situation the poet addressed more directly in his political poems of the 1860 edition. Whitman in his later editions was to place these metaphorical poems in a section of Leaves of Grass where their anxiety and pessimism would seem to be motivated by the idea of death, thus divorcing them from their original political setting. This procedure was a standard one of the late Whitman whereby he attempted to tone down the

---

[15] Ibid., p.142.

[16] Ibid., p.5.

[17] Ibid., p.179.

starkness of his third edition pieces and meld them more smoothly into the whole of his corpus.

In both poems the sea images are prominent and the sense that one is being engulfed by forces far beyond mere human control is paramount. Thus in the most explicit statement Whitman states in the first stanza of "Yet, Yet, Ye Downcast Hours,"

> Yet, Yet, ye downcast hours, I know ye also,
> Weights of lead, how ye clog and cling at my ankles,
> Earth to a chamber of mourning turns -- I hear the
> o'erweening, mocking voice,
> Matter is conqueror - matter, triumphant only, continues
> onward.[18]

The second stanza is evenly divided between two lines which indicate the author's concern for his "lover" and two lines which invoke the mystery of the sea. The remainder of the poem is an acknowledgement of the cries for help from the sea and a recognition that the poet can do nothing salvific in this case. Thence the author applies the situation to himself. "A young man's voice, Shall I not escape?"[19] Clearly the two primary principles in this poem are the lover's duty to his love and the inescapability of doom.

The second poem, "Thoughts," is even more sea ridden. As the poet notes, the knell of death enters suddenly, impinging even on joyful occasions. "As I sit with others at a great feast, suddenly while the music is playing,/ To my mind, (whence it comes I know not,) spectral in mist of a wreck at sea,. . ."[20] And death causes the poet to ask the same question broached above - what remains? "Sinking there while the

---

[18] Blodgett and Bradley, p.446.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., p.453.

passionless wet flows on - and I now pondering. Are those women indeed gone?/ Are souls drown'd and destroy'd so?/ Is only matter triumphant?"[21]

Two elements are striking in these poems - first, what T. S. Eliot would term "death by water," and second, the poet's note of resignation. For those critics who see Whitman as the Transcendental cheerleader, slighting mortality in favor of a progressive elevation into Hegelian realms, these poems must provide a shock. Indeed, their tenor is that of classical Stoic verse - the search for acceptance of an inscrutable fate rather than the quest for the Grail of evolutionary humanism. Even admitting the sad state of the Union in 1860, and also acknowledging Whitman's personal difficulties at this time, still in considering Leaves of Grass one can not ignore such poems and such an atmosphere.

But, passing beyond the complications of the third edition for the moment, Whitman's later verse follows the themes of his earlier and greater work. Thus in 1873 Whitman wrote a poem which he included in the section of Leaves of Grass called "Old Age Echoes." This poem, "Nay, Tell me Not To-Day the Published Shame: Winter of 1873, Congress in Session," is a reversion to his disgust with partisan politics. In this four stanza poem, Whitman contrasts the splendor of the Capitol with the sordid "deals" which the parties perpetrate under the as yet uncompleted dome, And the professional political process is contrasted with the democratic spirit of the mass electorate.

Your self-distilling, never-ceasing virtues, self-denials, graces,

---

[21] Ibid.

Your endless base of deep integrities within, timid and certain,
Your blessings steadily bestowed, sure as the light, and still,
(Plunging to these as a determin'd diver down the deep hidden waters,)
These, these to-day I brood upon - all else refusing, these I will con,
To-day to these give audience.[22]

This is the transcendental Whitman in full flower, affirming his faith in the diversity and individuality of the electorate en masse. But, interestingly enough, Whitman chose to contrast the egalitarian democracy of the electorate with the "publish'd shame" of the Congress.

Expressive of his egalitarian faith, in a poem of 1860 entitled "Thoughts" (a favorite and oft used title), Whitman, rather like Gallup, Roper and contemporary politicians, puts his faith in numbers.

Of public opinion,
Of a calm and cool fiat sooner or later, (how impassive! how certain and final!)
Of the President with pale face asking secretly to himself, What will the people say at last?[23]

Whitman in this poem is the all out populist - not merely majority rule, but rather the voice of a unified majority - precisely the sort of anti-libertarian bent so fatally seductive to populist movements.

Of the true New World - of the Democracies resplendent en-masse,
Of the conformity of politics, armies, navies, to them,
Of the shining sun by them - of the inherent light, greater than the rest,

---

[22] Ibid., pp.578-9.

[23] Ibid., pp.479-80.

> Of the envelopment of all by them, and the effusion of all from them.[24]

And in this passage, the phrase "the conformity of politics" is both the most frightening and the most indicative.

But, through all the tortuous working out of mass egalitarian Democracy, there ever remained in Whitman's vision a simple, almost simplistic, creed. In a topical poem published in 1884 in the section of Leaves of Grass entitled "Sands at Seventy," Whitman speaks of election day, November, 1884. "This seething hemisphere's humanity, as now, I'd name - the still small voice vibrating - America's choosing day,/ (The heart of it not in the chosen - the act itself the main, the quadrennial choosing,)"[25] And, after all the polemics and theoretics, the ultimate democratic faith of the poet is best embodied in the words, "the still small voice vibrating."

More central to Whitman's thoughts on democracy were his patriotic poems. In this instance, since the later poetic statements are based on the semi-poetry of the 1855 Preface, it is necessary to consider in detail one of the most unusual clarion calls for democratic nationalism, as well as one of the most unique and eccentric essays in American literature, the Preface to the first edition of Leaves of Grass.

The Preface could almost be the transcription of notes and jottings in Whitman's notebooks, or, as was noted above, that combination of key phrases and occasional paragraphs so useful as notes for the extemporaneous speaker. In short, stylistically little more than a change in typographical layout would render it fit for inclusion in the body of Leaves

---

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., p.517.

of Grass, as indeed it was to be under the title "By Blue Ontario's Shore."

The Preface in its entirety is a consideration of the nature and role of poetry in America. For purposes of gaining some insight into Whitman's patriotic poems it will be useful to consider three points of the Preface: the convertibility of Poet and the United States, the qualities of the Poet (and hence of the States), and the aim or goal toward which everything inexorably tends - the Novus Ordo Saeculorum.

Whitman opens the Preface with a vision of America as poetry. "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem."[26] And he concludes his lengthly Preface with an affirmation of the convertibility, or rather the identity, of the Poet and America.

> An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make a superb nation. The soul of the largest and wealthiest and proudest nation may well go half-way to meet that of its poets. The signs are effectual. There is no fear of mistake. If the one is true the other is true. The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.[27]

Now this identification can be made to appear complicated, "mystical," and in a very fuzzy sense Idealistic by the application of certain philosophical analyses. But such is hardly necessary. Operating rather on another philosophical principle, Occam's Razor, it might better be said that Whitman simply is reaffirming his usual individual - en masse relation.

---

[26] Ibid., p.709.

[27] Ibid., p.729.

Thus, the nation as a whole provides the proper environment within which the individual can develop most fully and that development is naturally a reflection of the character of the nation as a whole. Hence the dual identity of the Individual - En Masse, as expressed in "Song of Myself" and explicated in Democratic Vistas, is here cast into the terms of the Poet and the States. Only if this parallel is grasped can the seeming arrogance and kookiness of Whitman's claims about the poet be understood.

Having stated his premise of identity, Whitman now proceeds to devote a bulk of his Preface to a consideration of the qualities of the Poet-Nation. In a brief phrase Whitman captures the central qualities which are necessary for the integration and smooth working of the individual-en masse, "Sanity and ensemble characterize the great master."[28] Under these two rubrics all the virtues necessary for an operative political and social democracy can be found. Thus "Ensemble" would refer to the egalitarian principles which offer the raison d'etre of a political democracy, and "sanity" is the Whitmanian virtue of prudence. Prudence, on first sight a most unlikely ideal for Whitman, is very central to his scheme of the democratic life and first makes its appearance in the 1855 Preface.

Whitman details several of the qualities which embody ensemble - naturalness, candor and political liberty. The theme of naturalness is an obvious one throughout Whitman's work. In the Preface he notes, "These American states strong and healthy and accomplished shall receive no pleasure from violations of natural models and must not permit them. . . . Clean and vigorous children are jetted and conceived only in

---

[28] Ibid., p.720.

those communities where the models of natural forms are public every day."[29] But then Whitman proceeds to push his point to the extreme in his call for "perfect personal candor."

> All faults may be forgiven him who has perfect personal candor. Henceforth let no man of us lie, for we have seen that openness wins the inner and outer world and that there is no single exception, and that never since our earth gathered itself in a mass have deceit or subterfuge or prevarication attracted its smallest particle or the faintest tinge of a shade. . .[30]

But the quality of ensemble which Whitman most stresses is of course political liberty.

> In the make of the great masters the idea of political liberty is indispensible. Liberty takes the adherence of heroes wherever men and women exist. . . . but never takes any adherence from the rest more than from poets. They are the voice and exposition of liberty. They out of ages are worthy the grand idea. . . .[31]

Whitman then asks how one can recognize liberty, or rather the absence of liberty. In answer he catalogues aspects of a society from which political liberty has all but disappeared. The catalogue is, of course, an indictment of the state of the Union in 1855.

> . . . when the laws of the free are grudgingly permitted and laws for informers and bloodmoney are sweet to the taste of the people. . . when those in all parts of these states who could easier realize the true American character but do not yet--when the swarms of cringers, suckers, dough-faces, lice of politics, planners of sly involutions for their own preferment to city offices or state legislatures to the judiciary or congress or the presidency, obtain a response of love and natural deference from the people whether they get the offices or no,

---

[29] Ibid., p.722.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid., p.720.

> . . . and when servility by town or state or the federal government or any oppression on a large scale or small scale can be tried on without its own punishment following duly after in exact proportion against the smallest chance of escape. . .[32]

It is interesting to note here the indirectness of Whitman's accusations. Even though the same charges are openly made in "The Eighteenth Presidency," here in his more optimistic Preface, Whitman chooses to place them in the future conditional.

From a consideration of the qualities of the ensemble, Whitman turns to the quality most important to the poet-individual -- sanity or Prudence.

> Caution seldom goes far enough. It has been thought that the prudent citizen was the citizen who applied himself to solid gains and did well for himself and his family and completed a lawful life without debt or crime. The greatest poet sees and admits these economies as he sees the economies of food and sleep, but has higher notions of prudence than to think he gives much when he gives a few slight attentions at the latch of the gate.[33]

But as Whitman goes on to note at some length, his prudence is not to be understood as mere frugality with possession. "The prudence of mere wealth and respectability of the most esteemed life appears too faint for the eye to observe at all when little and large alike drop quietly aside at the thought of the prudence suitable for immortality."[34] Rather this prudence suitable for immortality is a careful attention to consequences, a recognition that every action or state "has reference to what ensues." Unfortunately Whitman fails, in

---

[32] Ibid., p.721.

[33] Ibid., p.723.

[34] Ibid.

this early essay, to very well define his notion of prudence, a topic which was to be a subject for future poetry and prose, but instead he sweeps on to link the notion of consequences to his belief in Progress.

Having mysteriously linked prudence and progress, Whitman as the final point considers the aim or goal, the new order. "A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. . . . Through the divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future. . . . They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth."[35] All this is unexceptional, if rather chauvinistic.

Thus in the 1855 Preface, Whitman develops two notable points in his political creed. The first, discussed above, is the convertibility of the poet and the nation, standing in relationship to each other like the Individual-People en masse duality. The other central development of the Preface is the identity of sanity or prudence as the primary virtue of the Poet.

In the most direct statement about this virtue of prudence, Whitman writes,

> The prudence of the greatest poet answers at last the craving and glut of the soul, is not contemptuous of less ways of prudence if they conform to its ways, puts off nothing, permits no let-up for its own case or any case, has no particular sabbath or judgment-day, divides not the living from the dead or the righteous from the unrighteous, is satisfied with the present, matches every thought or act by its correlative, knows no possible forgiveness or

---

[35] Ibid., p.727.

> deputed atonement. . . . and only that person has no great prudence to learn who has learnt to prefer real longlived things, and favors body and soul the same, and perceives the indirect assuredly following the direct, and what evil or good he does leaping onward and waiting to meet him again - and who in his spirit in any emergency whatever neither hurries nor avoids death.[36]

Thus, passing over the Biblical allusions and the rhetorical posing, Whitman would seem to identify prudence with experience and to be stressing the value of the experiential if it is rendered conscious and not either straitjacketed into formulae or ignored altogether. The stress on the conscious experiential is the chief interest and contribution of Whitman's 1855 Preface, and is a topic to which this paper will have cause to return.

Whitman's songs to his native land are frequent and generally repetitive. This chapter will survey the overall output and will attempt to discern certain chronological, if minor, developments in Whitman's handling of this theme. Throughout, however, it must be recalled that "By Blue Ontario's Shore" is Whitman's classic and most robust piece of patriotic poetry.

One can in a sense bracket Whitman's patriotic poetry by noting his "Inscriptions" to Leaves of Grass and several late efforts appended to Leaves of Grass. The sense of continuity is real and telling. Thus Whitman is eager to define his role as publicist for Democracy.

> I heard you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle
> the New World,
> And to define America, her athletic Democracy,
> Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them
> what you wanted.[37]

---

[36] Ibid., p.726.

[37] Ibid., p.3.

But Whitman most clearly sets forth his ideal, and most joyously and lyrically, in his arch typal poem from the third edition, "I Hear America Singing." Omitting the catalogues it runs:

> I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
> . . .
> Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
> The day what belongs to the day - at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
> Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.[38]

And clearly the theme here is individualism and its merit.

But if such be the political gist of Whitman's early work, his late work is equally of a piece. Thus in a poem of 1888 printed in the section entitled "Sands at Seventy," Whitman can still boast of the egalitarian achievements of his nation.

> Here first the duties of to-day, the lessons of the concrete,
> Wealth, order, travel, shelter, products, plenty;
> As of the building of some varied, vast, perpetual edifice,
> Whence to arise inevitable in time, the towering roofs, the lamps,
> The solid-planted spires tall shooting to the stars.[39]

But if early and late Whitman's Jacksonian ideals remain the same, his poetry of patriotism in between the extremes of his age is both more varied and more constant than might be suspected.

In his early editions Whitman loves to play the role of the bard of the workingman. Thus these editions abound in "songs" dedicated to physical labor. In two of these Whitman

---

[38] Ibid., p.12.

[39] Ibid., p.526.

makes quite plain his political leanings. Interestingly both "Song of the Broad Axe" and "A Song for Occupations" are from the first two editions, from, in other words, the most explicitly partisan political period of his poetic oeurve.

In both poems, as might be gathered from their titles, the catalogue form is pre-eminent. "A Song for Occupations," however, pauses briefly to consider in a most penetrating light the political occupation.

> The sum of all known reverence I add up in you whoever you are,
> The President is there in the White House for you, it is not you who are here for him,
> The Secretaries act in their bureaus for you, not you here for them,
> The Congress convenes every Twelfth-month for you,
> Laws, courts, the forming of the States, the charters of the cities, are all for you.[40]

The egalitarian note here is strong.

"The Song of the Broad-Axe," as the title implies, is more at ease, more robust and specific. Thus in a typical passage, in this case from the fifth stanza, Whitman details the specifics of his heavenly city.

> Where the city stands with the brawniest breed of orators and bards,
> Where the city stands that is belov'd by these, and loves them in return and understands them,
> Where no monuments exist to heroes but in the common words and deeds,
> Where thrift is in its place, and prudence is in its place,
> Where men and women think lightly of the laws,
> Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons,
> Where outside authority enters always after the precedence of inside authority,

---

[40] Ibid., p.215.

> Where the citizen is always the head and ideal, and
> President, Mayor, Governor and what not, are
> agents for pay,
> Where children are taught to be laws to themselves, and
> to depend on themselves,
> . . .
> There the great city stands.[41]

Here Whitman reveals what most enthralled him in American democracy -- the perversity, the sheer individuality of the electorate. At its best, Whitman would say, democracy is sublimely unpredictable and ultimately incorrigible; democracy is arational and fortuitous, but like all bolts of lightning - divine and prophetic. Democracy en masse is correct by virtue of instinct not reason. And hence, of course, the poet is a more apt guide to its interpretation than the political scientist, or in Whitman's era, the politician.

If such, early, late and middle, is the tenor of Whitman's patriotic poetry, attention might fruitfully be focused at this point on Whitman's most ambitious poetic statement of his patriotic views, "By Blue Ontario's Shore." This lengthly poem was first included in Leaves of Grass in the second edition, that is in 1856. As originally phrased it was a poetic transcription of the 1855 Preface, with appropriate additions. In subsequent editions some of the more harsh and topical political allusions were excised and occasional references to the Civil War were injected, but overall it remains Whitman's major piece of patriotic poetry.

The most perturbing and striking note is cast in the first stanza. After a brief introduction wherein the poet decides to interpret American Democracy, Whitman ends the stanza with a cynical parenthesis. "(Democracy, the destin'd

---

[41] Ibid., p.186.

conqueror, yet treacherous lip-smiles everywhere,/ And death and infidelity at every step.)"[42] Even before Eden is limned, the serpent is present. And yet ultimate victory is assured - "the destin'd conqueror."

The theme of the first stanza is repeated in the ninth stanza and in the first of the two concluding stanzas, the nineteenth. Thus the ninth stanza opens, "I listened to the Phantom by Ontario's shore,/ I heard the voice arising demanding bards,/ By them all native and grand, by them alone can these States be fused into the compact organism of a Nation."[43] And in stating his belief that the Poet must supplant the politician as the leader of the new nation, Whitman writes, "Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall."[44] And in the more lyric nineteenth stanza Whitman notes, "And I saw the free souls of poets,/ The loftiest bards of past ages strode before me,/ Strange large men, long unwaked, undisclosed, were disclosed to me."[45] Curiously the nineteenth and the first stanzas were added in the 1867 edition of Leaves of Grass, while the ninth stanza first appeared in the original poem of 1856, though its thought and wording were taken from the 1855 Preface. And to further emphasize the unity of these three theme-stating stanzas and their central structuring role in the overall poem, each begins with an almost identical line, "By blue Ontario's shore," followed by the apparition of the summoning spirit.

The first major section of "By Blue Ontario's Shore,"

---

[42] Ibid., p.340.

[43] Ibid., p.346.

[44] Ibid., p.347.

[45] Ibid., p.355.

then, comprises stanzas 2-8, and may be divided into two considerations each of three stanzas: the Individual as the Nation (2-4) and America as the land of the future (5,6,8). The seventh stanza is an interpolation of 1867 and deals with the Civil War experience.

The notion that the Nation is the expression of the Individual, the Nation-Individual convertibility, is an idea which Whitman had previously expressed in the 1855 Preface. In the second stanza Whitman boldly opens this theme, stating the all inclusiveness, both of the Nation and of the Individual. "A Nation announcing itself,/ I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated,/ I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own forms."[46] In the next stanza Whitman makes more explicit the concept of egalitarian perfectibility. "Have you thought there could be but a single supreme?/ There can be any number of supremes - one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another, or one life countervails another."[47] And hence Whitman can then move to emphasize in one of his most quotable lines the romantic notion that great personalities both mirror and create great nations. "Produce great Persons, the rest follows."[48] The fourth stanza details how such great persons are to be produced - not by conformity but by rugged individualism.

> Fear grace, elegance, civilization, delicatesse,
> Fear the mellow sweet, the sucking of honey-juice,
> Beware the advancing mortal ripening of Nature,
> Beware what precedes the decay of the ruggedness of states and men.[49]

---

[46] Ibid., p.340.

[47] Ibid., p.341.

[48] Ibid., p.342

[49] Ibid.

Whitman's other theme in the first major section of "By Blue Ontario's Shore" is one of his most constant - America the land of the future, the democratic exemplar to the world. The fifth and especially the sixth stanzas are long catalogues of America's potential, whence it arose and where it is heading. As he concludes in the eighth stanza, "O days of the future I believe in you - I isolate myself for your sake,/ O America because you build for mankind I build for you."[50]

At this point, as was noted above, Whitman returns in his ninth stanza to a restatement of his theme, the need for poets to unify and direct the nation. And as a natural extension of that idea, the tenth stanza, another catalogue, lists the various aspects through which the poet can accomplish this goal. But in the final lines of the tenth stanza Whitman, in summing up the Poet's role, introduces the strange abstraction of "the great Idea," which would appear to be the overall name of the poet's goal. "For the great Idea, the idea of perfect and free individuals,/ For that, the bard walks in advance, leader of leaders,/ The attitude of him cheers up slaves and horrifies foreign despots."[51] In 1867 Whitman inserted here the eleventh stanza which is a celebration of the defiant, indeed warrior, spirit of "the great Idea."

> For the great Idea,
> That, O my brethern, that is the mission of poets.
>
> Songs of stern defiance ever ready,
> Songs of the rapid arming and the march,
> The flag of peace quick-folded, and instead the flag we know,
> Warlike flag of the great Idea.[52]

---

[50] Ibid., p.346.

[51] Ibid., p.348.

[52] Ibid.

Whitman is clearly thinking of the Civil War, for the remainder of the stanza is filled with vignettes of battlefields and charges. Apparently, then, with his own Civil War experiences in mind, Whitman would seem to be saying not only that free and perfect were worth fighting for, but that the Poet ought to organize, inspire and lead the fight. Once again Whitman is replacing the politician with the poet as leader of the nation.

After this extraordinary stanza, Whitman reverts to the specifics of the poet, cataloguing in stanza twelve the poet's preparation for his role, even as in stanza ten he had catalogued the role of the poet. And the thirteenth and fourteenth stanzas deal with allied topics already well covered in the 1855 Preface, the new and higher breed of poets of Archetype for the Nation and for every Individual. As he quite selflessly commands, "Fall behind me States!/ A man before all - myself, typical, before all."[53]

Thus far in the second section of "By Blue Ontario's Shore" Whitman has dealt with the Poet, but in the second part of this section Whitman turns to the Individual. Throughout stanzas sixteen, fifteen and seventeen, the stress is on the self, the "I."

> I swear I begin to see the meaning of these things,
> It is not the earth, it is not America who is so great,
> It is I who am great or to be great, it is You up there,
> or any one,
> It is to walk rapidly through civilizations, governments,
> theories,
> Through poems, pagaents, shows, to form individuals.[54]

Indeed even America in its greatness and its promise comes down

---

[53] Ibid., p.351.

[54] Ibid., p.352.

at last to the Individual. "The American compact is altogether with individuals,/ The only government is that which makes minute of individuals,/ The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one single individual - namely to You."[55]

This use of "You" is of interest here, for it would seem to be not only the reader with whom Whitman is in dialogue, but also the Other Person in general - all that is Person but not I. Hence Whitman preserves, even when seemingly at his most Ego-centric, the notion of an inter-personal community which alone can build his Democracy. For a Democracy of autonomous Individuals could scarcely be called a Democracy at all.

> O I see flashing that this America is only you and me,
> Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,
> Its crimes, lies, thefts, defections, are you and me,
> Its Congress is you and me, the officers, capitols,
> armies, ships, are you and me,
> Its endless gestations of new States are you and me,
> The war, (that war so bloody and grim, the war I will
> henceforth forget), was you and me,
> Natural and artificial are you and me,
> Freedom, language, poems employments, are you and me,
> Past, present, future, are you and me.[56]

And yet, Whitman is still painfully aware in this most patriotic of poems, of the terrible task ahead in creating Democracy. The externality, the sheer facticity of the unidealized world meant that the real task of the poet was to take the notion of Democracy and wed it to the brute material about him and thus spiritualize both himself and his nation. This all but Hegelian notion, which was stated at greater length in Democratic Vistas, is already touched upon here in "By Blue

---

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., p.353.

Ontario's Shore" in even more striking and forceful terms.

> I match my spirit against yours you orbs, growths,
> mountains, brutes,
> Copious as you are I absorb you all in myself and become
> the master myself,
> America isolated yet embodying all, what is it finally
> except myself?
> These States, what are they except myself?
>
> I know now why the earth is gross, tantalizing, wicked,
> it is for my sake,
> I take you specially to be mine, you terrible, rude forms.[57]

After this moving stanza, Whitman in the nineteenth stanza reverts to a restatement of his theme and in the concluding stanza calls for other poets and bards to join him in his labors, "Ample Ohio's,Kanada's bards - bards of California! inland bards - bards of the war!/ You by my charm I invoke."[58]

In somewhat grandiloquent terms Allen assesses the importance of this poem.

> Even the religious concept of individualism, first formulated in the '55 Preface, takes on new depth and breath when whole passages of the Preface are transferred to Poem of Many in One (later By Blue Ontario's Shore) and are motivated with cosmic significance. In addition to singing a new nation, which is to build on the past and henceforth lead the world, the poet has taken on a philosophical search for the meaning of the universe.[59]

Doubtless there is a deepening of thought as expressed in a clearer realization of the necessity of mastering the material external and thus spiritualizing it. This recognition of evil and strife is of considerable value in a more fully rounded

---

[57] Ibid., p.354.

[58] Ibid., p.355.

[59] Allen, Handbook, p.134.

interpretation of Whitman that is usually accorded him. Also the poet makes more explicit the process whereby the Individual and the Nation become convertible, and also how the Poet is to act as pioneer and shepherd of this spiritualizing development. But by far the most important development of "By Blue Ontario's Shore" is Whitman's stress on mutality - for though the stress is largely on the Self of the poet, Whitman now easily includes the you - the collective, personal and ideal.

Overall, however, "By Blue Ontario's Shore" is an early poem - and the solution and grappling with the problems and promises of Democracy will be undertaken in more personal and later poems - specifically in those of the third edition.

But if in "By Blue Ontario's Shore" Whitman was setting out his poetic program, in many other poems of his central productive period he was the patriotic poet in action. Thus in "As I Walk These Broad Majestic Days" (1860), he gives a concise resumé of his poetic and patriotic principles.

> Then my realities:
> What else is so real as mine?
> Libertad and the divine average, freedom to every slave
> on the face of the earth,
> The rapt promises and lumine of seers, the spiritual world,
> these centuries-lasting songs,
> And our visions, the visions of poets, the most solid
> announcements of any.[60]

Noteworthy here is Whitman's invocation of the "divine average." In the same edition in "Songs at Sunset" Whitman writes, "Splendor of ended day floating and filling me,/ Hour prophetic, hour resuming the past,/ Inflating my throat, you divine average,/ You earth and life till the last ray gleams I sing."[61]

---

[60] Ibid., p.487.

[61] Ibid., p.494.

And again in "Years of the Modern" (1865), "Never were such sharp questions ask'd as this day,/ Never was the average man, his soul, more energetic, more like a God,/ Lo, how he urges and urges, leaving the masses no rest."[62] The divine average here has become the moving force of history - not merely the final cause but also the efficient cause of history.

The struggle of the Civil War enhanced and strengthened Whitman's preoccupation with Identity - the two fold identity of Individual and of Ensemble - under the vision and term of the Union. One of Whitman's finest patriotic poems, published in 1872, "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood," deals specifically with this theme. "This poem has deserved attention as a central statement of WW's convictions about the role of the 'equal brood' of the states in American democracy, and the future of that democracy in the world order. The power of idealism has overcome the rhetoric."[63]

The poem runs just over 130 lines and is divided into six sections, the first of which stresses Whitman's optimism for the future of the Union. The second stanza begins with the famous line, "As a strong bird on pinions free. . ." which was the opening line of Whitman's Commencement Poem at Dartmouth in June of 1872 and which he had incorporated into the longer "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood." Unfortunately the second section typifies certain tendencies in Whitman's later poetry. Thus, though the lines are more limpid and smooth than much of his earlier more exuberant work, it is also notably more abstract and metaphysical. For example:

---

[62] Ibid., p.489.

[63] Ibid., p.455.

> And for thy subtler sense subtler refrains dread Mother,
> Preludes of intellect tallying these and thee, mind-
> formulas fitted for thee, real and sane and large
> as these and thee,
> Thou! mounting higher, diving deeper than we knew, thou
> transcendental Union!
> By thee fact to be justified, blended with thought,
> Thought of man justified, blended with God,
> Thought of thy idea, lo, the immortal reality!
> Through thy reality, lo, the immortal idea![64]

As one critic has noted of this late style, ". . . at that point in his career when he ceased to transfigure values in speech: when, after 1856, his rhythms lost touch with the native idiom of communication where the battle between self and society is first joined; when, intent on being 'America' instead of being simply American, he was forced to resort to the mythical language of his abstract incantations, whose ideal vision of men and things could no longer capture the mystery of their mock-congradulatory signs and bows."[65] While this critique may be too harsh, still in the poetry of the later Whitman the uplift may yet be there, but it is more attenuated and somehow less real and urgent. Further, as the fourth and fifth sections reveal, Whitman had shifted his emphasis from the immediacy of the experience of Democracy to a stress on the universality of a future Democracy. This universality would comprise both a sense that all past history was involved in the experiment of Democracy and a belief that the fulfillment of Democracy would mean its spread to all nations of the world.

But perhaps the most important passage for insight into Whitman's political thought is a parenthetical one introduced

---

[64] Ibid., pp.456-7.

[65] John Kinnard, "Paradox of American 'Identity'," Partisan Review, XXV (1958), p.405.

into the last section of "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood." "(Lo, where arise three peerless stars,/ To be thy natal stars my country, Ensemble, Evolution, Freedom,/ Set in the sky of Law.)"[66] Thus to the guiding principles of Democracy which Whitman had stressed in the past - Freedom (of Individuality) and Ensemble, he now adds Evolution. Indeed the central point of this poem was precisely the extension of the optimism characteristic of Young America into a dogmatic evolutionary progress toward an Ideal Future.

> Thou mental, moral orb - thou New, indeed new, Spiritual World!
> The Present holds thee not - for such vast growth as thine,
> For such unparallel'd flight as thine, such brood as thine,
> The FUTURE only holds thee and can hold thee.[67]

This Hegelian or more accurately Haeckelian theme was also, of course, stressed and elaborated in Democratic Vistas, which was published in final form in the same year of 1872.

In the previous year Whitman had written a more reflective poem of backward glances in a more subdued style, "To Thee Old Cause." The "old cause" was a popular phrase for the goals of the Democratic party which Whitman had earlier defined as "the great idea, the progress and freedom of the race." In this poem Whitman reflects on the recent war for the good old cause, and on the unity of his poetic goal and that of his nation's travail. " . . . my book and the war are one,/ Merged in its spirit I and mine, as the contest hinged on thee./ As a wheel on its axis turns, this book unwitting to itself,/ Around the idea of thee."[68] The use of imagery here is striking and effective

---

[66] Blogett & Bradley, p.460.

[67] Ibid., p.461.

[68] Ibid., p.5.

and in its low key way expresses far more than much of Whitman's more inflated verse the central purpose of his poetry and the real bond between Whitman and America.

"So Long!" has terminated Leaves of Grass ever since the third edition in which it first appeared. And as such it aptly summarizes many of Whitman's patriotic themes.

> I announce that the identity of these States is a single identity only,
> I announce the Union more and more compact, indissoluble,
> I announce splendors and majesties to make all the previous politics of the earth insignificant.[69]

But this is only half of Whitman's patriotic vision, for there is also the individual, and hence the personal.

> I announce adhesiveness, I say it shall be limitless, unloosen'd,
> I say you shall yet find the friend you were looking for.
> I announce a man or woman coming, perhaps you are the one, (So long!)
> I announce the great individual, fluid as Nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully arm'd.[70]

As has long been recognized, it is Whitman's personal poems which have assured his continuing interest and mastery. And as the bard of Democracy, what Whitman reveals about himself and his beliefs is substantially a revelation of his vision of Democracy. Some of this spirit by which the poet becomes a reflector of Democracy can be seen in two poems first published in the second edition of Leaves of Grass. In "Salut au Monde!" Whitman spans the globe celebrating the glories of life, and as he so often noted elsewhere but beautifully explicitly here, the fact of Equality of all men is precisely the bond whereby

---

[69] Ibid., p.504.

[70] Ibid.

the Poet may presume, in speaking of himself, to be speaking for all men. "Each of us inevitable,/ Each of us limitless - each of us with his or her right upon the earth,/ Each of us allow'd the eternal purports of the earth,/ Each of us here as divinely as any is here."[71] But equality alone is insufficient; equality merely provides the possibility of union - some further rapport or empathy is needed. And this empathy Whitman calls compassion or love. "My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the whole earth,/ I have look'd for equals and lovers and found them ready for me in all lands,/ I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them."[72]

In "Song of the Open Road" Whitman extends this theme of love or comradeship. The road is, as George Sand wrote in Consuelo, "' . . . the symbol and image of an active and varied life. . . . And then that road is the passage of Humanity, the route of the Universe. . . . So far as the sight can read, the road is a land of liberty.'"[73] In this poem Whitman invites companionship in his travels. "Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!/ Traveling with me you find what never tires."[74] And, "Allons! after the great Companions, and to belong to them!/ They too are on the road - they are the swift and majestic men - they are the greatest women."[75] In the final lines of this exciting poem Whitman makes his proposition most affectively.

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,

---

[71] Ibid., p.147.
[72] Ibid., p.148.
[73] Ibid., pp.148-9.
[74] Ibid., p.154.
[75] Ibid., p.155.

> I give you my self before preaching or law;
> Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
> Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?[76]

Earlier in the poem Whitman had defined by the use of a favorite term and by the suggestion of a powerful image the quality of the comradeship he sought. "Here is adhesiveness, it is not previously fashion'd, it is apropos;/ Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers?/ Do you know the talk of those turning eye-balls?"[77]

Whitman's extensive opening statement of purpose and belief, personal, poetic, and national, in Leaves of Grass was the long poem "Proto-Leaf," first published in the third edition. As the title implied, it was the ground and seed of all that was to follow. In the 1867 edition it was subject to certain revisions and the title was changed to the final one, "Starting from Paumanok." As Charles Feidelson has summed up the statement and import of the poem,

> Retrospectively, one sees that the preliminary statement of the poem - "Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World" - has ushered in a song which not only is addressed to and descriptive of America but also is the vehicle, at once product and creator, of a metaphysical "newness." In the course of the poem the solitary voice of the individual poet has expanded into the presence of an all-inclusive Word - "a word to clear one's path ahead endlessly." And the speaker's union with his hearers is imaged in the final section as the love relationship of "cameradoes" on the journey.[78]

This then is the harbinger poem of Leaves of Grass.

---

[76] Ibid., p.159.

[77] Ibid., p.153.

[78] Charles Feidelson, Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago, 1953), p.19.

The importance of the unity and diversity of the polity of America is soon made plain. "I will make a song for these States that no one State may under any circumstances be subjected to another State,/ And I will make a song that there shall be comity by day and by night between all the States, and between any two of them."[79] And here once again Whitman indicates his suspicion and dissatisfaction with the policies of Buchanan which in 1860 promised to upset the equality of the States. "And I will make a song for the ears of the President, full of weapons with menacing points,/ And behind the weapons countless dissatisfied faces."[80] After the Civil War, in celebration of that Unity which alone was to ensure the Equality of the States, Whitman added four further lines to this passage.

> And a song make I of the One form'd out of all,
> The fang'd and glittering One whose head is over all,
> Resolute warlike One including and over all,
> (However high the head of any else that head is over all.)[81]

But, as has been noted elsewhere in this paper, Whitman consistently saw the relationship of the States and the Union as parallel to the relationship of Individuals and the People Ensemble. Hence even as the Union was no mere paper contract but a living entity, so the People was not simply the sum of Individuals, but rather the bonding of Individuals.

> I will sing the song of companionship,
> I will show what alone must finally compact these,
> I believe these are to be found their own ideal of manly love, indicating it in me.
> I will therefore let flame from me the burning fires that were threatening to consume me,

---

[79] Blodgett & Bradley, p.18.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.

I will lift what has too long kept down those smouldering
fires,
I will give them complete abandonment,
I will write the evangel-poem of comrades and of love,
For who but I should understand love with all its sorrow
and joy?
And who but I should be the poet of comrades?[82]

Such a People would, of course, be unique in history, or so Whitman believed, and their works would be equally unique and original. "A world primal again, vistas of glory incessant and branching,/ A new race dominating previous ones and grander far, with new contests,/ New politics, new literatures and religions, new inventions and arts."[83] And in the field of politics Whitman was quite explicit on the sort of changes to be expected.

See, ploughmen ploughing farms - see, miners digging
mines - see, the numberless factories,
See, mechanics busy at their benches with tools - see
from among them superior judges, philosophers,
Presidents, emerge, drest in working dresses.[84]

And yet how is Whitman to reconcile the towering role of the poet, the bard of Personality, with the seemingly contradictory product of equalities? This is a problem which both Whitman and this paper will be forced to ponder further.

Here in this proto-leaf, Whitman is less concerned, however, with subtleties of political theory than with the inspiring vision of Democracy based on the brotherhood of equality. In his concluding stanza Whitman sings:

---

[82] Ibid., p.19.

[83] Ibid., p.26.

[84] Ibid., p.27.

O my comrade!
O you and me at last - and us two only;
O power, liberty, eternity at last!
O to be relieved of distinctions! to make as much of vices as virtues!
O to level occupations and the sexes! O to bring all to common ground! O adhesiveness!
O the pensive aching to be together - you know not why, and I know not why.
O a word to clear one's path ahead endlessly!
O something extatic and undemonstrable! O music wild!
O now I triumph - and you shall also;
O hand in hand - O wholesome pleasure - O one more desirer and lover,
O haste, firm holding - haste, haste on, with me.[85]

Significantly, in the 1867 and subsequent editions Whitman deleted lines 3-7 from the above, his invocation of adhesive love. Although it is premature at this point to enter into a discussion of adhesiveness, a topic better reserved for the consideration of the "Calamus" poems, it is plain that in the original version of "Starting from Paumanok," not only is the poet faced with the dilemma of the poet celebrator of personality and also celebrator of equality, but also Whitman is unsure whether his role is to be one of public leadership or private comradeship. As Allen has noted, ". . . an examination of 'Proto-Leaf' shows unmistakably that the poet had been torn between two conflicting ambitions: (1) to be the poet-leader of his nation and (2) to be the poet of a private love between two men, in an attachment which made him willing to renounce his nationalistic role. The drama of this psychological struggle is scarcely apparent in the final version, in which love of individuals for each other is presented as the innate strength of the

---

[85] Fredson Bowers, Whitman's Manuscripts (Chicago, 1955), pp.35-37.

compact of states, the 'many in one.'"[86] In fact, as this paper will attempt to demonstrate in due course, both of these dichotomies are more apparent than real, and the suppression of the invocation of adhesiveness in the final stanza is due more to Whitman's interest in toning down certain emotional excesses of the third edition than in any effort to marry his private emotions to his political philosophy - a marriage which in any case had been plighted well before 1860 and which Whitman's Civil War experiences merely served to consummate.

The longest and most typical of Whitman's poems is, of course, "Song of Myself." The work has been extensively commented upon and in recent decades dissected to discover its 'form.' But more to the point are the words of the great contemporary South American author, Juan Luis Borges, "Whitman's invention lies in the fact that the pronoun I as used by him had a plural and mystical meaning. . . . All poets try to say things that have never been said before; Whitman, as a democrat, hit on the strange idea of uttering the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands."[87] A line from the twenty-second section of the poem aptly confirms Borges' judgment and also sets the keynote of this work, "I am he attesting sympathy."[88] For it is sympathy - a feeling with - which best captures Whitman's uncanny ability to transform egoism into universality and which allows him personally to experience the bonding comradeship which was so central to his message. Indeed the whole sum and substance of "Song of Myself" is Whitman's commonality - identity even -

---

[86] Gay Wilson Allen, "The Two Poets of LG" Patterns of Committment in American Literature (Toronto, 1967), p.65.

[87] Juan Luis Borges, "Achievements of Walt Whitman," Texas Quarterly, V, 1, (1962), p.46.

[88] Blodgett & Bradley, p.50.

with all his fellows. "And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,/ And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,/ And of these one and all I weave the song of myself."[89] Or more concretely, expressive of Whitman editor and New Yorker,

> This is the city and I am one of the citizens,
> Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars, markets, newspapers, schools,
> The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories, stocks, stores, real estate, and personal estate.[90]

Throughout the poem two elements are in play, both aspects of Walt Whitman the poet. The first of these is the "I" of the poet. "I know perfectly well my own egotism."[91] And, "I am an acme of things accomplish'd, and I am encloser of things to be."[92] Again, "I have said that the soul is not more than the body,/ And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,/ And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is."[93] But complementing this emphasis is the other Walt Whitman. "Endless unfolding of words of ages!/ And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse."[94] Or as he more prosaically notes, "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me."[95] Thus Whitman not only enfolds and encompasses all in his Self, but his Self is also part of the People En Masse, Ensemble. "I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and

---

[89] Ibid., p.44.
[90] Ibid., p.77.
[91] Ibid., p.77.
[92] Ibid., p.80.
[93] Ibid., p.86.
[94] Ibid., p.51.
[95] Ibid., p.41.

fathomless as myself."[96] Whitman most forcefully expresses this dual identity in the very opening lines of Leaves of Grass in "One-Self I Sing." "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,/ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."[97] "Those two lines introduce Leaves of Grass, and summarize or introduce most of Whitman's thought on order in any context. Most of the important Whitman words are there."[98] And it is precisely because of this dual identity that the poet can proclaim, "I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,/ By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms."[99]

Two poems from the second edition give a deeper and more emotional, if also a more cryptic, vision of the dual identity which was so central to Whitman's thought, "The Sleepers" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Of the former, one critic has noted, "It is a powerful and original composition, one of the poet's most imaginative, and also one of the most esoteric. It is perhaps the only surrealist American poem of the nineteenth century, remarkable in its anticipation of later experiment."[100] The poet's spirit, while he sleeps, wanders abroad and both observes and empathises and vicariously at least enters into the sleepers and their dreams. It is a daring metaphor of empathy. "I go from bedside to bedside, I sleep close with

---

[96] Ibid., p.35.

[97] Ibid., p.1.

[98] George Bowering, "The Solitary Everything," WWR, XV, 1(1970), p.25.

[99] Ibid., p.43.

[100] Blodgett & Bradley, p.424.

the other sleepers each in turn,/ I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,/ And I become the other dreamers."[101] And in this exalted state the poet can live in the past as well as present; he can feel more deeply and less self-consciously; his new freedom enables him to understand more fully.

This idea of empathy is developed in a more realistic setting in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

> It avails not, time nor place - distance avails not,
> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,
> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
> Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd.[102]

The overcoming of time enables the poet to speak with and be among generations yet unborn - for as a fully self-conscious identity the poet in his Individuality is able to be one with the Ensemble, past, present, and future. "Closer yet I approach you,/ What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you - I laid in my stores in advance,/ I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born."[103] And in an even more daring leap, Whitman avers that inanimate objects too, to the extent that they enter into the consciousness of the poet, these too are woven into his identity - Individual and Ensemble.

Before the difficult and crucial consideration of the "Calamus" poems, it is illuminating to look at Whitman's more mature reflections on the purposes of Leaves of Grass in general and of "Calamus" in particular. In the Preface of 1872, Whitman

---

[101] Ibid., pp.425-6.

[102] Ibid., p.160.

[103] Ibid., p.163.

notes the dual intent of his total corpus and the specific emphasis of Leaves of Grass as published in the first several editions.

> "Leaves of Grass," already published, is, in its intentions, the song of a great composite democratic individual, male or female. And following on and amplifying the same purpose, I suppose I have in my mind to run through the chants of this volume, (if ever completed,) the thread-voice, more or less audible, of an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric democratic nationality.[104]

In the Preface of 1876, Whitman is more expansive. Commenting on Leaves of Grass, he notes, "In that former and main volume, composed in the flush of my health and strength, from the age of 30 to 50 years, I dwelt on birth and life, . . . my enclosing purpose being to express, above all artificial regulation and aid, the eternal bodily composite, cumulative, natural character of one's self."[105] Then in a very lengthy footnote, Whitman precised the quality of this "natural character of one's self." It is, of course, the development of a Democratic, New World character. But above all, Whitman stresses, the poem is not only directed to but is also a description of the reader. "Then I meant 'Leaves of Grass' as publish'd to be the Poem of average Identity, (of yours, whoever you are, now reading these lines.) . . . To sing the Song of that law of average Identity, and of Yourself, consistently with the divine law of the universe, is a main intention of those 'Leaves.'"[106]

---

[104] Ibid., p.743.

[105] Ibid., p.748.

[106] Ibid., p.750.

With this as overall background, Whitman then turns to the question of how to interpret his most 'scandalous' poems - the "Calamus" sequence. This passage is so crucial as to deserve quotation in full, despite its length.

> Something more may be added - for, while I am about it, I would make a full confession. I also sent out "Leaves of Grass" to arouse and set flowing in men's and women's hearts, young and old, endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever. To this terrible, irrepressible yearning, (surely more or less down underneath in most human souls) - this never-satisfied appetite for sympathy, and this boundless offering of sympathy - this universal democratic comradeship - this old, eternal, yet ever-new interchange of adhesiveness, so fitly emblematic of America - I have given in that book, undisguisedly, declaredly, the openest expression. Besides, important as they are in my purpose as emotional expressions for humanity, the special meaning of the "Calamus" cluster of "Leaves of Grass," (and more or less running through the book, and cropping out in "Drum-Taps,") mainly resides in its political significance. In my opinion, it is by a fervent, accepted development of comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, north and south, east and west - it is by this, I say, and by what goes directly and indirectly, along with it, that the United States of the future, (I cannot too often repeat,) are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, anneal'd into a living union.[107]

Hence "love and friendship" are not celebrated merely in and for themselves, but for their <u>political</u> significance. The Union of the States, and hence the working of Democracy, is dependent upon a "fervent, accepted development of comradeship." Whitman's choice of adjectives here is especially interesting: "fervent" and "accepted." The emotion must be deeply felt and it must be openly acknowledged. Hence it must be assumed that

---

[107] <u>Ibid.</u>, p.751.

many of Whitman's audience were too 'up-tight' to feel the emotion of comradeship and most certainly, even if they did so, were incapable of embracing the emotion as righteous and beneficial.

Even within Whitman's lifetime critics were attracted by the strangeness of the "Calamus" poems. Two problems have come to be recognized as central to these poems. The first and most blatant issue is the extent to which the homosexual tenor of the poems renders the universality of their theme less valid. The second and more subtle problem is the pessimism and morbidity of many of the poems. As Schyberg comments, "The glaring incongruity between these poems and the 'new Bible' in which they appeared was doubly conspicuous because of the tragic tone which ran through them."[108] The critical resolution of both these problems is exceptionally controverted and it is rare to find any two critics in final agreement on the import of the "Calamus" poems in Whitman's total corpus.

Since the key word for comradeship in Leaves of Grass and especially in "Calamus" is "adhesiveness," a consideration of the origins of this unique term is of value. Esther Shepard states the matter more succinctly than most. "Much has been written of Whitman's adhesiveness. Professor Hungerford is of the opinion that perhaps too much has been made of Whitman's use of the word. The explanation, he says, may be simply that when Whitman 'became acquainted with phrenology, he found a vocabulary for love and friendship which suited him. Amativeness meant the instinct of physical love, Adhesiveness the quality of attachment on which friendship rests.'"[109]

---

[108] Schyberg, p.158.

[109] Esther Shepard, Walt Whitman's Pose (New York, 1938), p.119.

Whitman with his pseudo-scientific interests in hydropathy and genealogy was naturally drawn to phrenology, Indeed the first edition of Leaves of Grass was sold through the house of Fowler and Wells - a firm which specialized in phrenological works. "Since Whitman was to view human nature all the rest of his life from the peculiar analytical categories of the phrenologists, it is of curious interest to discover the source of these. The poet of intuition, of sympathy, and of emotion was turning, in his preparatory years, to what he regarded as sound scientific analysis of human character on which to base his poetry."[110]

Never one to enjoy his interests at a distance, " . . . one day in July, 1849, he had his bumps read. Walt Whitman was never the same afterwards. . . . Whitman remembered what Lorenzo Fowler told him. His 'chart of bumps' affected his whole conception of himself. And considering the nature of Leaves of Grass, with its 'Song of Myself,' Whitman's conception of himself is important, and it is something which ought to be understood by critics. That Whitman himself regarded the chart as significant is shown not only from the fact that he preserved it. He had it published five times. . . . Walt Whitman wished people to know what Fowler had said about him."[111] What Lorenzo N. Fowler, a leading figure in the phrenological movement had to say about Walt was, naturally, most flattering.

> You have a large sized brain giving you much mentality as a whole. Few men have all the social feelings as strong as you. . . . You are one of the most friendly men in the world and your happiness is greatly depending on your social

---

[110] E. Hungerford, "Walt Whitman and His Chart of Bumps," AL, II (1931), p.360.

[111] Ibid., p.362.

> relations. You are familiar and open in your intercourse with others but you do not by so doing lose your dignity. . . . You are no hypocrite but are plain spoken and are what you appear to be at all times. You are independent, not wishing to be a slave yourself or to enslave others. You have your own opinions and think for yourself. You wish to work on your own hook, and are inclined to take the lead. You are very firm in general and not easily driven from your position. Your sense of justice, of right and wrong, is strong and you can see much that is unjust and inhuman in the present condition of society. . . .[112]

In fact, overall, this analysis was acutely perceptive and Whitman had reason to be proud. Its real importance would seem to have been a psychological one - to confirm Whitman in his sense of self worth and give him courage to launch into a career as poet.

But, for the purposes of "Calamus," there was another use for Whitman's phrenological lore. "When he became acquainted with phrenology, he found a vocabulary for love and friendship which suited him."[113] There is no doubt that Whitman found such a vocabulary of considerable use, for in his collection of notes on the American language, An American Primer, he had written:

> Words of approval, friendship, This is to be said among the young men of These States, that with a wonderful tenacity of friendship, and passionate fondness for friends, and always a manly readiness to make friends, they yet have remarkably few words of names for the friendly sentiments.-- They seem to be words that do not thrive here among the muscular classes, the young men of these states, rarely use, and have an aversion for; -- they never give words to their most ardent friendships.[114]

---

[112] Blodgatt & Bradley

[113] Hungerford, p.380.

[114] Horace Traubel, ed., An American Primer (Boston, 1904), p.15.

The word which Whitman borrowed from phrenology to describe these manly friendships was "Adhesiveness."

There are ambiguities here, but Whitman, as was noted above, offered a fairly clear definition of adhesiveness in the celebrated footnote in Democratic Vistas. And, "This explanation and illustration of adhesive love (the one in Democratic Vistas) is supplemented by a definition which Whitman gave to a Washington paper: 'adhesiveness -- a personal attraction between men that is stronger than ordinary friendship. The 'Calamus' poems celebrate it.'"[115]

Among the "Calamus" poems few are more filled with Whitman's belief in the vivifying power of comradeship to establish the perfect Democracy than "For You O Democracy."

> Come I will make the continent indissoluble,
> I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon.
> I will make divine magnetic lands,
> With the love of comrades,
> With the life-long love of comrades.
>
> I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
> I will make inseperable cities with their arms about each other's neck,
> By the love of comrades,
> By the manly love of comrades.
>
> For you these from me, O Democracy, to serve you ma femme!
> For you, for you I am trilling these songs.[116]

And indeed Whitman sees comradeship as the basis not just of political unity but also of all togetherness. "Yet underneath Socrates clearly see, and underneath Christ the divine I see,/ The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend

---

[115] Shepard, p.120

[116] Blodgett & Bradley, p.117.

to friend,/ Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents,/ Of city for city, and land for land."[117] Further this union is not confined only to America and Americans but is to embrace all mankind. "It seems to me there are other men in other lands yearning the thoughtful,/ . . ./ And it seems to me if I could know these men I should become attached to them as I do to men in my own lands,/ O I know we should be brethern and lovers,/ I know I should be happy with them."[118] And the key to this comradeship is the simplicity and equality of the lovers.

> Demand the most copious and close companionship of men,
> Demand the blades to rise of words, acts, beings,
> Those of the open atmosphere, coarse, sunlit, fresh, nutritious,
> Those that go their own gait, erect, stepping with freedom and command, leading not following,
> Those with a never quell'd audacity, those with sweet and lusty flesh clear of taint,
> Those that look carelessly in the faces of Presidents and governors, as to say Who are you?
> Those of earth born passion, simple, never constrain'd, never obedient.[119]

So taken is Whitman with the power and sweep of comradeship that he even inverts the ends-means dialectic and celebrates political bonds as a means of cultivating the supreme good of adhesiveness. "I believe the main purport of these States is to found a superb friendship, exalte, previously unknown,/ Because I perceive it waits, and has been always waiting, latent in all men."[120] Whitman was well aware that a

---

[117] Ibid., p.121.

[118] Ibid., p.128.

[119] Ibid., p.129.

[120] Ibid., p.133.

Democracy based on the free and spontaneous affection of adhesiveness was corrosive of the pattern of political institutions as they had developed in America. Indeed one of the main virtues of adhesiveness in Whitman's eyes was the fact that it eliminated the need for political parties. He replied to his critics in a defiant poem.

> I hear it charged against me that I sought to destroy
> institutions,
> But really I am neither for nor against institutions,
> (What indeed have I in common with them? or what with the
> destruction of them?)
> Only I will establish in the Mannahatta and in every city
> of these States inland and seaboard,
> And in the fields and woods, and above every keel little
> or large that dents the water,
> Without edifices or rules or trustees or any argument,
> The institution of the dear love of comrades.[121]

Like Marx's dictatorship of the proletariat, so too the American party system would wither away - unneeded by regenerated man activated by love of his fellows. Thus in Whitman's ideal vision his polity becomes a New Jerusalem.

> I dream'd in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks
> of the whole of the rest of the earth,
> I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,
> Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love,
> it led the rest,
> It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that
> city,
> And in all their looks and words.[122]

All of this is unexceptional, if utopian, but, alas, it is only a partial reading of the "Calamus" poems. The whole sequence introduces other important and unsettling elements

---

[121] Ibid., p.128.

[122] Ibid., p.133.

which must be given their due. Hence, in the view of one highly regarded critic, "At the time of its appearance Calamus was intended as a program, a chapter in the new Bible; and it was a revelation, the frankest of Whitman's whole gospel. His "City of Friends" was not a new Philadelphia with the motto, "City of Brotherly Love," but a colony of homosexuals."[123] As will be discussed later in this paper, there is a sense in which the family (and hence heterosexual relationships) ought not and can not be the basic element in a public or political society - which is not to say that inverted relations are the basis of politics, merely to deny that "healthy" heterosexuality is either. But in any case, the erotic nature of many of the "Calamus" poems cannot in fairness be overlooked.

To select but a few examples of poetry celebrating the love between men is to render the general tenor of "Calamus" as a whole. In his opening poem Whitman declares his purpose. "I proceed for all who are or have been young men,/ To tell the secret of my nights and days,/ To celebrate the need of comrades."[124] And more directly, "For an athlete is enamour'd of me, and I of him,/ But toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me eligible to burst forth,/ I dare not tell it in words, not even in these songs."[125]

And unlike the adhesiveness which was to be the ground of the City of Friends, all too often this same love is depicted as exclusive and private, a love which draws the poet away from wider comradeship and even from his art. ". . . I am silent, I require nothing further,/ I cannot answer the question of

---

[123] Schyberg, p.168.

[124] Blodgett & Bradley, p.112.

[125] Ibid., p.132.

appearances of that of identity beyond the grave,/ But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,/ He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me."[126]

So jealous a love is this private adhesiveness that the poet is often left desolated by the absence or neglect of his lover. But by far the most disconsolate of the "Calamus" poems is, one which was deleted in 1867.

> Hours continuing long, sore and heavy-hearted,
> Hours of the dusk, when I withdrawn to a lonesome and unfrequented spot, seating myself, leaning my face in my hands;
> . . .
> Hours discouraged, distracted - for the one I cannot content myself without, soon I saw him content himself without me;
> Hours when I am forgotten . . .
> . . .
> Hours of my torment - I wonder if other men ever have the like, out of the like feelings?
> Is there even one other like me - distracted - his friend, his lover, lost to him?[127]

The pensive and mournful note of these "Calamus" poems is prolonged, intensified and universalized in two of the most notable poems in the sequence, "Scented Herbage of my Breast" and "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances." In the former poem Whitman links sex and death. "Through me shall the words be said to make a death exhilarating,/ Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may accord with it,/ Give me yourself, for I see that you belong to me now above all, and are folded inseparately together, you love and death are."[128] The poem intimates that only in death can the truth of love be revealed beyond the

---

[126] Ibid., p.121.

[127] Ibid., p.596.

[128] Ibid., p.115.

transitory appearances of things. Thus the poem implies something very strange in Whitman's thought and most atypical - a suspicion of Nature. As the title of the latter poem indicates, this suspicion of and estrangement from Nature goes even further to a fear that Nature is in decay.

> That may-be reliance and hope are but speculations after all,
> That may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only,
> May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills, shining and flowing waters,
> The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms, may-be these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions, and the real something has yet to be known.[129]

It is significant that this attitude is revealed in the "Calamus" poems, as though in some way the emotion of adhesiveness was linked for Whitman with a turn from his usual embrace of the world around him. As Edwin Miller has noted, "'Calamus' is a lament for the loss of love. It matters little whether it records the loss of a specific lover. . . . Hands reach out to touch the beloved. . . but almost at once the psychic and cultural censor intervenes, 'Thou shalt not touch.' Though love is, or should be, a dialogue, in these songs hands briefly touch, and eyes meet in a silent exchange, but the poet utters a monologue of separateness."[130] And in an even more dire analysis, Griffith writes, "Having thrust heterosexualism into the role of supreme life-giver, Whitman had to see the way of homosexualism is a way of unproductivity and of unremitting lifelessness."[131]

---

[129] Ibid., p.120.

[130] Edwin H. Miller, Walt Whitman's Poetry: Psychological Journey (Boston, 1968), pp.150-1.

[131] Clark Griffith, "Sex and Death in 'Calamus'," PQ, XXXIX (1960), p.23.

But there is one final string to Whitman's lyre in "Calamus," a theme which would seem to deny many of the attitudes and problems noted above. For in several poems Whitman makes plain that his poetry celebrating adhesiveness is more real and more important than any suggestion of love or longing or perturbation contained in them. The clearest statement of this is the conclusion of "Not Heaving From My Ribb'd Breast Only."

> Not in the murmurs of my dreams while I sleep,
> Not the other murmurs of these incredible dreams of every day,
> Nor in the limbs and sense of my body that take you and dismiss you continually - not there,
> Not in any or all of them O adhesiveness! O pulse of my life!
> Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than in these songs.[132]

From this passage James E. Miller, Jr., concludes, "In other words, the songs become the only necessary outlet for the poet's adhesiveness."[133] But such disclaimers in favor of the spirituality of adhesiveness are not altogether convincing. As Schyberg comments, "The Calamus poems are all love poems. They express a homosexual emotion in all its nuances, from yearning and personal attraction to happy union, envy and jealousy."[134] However, two important qualifications are necessary. First, as Allen emphasizes through his distinction between "homoerotic" and "homosexual," there is no solid evidence that Whitman ever actually experienced homosexual love. Not only is "Calamus" a

---

[132] Blodgett & Bradley, p.120.

[133] James E. Miller, "Whitman's 'Calamus'," PMLA, LXXIX, (1964), p.263.

[134] Schyberg, p.159.

mixture of sexual adhesiveness and broader political comradeship, but also the revisions of 1867 and Whitman's subsequent work both tended to de-emphasize the former element and develop the latter.

Several interpretations for this undeniable shift have been offered. Schyberg, whose interpretation has been the starting point for most subsequent commentators, considers "Calamus" to be in no way a social program, but rather strictly a series of love poems. However the experience of the war and more mature insight caused Whitman to alter the poems to fit his later vision of himself as social prophet.

> As Holloway says, his loudly proclaimed "Friendship" revealed itself to be "a jealous emotion." Whitman discovered that himself; therefore the deletions - he had to resume the prophet role and to emphasize it. In 1871, in Democratic Vistas, he tried to interpret all of Calamus in a social sense, to make the word "adhesiveness" into a democratic term, and in 1867 he deleted it from the Calamus passage in "Starting from Paumanok."[135]

And as Schyberg says of Drum Taps, Whitman's work on the Civil War, "The diffuse, all-embracing lyrical emotion was now unified by a definite theme. His ego-centric emotion became less arrogantly subjective; his feeling of comradeship was not an egotistic feeling, but was really democratic. This theme provided a basis for an interpretation of the Calamus sentiment. Many of the striking, earlier themes could fit into this new integration. . ."[136] Allen follows Schyberg's lead almost completely.

> Let those who wish interpret Calamus as an allegory of democratic brotherhood. The fact remains that the expression is the poetry of love, and sometimes almost as tender

---

[135] Ibid., p.169.

[136] Ibid., p.182.

> and beautiful as the expression of affection and friendship in Shakespeare's sonnets, which these poems parallel in a number of ways.[137]

Hence the variations between the original "Calamus" and the 1867 version is best explained, like Schyberg, in terms of later growth. "First the love poems of 1860 developed into a search for lovers among the readers, then came the creation of an ideal 'city of friends,' which gradually became a social and patriotic program. Now the poet in his old age looks to God for perfect comradeship."[138]

Such interpretations discern in Whitman's life and work a neat developmental pattern. Unfortunately the upshot of this interpretation is to consider late Whitman as the truest, finest Whitman - which most assuredly is not the case. However most critics with slight variations follow this scheme. As one such clearly states, " . . . Whitman's return to comradeship after 1865 marked his entry onto a more serene kind of poetry. Never again were sexual elements brought to the foreground. In their place, Whitman substituted the idealized attachments that are dramatized in Drum-Taps, or he began establishing the kinship between homosexualism and democracy. . ."[139]

These interpretations are the result of two difficulties. The first of these is the refusal to take Whitman the editor, the political commentator, the political theorist, with any real seriousness and to concentrate almost exclusively on his poetic opus. The second difficulty is the tendency to fuse Whitman's political thought with his metaphysical ideas. While there was

---

[137] Handbook, p.152.

[138] Ibid., p.198.

[139] Griffith, p.38.

an undoubted and dramatic development of Whitman's ideas on death from the naive optimism of 1855 to the sudden pessimism of 1860 and thence to the gradually more serene and even Olympian acceptance of the late Whitman, this paper would maintain that Whitman's political views over the years were remarkably homogeneous. Hence the revisions of "Calamus," for example, which when all is said and done are really rather minor, can well be explained merely as an effort to tone down the homosexual emphasis of the poems, as well as, admitting the other metaphysical strand in Whitman's thought, an effort to relieve the pessimism of the 1860 edition. A later chapter will offer an overall view of Whitman's thought on Democracy. But at this stage it is important to note that the "Calamus" poems, at least from the aspect of Whitman's political thought, express nothing startingly original or unqiue; rather they fit quite smoothly into Whitman's general scheme of Democracy.

"Calamus - 5" in the original 1860 edition was subsequently dropped and mined for two other pieces, "For You O Democracy," which was cited above as heralding the vivifying power of comradeship in establishing the perfect Democracy, and "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice," which will be considered below. One brief passage from the original poem of 1860, however, stands as a fine instance of Whitman's use of the love of Individuals to found and bind Democracy.

> There shall from me be a new friendship - It shall be
> called after my name,
> It shall circulate through The States, indifferent of
> place,
> It shall twist and intertwist them through and around each
> other - Compact shall they be, showing new signs,
> Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom,
> Those who love each other shall be invincible,
> They shall finally make America completely victorious,

in my name.[140]

As Schyberg has noted, "Whitman's whole fanatical, sentimental idea about a democracy that should be founded on the manly friendships, on the comradeship between men, got its confirmation at the outbreak of the war in the fellowship and generosity of the youth of America."[141] While one might disagree that the notion was fanatical and sentimental, still Drum Taps did prove to be a record of the proving out of Whitman's Democracy based on comradeship.

> It shall be customary in the houses and street to see
> manly affection,
> The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face
> lightly,
> The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,
> The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.
> These shall tie you and bind you stronger than hoops of
> iron,
> I, ecstatic, O partners! O lands! with the love of
> lovers tie you.
>
> (Were you looking to be held together by lawyers?
> Or by an agreement on a paper? or by arms?
> Nay, nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere.)[142]

The bond of legal documents did not hold in 1861, but the bond of comradeship in arms, of manly affection, did and in so doing restored the Union and with it the possibility of Democracy.

---

[140] Blodgett & Bradley, p.609.

[141] Schyberg, p.191.

[142] Blodgett & Bradley, p.237.

CHAPTER V

Late Whitman

From 1855 through 1872 - from "Song of Myself" to his paralytic stroke on January 23, 1873 - was Whitman's great productive period as a poet. Thereafter, despite an occasional poem, Whitman's output was largely in prose, most notably Specimen Days and Collect (1882) and November Boughs (1888). This chapter will examine this last period of Whitman's career.

Whitman best expresses what he discovered in the course of the Civil War and how it rounded out, confirmed, and enlivened his political beliefs when he wrote in "Three Years Summ'd Up," "Those three years I consider the greatest privilege and satisfaction, . . . and, of course, the most profound lesson of my life. . . . It aroused and brought out and decided undream'd-of depths of emotion. It has given me my most fervent views of the true ensemble and extent of the States."[1] For despite Whitman's saunters along Broadway and his friendship with the trolley drivers, he had not really come much in contact with the average citizen, and in any case his acquaintance was largely limited to residents of New York City and Brooklyn. And so, time and again, he was to be amazed by the simplicity and directness of the soldiers he fell among and ministered to.

> The actual soldier of 1862-'65, North and South, with all his ways, his incredible dauntlessness, habits,

---

[1] Stovall, I, 113.

> practices, tastes, language, his fierce friendship, his appetite, rankness, his superb strength, and animality, lawless gait, and a hundred unnamed lights and shades of camp, I say, will never be written - perhaps must not and should not.[2]

The great virtues of the Individual whom he had celebrated in his poetry were suddenly found to be unconsciously residing in the soldiers of the Union. The Individual was not only found to be real, but more wondrous yet, to be acting in concert with his fellows, bound to them by the comaraderie of the soldiers' fellowship, and acting for the preservation and ennoblement of the Democracy. "The mud was very deep. The men had their usual burdens, overcoats, knapsacks, guns and blankets. Along and along they filed by me, with often a laugh, a song, a cheerful word, but never once a murmur. I may have been odd, but I never before so realized the majesty and reality of the American people en masse. It fell upon me like a great awe."[3] It was as though when Whitman traveled to Virginia to see his wounded brother, he had stumbled upon the New Jerusalem.

That this experience altered his personal way of life is clear; it did not alter but rather renewed and strengthened his political beliefs. The Democracy was not, as he had all along suspected, the political parties and the hack time servers. "I have said somewhere that the three Presidentiads preceeding 1861 show'd how the weakness of rulers are just as eligible here in American under republican, as in Europe under dynastic influence."[4] Rather now the Democracy was in practice, in living flesh and blood, revealed to be precisely the common laborers

---

[2] Ibid., p.117.

[3] Ibid., p.32.

[4] Ibid., p.24.

and average citizens who Whitman had proclaimed it to be in the first two editions of Leaves of Grass. "Down in the abysms of New World humanity there had form'd and harden'd a primal hard-pan of national Union will, determin'd and in the majority, refusing to be tampered with or argued against, confronting all emergencies, and capable at any time of bursting all surface bonds, and breaking out like an earthquake."[5]

Indeed through Specimen Days Whitman discerns among the populace of America precisely the dual identity which he had heralded in 1855 - Individuality and Ensemble. In a chauvinistic mood reminiscent of the spread-eagle style of his journalistic days, speaking of Canada, Whitman notes:

> From what I already see, I should say the young native population of Canada was growing up, forming a hardy, democratic, intelligent, radically sound, and just as American, good-natured and individualistic race, as the average range of specimens among us. As among us, too, I please myself by considering that this element, though it may not be the majority, promises to be the leven which must eventually leven the whole lump.[6]

The stress on the role of the Individual is clear. What is of greater interest here is Whitman's subtle distinction on this theme. No longer is everyman about to reveal himself as the Individual, but only a part of the whole, a select element, which, in terms echoing the Bible and yet reminiscent of Marx, will leaven the lump. And this leaven of Individuals he sees as progressively and inexorably more numerous and bound into a fraternal and political union of comradeship. " . . . a palpable outcropping of that personal comradeship I look forward to as the subtlest, strongest future hold of this many-item'd

---

[5] Ibid., p.25.

[6] Ibid., p.240.

Union - are not only constantly visible here in these mighty channels of men, but they form the rule and the average."[7] Whitman is true to his pre-War vision - Individuals bound together in aggregate by the ties of comradeship.

Thus it is clear in Whitman's mind that though the process may be forced to start with a leaven in the lump, the process once initiated is a progressive one. So despite the necessary interlude of, say, a divine literatus, still in the end all will be equal, but on a level far higher than now imagined. "Other lands have their vitality in a few, a class, but we have it in the bulk of the people. Our leading men are not of much account and never have been, but the average of the people is immense, beyond all history. . . . We will not have great individuals or great leaders, but a great average bulk, unprecedentedly great."[8] In Whitman's Utopia all men will be geniuses; all men will be aristocrats. As an example of this, Whitman points to Grant. In the autumn of 1879 Whitman writes, " . . . he proves how an average western farmer, mechanic, boatman, carried by the tides of circumstances, perhaps caprices, into a position of incredible military or civic responsibilities, . . . may steer his way fitly and steadily through them all. . ."[9]

Whitman here acknowledges the interaction of Individuals and the aggregate or Ensemble. If a few leavening Individuals are necessary to start the process in train, in due course the very fact of living within the aggregate fosters and encourages the development of Individuals. The relationship can and should

---

[7] Ibid., p.172.

[8] Ibid., p.224.

[9] Ibid., p.226.

be a symbiotic one - for the benefit of both Identities - the Self and the En Masse. And so the duties of an American political leader in the last quarter of the nineteenth century are, " . . . to compact and fraternize the States, encourage their materialistic and industrial development, soothe and expand their self-poise, and tie all and each with resistless double ties not only of intertrade, but human comradeship."[10] The creation of a worthy aggregate or ensemble is a political task and, as Whitman had said from the start, such a union, though made more likely through material progress, can be founded only on comradeship, on adhesiveness. "I would inaugurate from America, for this purpose, new formulas - international poems. I have thought that the invisible root out of which the poetry deepest in, and dearest to, humanity grows, is Friendship. I have thought that both in patriotism and song (even among their grandest shows past) we have adhered too long to petty limits, and that the time has come to enfold the world."[11]

When in his later years Whitman wrote "Origins of Attempted Secession," his years of political observation led him to a definite and very sour view of partisan strife, the cause he would say of the war. "For twenty-five years previous to the outbreak, the controlling 'Democratic' nominating conventions of our Republic . . . were getting to represent and be composed of more and more putrid and dangerous materials."[12] In concentrating on the nominating convention, of course, Whitman chose the most blatant and mercenary manifestation of political jobbing. However, as he noted, "Remember they had come to be the fountains

---

[10] Ibid., p.227.

[11] Carolyn Wells & Alfred F. Goldsmith, eds., Rivulets of Prose (New York, 1928), p.211.

[12] Stovall, II, 264.

and tissues of the American body politic, forming, as it were, the whole blood, legislation, office-holding &c."[13] Some gauge of Whitman's detestation of professional politicians can be gathered in the following brief excerpt from his catalogue of "typical" members of a nominating convention.

> The members who composed it were, seven-eights of them, the meanest kind of bawling and blowing office-holders, office-seekers, pimps, malignants, conspirators, murderers, fancy-men, custom-house clerks, contractors, kept-editors, spaniels well-train'd to carry and fetch, jobbers, infidels, disunionists, terrorists, mail-riflers, duellists, creatures of the President, creatures of would-be Presidents. . . .[14]

And as he concludes, "Is it strange that a thunder-storm follow'd such morbid and stifling cloud-strata."[15]

Whitman sees all this as a cautionary tale of politics. "History is to record those three Presidentiads, and especially the administrations of Fillmore and Buchanan, as so far our top-most warning and shame. . . . All the main purposes for which the government was established were openly denied."[16] Indeed, Whitman has no hesitation in blaming the North for the war, for, as he accurately noted, ". . . if at the opening of the contest the abstract duality-question of slavery and quiet could have been submitted to a direct popular vote, as against their opposite, they would have triumphantly carried the day in a majority of the northern States. . . ."[17] Whitman tallies his list of causes and, not surprisingly, finds the corruptions of the political

---

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., p.265.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., pp.265-66.

[17] Ibid., p.266.

process the dominant cause of the war. "The hot passions of the South - the strange mixture in the North of inertia, incredulity, and conscious power - the incendiarism of the abolitionists - the rascality and grip of the politicians, unparallel'd in any land, any age."[18]

The real disappointment to Whitman was not the crisis of secession, which the Union survived triumphantly, but rather the aftermath. "Meantime elections go on, laws are pass'd, political parties struggle, issue their platforms, &c., just the same as before."[19] But as usual Whitman opts for hope in the long run. "Out of that war not only has the nationality of the States escaped from being strangled, but more than any of the rest, in my opinion, more than the north itself, the vital heart and breath of the south have escaped from the pressure of a general nightmare, and are henceforth to enter on a life, development, and active freedom. . . ."[20] In another section of Collect Whitman, speaking of the continental powers, Russia and America, notes the elements of greatness which must in due course lead to the perfection of Democracy in America and the lifting of the Romanov yoke in Russia.

> The variety of stock-elements and tongues, to be resolutely fused in a common identity and union at all hazards - the idea, perennial through the ages, that they both have their historic and divine mission - the fervent element of manly friendship throughout the whole people, surpass'd by no other races - the grand expanse of territorial limits and boundaries - the unform'd and nebulous state of many things, not yet permanently settled, but agreed on all

---

[18] Ibid., p.315.

[19] Ibid., p.267.

[20] Ibid., p.268.

> hands to be the preparations of an infinitely greater future. . .[21]

Once again Whitman has struck his common theme - the idea of mission rendered possible by comradeship in a favorable environment.

In the last years of his life Whitman published three sets of collected essays, November Boughs, A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads, and Good-bye My Fancy. It is indicative of Whitman's consistency of political ideas that his prose works of the 1880's parallel so closely his prose of the 1840's. Thus, restating his grand theme, Whitman wrote in the "Preface" to Democratic Vistas with Other Papers in the British edition, "I say, too, we (We who, in many departments, ways, make the building up of the masses, by building up grand individuals, our shibboleth: and in brief that is the marrow of this book.) are not to look so much to changes, ameliorations, and adaptations in Politics as to those of Literature and (thence) domestic Sociology."[22]

In an essay "America's Bulk Average," Whitman again underlines that whatever the role of Individuals and Poets, the nation must in the end come to rest on the quality of the Ensemble. If I were ask'd persona to specify the one point of America's people on which I mainly rely, I should say the final average or bulk quality of the whole."[23] And again, "I am not sure but my main and chief however indefinite claim for any page of mine w'd be its derivation, or seeking to derive itself, f'm that average quality of the American bulk, the people, and getting back to

---

[21] Ibid., p.325.

[22] Ibid., p.600.

[23] Ibid., p.706.

it again."[24]

Even, or more correctly, especially in literature, the genius of the American author is his solidarity with the People en masse. "Ensemble is the tap-root of National Literature."[25] But this literature must be one with the Ensemble and not just batten off it. "What are now deepest wanted in the States as roots for their literature are Patriotism, Nationality, Ensemble, or the ideas of these, and the uncompromising genesis and saturation of these. Not the mere bawling and braggadocio of them, but the radical emotion-facts, the fervor and perennial fructifying spirit at fountain-head."[26] This principle is of central importance to Whitman, for his tireless strictures against professional politicians are exactly their manipulation of the aspirations and beliefs of the Ensemble - ideals they do not really share with the People because they have divorced themselves from the Ensemble. "The bulk of official persons . . . were just players in a game. Liberty, Equality, Union, and all the grand words of the Republic, were, in their mouths, but lures, decoys, chisel'd likenesses of dead wood, to catch the masses."[27]

But, as has been noted when considering Democratic Vistas, Whitman in the wake of the post war collapse of idealism felt the need to develop the figure of the divine literatus as mentor for the growth of Individuals. In A Backward Glance Whitman defends both his emphasis on Individuals and his use of an elite to stimulate such character development. "I have allow'd the

---

[24] Ibid., p.707.

[25] Ibid., p.664.

[26] Ibid., p.666.

[27] Ibid., p.582.

stress of my poems from beginning to end to bear upon American individuality and assist it - not only because that is a great lesson in Nature, amid all her generalizing laws, but as counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy. . . ."[28] This is a most interesting passage, for it is rare to find Whitman admitting to the existence of flaws in Democracy. But even as in the 1840's Whitman was wary of Democracy as practiced in New York because of the blind loyalty of untutored immigrants to the party machine, so now in the Gilded Age, Whitman apparently saw similar dangers - only intensified now by the impact of the Industrial Revolution. Hence to counteract the dangers of an aggregate manipulated by economic and political cliques, Whitman advises a stress on the role of the Individual. "Confronting the dangers of the State, the aggregate, by appeals (each writer, each artist after his kind) to the sympathies of Individualism, its pride, love of grand physique, urge of spiritual development, and the need of comrades."[29]

On the other hand, however, as Whitman makes abundantly plain, he is not advocating either an Individuality which would exist without regard to the community, the Ensemble, nor is he in championing the role of the divine literatus proposing the establishment of an elite. "Democracy has been so retarded and jeopardized by powerful personalities, that its first instincts are fain to clip, conform, bring in stragglers, and reduce everything to a dead level. While the ambitious thought of my song is to help the forming of a great aggregate Nation, it is, perhaps, altogether through the forming of myriads of fully

---

[28] Ibid., p.726.

[29] Holloway, Uncollected Poetry and Prose, p.56.

develop'd and enclosing individuals."[30]

Indeed the political thought of the late Whitman is most notable not for his insistence on the role of the divine literatus but rather for his reasons for proposing such a figure. If in the ante-bellum days Whitman could wax sulpherous over the state of America, still he was optimistic that the good sense of the ordinary citizen would right the situation - as indeed seemed to come true in the persons of the common soldier of the Union forces and of the great democratic leadership of Lincoln. But in 1881 such saviours seemed less reliable and less likely. Hence the need of "a race of giant bards. . . to counteract dangers, immensest ones, already looming in America - measureless corruption in politics - what we call religion, a mere task of wax or lace; - for ensemble, that most cankerous, offensive of all earth's shows - a vast and varied community, prosperous and fat with wealth of money and products and business ventures. . . ."[31] It would seem then that the very material abundance and success of America frightened Whitman lest the nation forget its unifying principles and stated goals.

The danger thus in the post war world was no longer confined to self serving professional politicians, but also extended to the attitude and aspirations of the citizenry at large. But nevertheless Whitman continued to pin his ultimate hopes in the People en masse - but now more narrowly defined and more suited to the society of the Industrial Age. " . . . it remains to be definitely avow'd that the native-born middle-class population of quite all the United States - the average of farmers and mechanics everywhere - the real, though latent and silent

---

[30] Stovall, II, 726.

[31] Ibid., p.486.

bulk of America, city or country, presents a magnificent mass of material, never before equaled on earth."[32]

Thus speaking of the goal of Democracy in that section of Collect entitled "Notes Left Over," Whitman reverts again to the theme he had outlined in the opening lines of Leaves of Grass, "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,/ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse." Adverting to the latter Identity, Whitman writes:

> . . . only here in America . . . has at last arisen, and now stands, what never before took positive form and sway, the People - and that viewed en masse, and while fully acknowledging deficiencies, dangers, faults, this people, inchoate, latent, not yet come to majority, nor to its own religious, literary, or aesthetic expression, yet affords, today, an exultant justification of all the faith, all the hopes and prayers and prophecies of good men through the past - the stablest, solidest-based government of the world - the most assured in a future. . .[33]

But as has been said, to criticize is to care, and in this Whitman did not hesitate to show his concern. As Whitman saw clearly as the nation grew and prospered and the immigrants became more numerous, the very material progress which rendered Democracy more attainable also, in its materialism and egalitarianism, posed new dangers to the Individual and hence to the People Ensemble. "Our country seems to be threatened with a sort of ossification of the spirit. . . . the current that bears us is one broadly and deeply materialistic and infidel. . . . For I do not believe the people of these days are happy. The public countenance lacks its bloom of love and its freshness of faith. For want of these, it is cadaverous as a corpse."[34]

---

[32] Ibid., p.487.

[33] Ibid., p.338.

[34] Holloway, Uncollected Poetry and Prose, p.90.

Hence his task of criticism. "I can conceive of no better service in the United States, henceforth, . . . than boldly exposing the weakness, liabilities and infinite corruptions of democracy."[35] But in concert with his belief in the progressive and evolutionary trends inherent in American Democracy, Whitman can confidently state, "Soon, it will be fully realized that ostensible wealth and money-making, show, luxury, &c., imperatively necessitate something beyond - namely, the sane, etern moral and spiritual-esthetic attributes, elements."[36] In fact, Whitman's ideal citizenry of Democracy was a large and stable middle class. The extremes of wealth or poverty were to be considered anomalies; the great broad mass was, as ever, to be egalitarian at root. "The final culmination of this vast and varied Republic will be the production and perennial establishment of millions of comfortable city homesteads and moderate-sized farms, healthy and independent, single separate ownership, fee simple, life in them complete but cheap, within reach of all."[37]

In truth Whitman's Democracy remained forever fixed by his early experiences with the political party system; the true corrupting influence and the greatest danger in America, when all was said and done, was not economic but political. "It still remains doubtful whether general suffrage, elections, &c., will ever secure, officially, the best wit and capacity - whether, through them, the first-class genius of America will ever personally appear in the high political stations. . . ."[38]

---

[35] Stovall, II, 340.

[36] Ibid., p.530.

[37] Ibid., p.539.

[38] Ibid., pp.530-1.

And again later in Collect, "More precious than all worldly riches is Freedom . . . entire freedom from party rings and mere conventions in Politics."[39] But by this stage in his life Whitman was generally willing to let this pass and to substitute for the leadership of politicians the more moral and ideal leadership of poets. "We elect Presidents, Congressmen, &c., not so much to have them consider and decide for us, but as surest practical means of expressing the will of majorities on mooted questions, measures, &c."[40] The parties and the politicians have their uses and if Whitman does not rail against them as fiercely as he once did, it is merely because he now considers their role to be wholly secondary in the Democracy.

But in the end Whitman, never one to fear repetition of an important truth, returns at the conclusion of the Collect to his, and democracy's, perennial paradox:

> One of the problems presented in America these times is, how to combine one's duty and policy as a member of associations, societies, brotherhoods or what not, and one's obligations to the State and Nation, with essential freedom as an individual personality, without which freedom a man cannot grow or expand, or be full, modern, heroic, democratic, American.[41]

The solution to this paradox, as has been noted elsewhere in this paper, lies in comradeship. In Collect Whitman wrote, "Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man . . . seems to promise the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States. . ."[42] In Walt Whitman's Workshop, Furness published some jottings

---

[39] Ibid., p.538.

[40] Ibid., p.531.

[41] Ibid., p.532.

[42] Camden Edition, V, p.131.

Whitman had drawn up for a projected essay in comradeship. Whitman had entitled these memoranda, "Notes for Lectures on Democracy and 'Adhesiveness'." Starting with an attack on inequality and the "present relics of imported feudal manners," Whitman avers, "that America must haughtily advance and support her own types, ruder and more generous, full of practical life, - a type of man to whose nostrils the air of These States has been breathes for the breath of life."[43] More to the point and indicative of the spirit of egalitarianism implied above, Whitman notes of American politics, "I observe shallow men are put in the greatest offices, even in the Presidency - and yet with all that, I entirely accept the movements of American politics. I know that underneath all this putridity of Presidents and Congressmen that has risen at the top, lie pure waters a thousand fathoms deep. - They make the real ocean, whatever scum may be on its surface."[44] The problem then is to insure that these clear waters be swept clean of the effulvia which floats so lightly to the surface. "Equality of all rights and persons is imperiously demanded by self-preservation - The cause of the ruin of all states that have been ruined has been that the whole body of the inhabitants without exception were not equally interested in the preservation of those states or cities - or that a portion were degraded."[45] Hence a spirit of absolute equality is essential.

But Whitman is not an indiscriminate leveler, for he well knows that equality is possible only among free and independent Individuals. In describing such Individuals Whitman makes plain

---

[43] Furness, p.55.

[44] Ibid., p.57.

[45] Ibid., p.58.

that comradeship is possible only among such men of independent strength. "There is something in the close presence of any candid and clean person - what it is I do not know. . . but it fills me with wonderful and exquisite sensations -- It is enough to be with him."[46] And indeed in another place, Whitman sees the Individual as god-like. "Not even God, is so great to me as Myself is great to me. - Who knows but I too shall in time be a God as pure and prodigious as any of them? - Now I stand here in the Universe, a personality perfect and sound; all things and all other beings as an audience at the play-house perpetually and perpetually calling me out from behind my curtain."[47] In this instance, Whitman, speaking of himself, seems egotistical in the extreme - but it must be kept in mind that Whitman sees himself as Everyman; he was the least exclusive of men. "I am large, I contain multitudes."[48]

Thus Whitman's aim is a public community of such god-like Individuals. This community alone is adequate to the business of Democracy. Hence Whitman's goal has little in common either with partisan political parties or with nonpartisan reform movements. "My final aim: To concentrate around me the leaders of all reforms - transcendentalists, spiritualists, free soilers. - We want a living principle as nature has, under which nothing can go wrong. This must be vital through the United States, fit for the largest causes and actions, and the smallest."[49]

This is a most important statement for it underlines

---

[46] Ibid., p.62.

[47] Holloway, Uncollected, II, p.83.

[48] Blodgett & Bradley, p.88.

[49] Furness, p.62.

Whitman's conviction that not only is the political warfare of parties irrelevant to Democracy, but even attempts to reform the political and social processes of the nation are at best patchwork endeavors. The only true generation of Democracy arises from an altogether different sphere - a moral sphere based on comradeship among equals. Thus even Whitman's notion of the uncommitted electorate is only a partial measure, a half-way house en route to the true Democracy.

CHAPTER VI

Analysis of Whitman's Thought

One of the problems in discussing Whitman's vision of the citizen in a mass democracy is the terms in which the debate is normally cast: Walt the celebrator of democratic truisms or Walt the naive Rousseauist. In short, Whitman is considered largely superficial; he lacks the grasp of the complexities and subtleties of the democratic process of governing. But do not his attacks on politicians often detail quite accurately abuses with which even the most 'hard-nosed' political scientist would agree? And can Asselineau's judgment be wholly correct when he says that Whitman's vision was "un conception très Jeffersonienne et mieux adaptée à une société agricole qu'à une société industrielle. Et c'est la raison pour laquelle, malgré son enthousiasme pour les réalizations étonnantes de l'industrie, Whitman parfois songe avec nostalgie à la civilisation agricole de naguère."[1] For if this Brooklyn and Broadway boy was so nostalgic for rural life, was he perhaps seeking something other than a 'return to innocence?'

Rousseau, like Nietzsche, has been subject to more than normal misinterpretation, distortion, and outright slander - and this not infrequently by scholars who might be expected to know better: More perceptively, a twentieth century philosopher has noted:

---

[1]Asselineau, p.448.

> The rebellious reaction against society during which Rousseau and the Romanticists discovered intimacy was directed first of all against the leveling demands of the social, against what we would call today the conformism inherent in every society. It is important to remember that this rebellion took place before the principle of equality, upon which we have blamed conformism since Tocqueville, had had the time to assert itself in either the social or political realm. Whether a nation consists of equals or nonequals is of no importance in this respect, for society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest.[2]

Thus several elements are in play in the Rousseauist tradition - and nostalgia is not one of them.

First, Arendt notes that equality per se can not necessarily be blamed for the sort of conformity which Tocqueville and Whitman both saw as a danger to the independent spirit. Indeed it is the familial element, an innately hierarchial structure, which Arendt sees as the root of the problem. Thus the extension of familial attitudes into public life is countered by Rousseau and by Whitman by a stress on 'intimacy,' that is some sort of union between equals.

Now Rousseau, in condemning the hierarchical, familial cast of feudal order, is advocating individuality. Rousseau saw that, "The striking coincidence of the rise of society with the decline of the family indicates clearly that what actually took place was the absorption of the family unit into corresponding social groups."[3] And hence, "The phenomenon of conformism is characteristic of the last stage of this modern

---

[2] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago, 1958), pp.36-37.

[3] Ibid., p.37.

development."[4] Even so Tocqueville saw that the destruction of the feudal order based on Family could well reduce each soul to an equality of isolation and hence open the community to despotism. The problem then is to achieve an equality which is not an equality of isolation - but to find bonding elements among individuals other than familial ties.

But if it is simplistic to identify Whitman (and the Transcendentalists in general) with the popular misreading of Rousseau, the other common charge against Whitman is even more absurd. And yet George Frederickson, a most respected and competent historian of the ante-bellum era, can bluntly state:

> Whitman did not propose any practical alternatives to the political party for the expression of the general will; he had the anarchists' faith that formal government can be replaced by the spontaneous action of the people. He differed from the moral reformers in his radical democratic belief that the people did not need to be reformed. . . . Whitman spoke for the desire of many Americans to free themselves of institutions, the past - all accumulated baggage - and 'light out for the territories' where self-fulfillment supposedly awaited them.[5]

This constitutes the loose and banal charge of 'anarchism.' More accurately one could say that Whitman refused to acknowledge the partisan system as either representative or productive of Democracy.

But, once more, Whitman was not, as the nineteenth century was wont to call such thinkers, a political economist, but a moralist or even a political philosopher. The easy and common out is to attempt to render Whitman's thought under the rubric 'mystical.' Such ought to be recognized as an admission of

---

[4] Ibid.

[5] Frederickson, pp.21-2.

analytical failure rather than an insight. But if we are to take Whitman at his word, it demands that Whitman's notions of Democracy be taken altogether seriously and not dismissed as arrant but verbally pleasing nonsense. In short, stock charges like 'Rousseauism' and 'anarchism,' not to mention 'homosexualism,' must give way to a root consideration of what it meant for Whitman to live in and feel responsible for a mass democracy. Once the public seriousness of Whitman is lost, he critically degenerates into either 'The Prophet' or "The Good Gray Poet' - and this writer doubts that such interpretations come close to doing justice to Whitman's poetry, or Whitman's idealism, or Whitman's politics.

In her most perceptive work, The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt applies her techniques of existential phenomenology to an examination of the political socialization of man. She begins her analysis by noting, "All human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men."[6] Now human activities can be divided into three types: labor, work and action. Labor is that activity necessary for the survival and propagation of the race; labor is concerned with the biological and with consumption -- it is basically animal. Work has to do with the production of objects which endure; it is not merely the use of but the mastery of nature. Fabrication then is nobler than mere labor, for it imposes human forms to erect a world of some permanence. " . . . Plato saw immediately that if one makes man the measure of all things for use, it is man the user and instrumentalizer, and not man the speaker and doer or man the thinker, to whom the world is being related."[7]

---

[6]Arendt, p.23.

[7]Ibid., p.138.

But speaking or doing is the final and highest form of activity - Action. Action can occur only among persons; it is radically inter-personal. As such action is always political.

Here Arendt makes a crucial distinction for the understanding of what constitutes the political - the difference between strength and power. "While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse."[8] Power then constitutes the public realm and is the consequence of interaction among persons. Tyranny thus depends upon the isolation of individuals; democracy depends on the interaction of persons.

Now if democracy depends upon inter-personal action, then economics and familial order are foreign to it. " . . . whatever was 'economic,' related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species, was a non-political, household affair by definition."[9]

Thus for Arendt, as for the Greek theoreticians of democracy, there must be a strict division between the public and the private. The family presumes a society of unequals; the Democracy presumes a community of peers. Not everyone in a nation need be equal, but all who participate in political action must be. "Equality, therefore, far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed."[10] Hence it is interesting here to take note of

---

[8] Ibid., p.179.

[9] Ibid., p.28.

[10] Ibid., p.31.

Arvin on Whitman's notion of equality. "The equality Whitman stands for is not the incredible Equality of the philosophes - the Equality that both sense and science give the lie to - it is the vital equality of common work and common living in a society from which arbitrary distinctions and the privileges of caste and fortune have been banished."[11] The whole thrust of Whitman's objections to the political party system is the innate inequality between boss and voter which the party system espoused. For the control of the leader or boss was derived from economic force and feudalistic loyalty - both qualities which stemmed from the private familial sphere and which were contradictory to equality. Whitman had nothing against persons working together in political groupings; the problem was that the party was rarely the local political club but rather normally the machine.

Thus equality, properly understood, as Whitman never tires of affirming, is the sine qua non of Democracy. But equality of the individual is not synonymous with sovereignty of the individual. Equality rather is a condition for inter-personal action; equality is a means and not an end. This is an easily neglected notion which has led to considerable modern havoc under the false banner of 'individualism.' As Arendt notes:

> In view of human reality and its phenomenal evidence, it is indeed as spurious to deny human freedom to act because the actor never remains the master of his acts as it is to maintain that human sovereignty is possible because of the incontestable fact of human freedom. The question which then arises is whether our notion that freedom and non-sovereignty are mutually exclusive is not defeated by reality, or to put it another way, whether the capacity for action does not harbor within itself certain

---

[11] Arvin, p.262.

> potentialities which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty.[12]

Thus Whitman is careful to term his vision of the independent and equal man not Individualism but Personalism.

When Tocqueville warns against the tyranny of equality he is speaking of the equality of isolation, of Individualism, just as when the social critics, Whitman among them, of the Gilded Age cried down the inhumane greed of Capitalism they were also talking of the results of Individualism. But Personalism involves the recognition of the necessity of inter-personal action - that is, the equal but non-sovereign citizen venturing public action before and in concert with his fellows.

As modern existential philosophy has stressed time and again, inter-personal relations are possible only among radically independent self-conscious individuals. "Man becomes man in personal encounters. Only by meeting a 'thou' does man realize that he is an 'ego'."[13] All other relationships which are based on sovereignty or 'individualism' fall into Hegel's category of the Master-Slave dialectic - the relationship of used and user which is manipulative on both sides. "Injustice against the other one is always injustice against oneself. The master who treats the slave not as an ego but as a thing endangers his own quality as an ego. The slave by his very existence hurts the master as much as he is hurt by him. The external inequality is balanced by the destruction of the ego-equality of the master."[14] Tillich, like most contemporary philosophers, is aware of the dangers of the radical isolation of the individual

---

[12] Arendt, p.211.

[13] Paul Tillich, Love, Power, and Justice (Oxford, 1954), p.78.

[14] Ibid., pp.78-79.

and the consequent depersonalization of the world. The task of each individual is to become aware of his Personhood, a process wholly dependent upon the quality of one's relationship with the Other - or in Buber's terms, the "I-Thou" relationship. This relationship must be one, in Tillich's evocative term, of Ultimate Concern. And hence God can well be described as the Ground of Ultimate Concern - that is, That without which Ultimate Concern could not be. But Tillich stresses that this interpersonal bonding of Ultimate Concern reaches its fulfillment only in "group relations" - that is beyond the familial ties in a more universal public union.

What is interesting and most practical in Tillich's analysis is his acknowledgment that group relations in the public sphere are inevitably, by virtue of size, complexity and historical development, dominated by a ruling minority. But that minority, if it is to be justified, must be part of and expressive of the whole, not simply dominant.

> The silent acknowledgment received by a ruling group from the whole group cannot be understood without an element which is derived neither from justice nor from power but from love, namely from love under guidance of its eros and philia qualities. It is the experience of community within the group. Every social group is a community, potentially and actually; and the ruling minority not only expresses the power and justice of the being of the group, it also expresses the communal spirit of the group, its ideals and valuations.[15]

Thus ultimately, "In this way, the power and justice of being in a group is dependent on the spirit of the community, and this means on the uniting love which creates and sustains the community."[16] Here Tillich echoes the restrained idealism of

---

[15] Ibid., p.98.

[16] Ibid., p.99.

the later Whitman. For Whitman's notion of the divine literatus, of the divine average and of prudence are all reflections of the special leadership role which a minority is forced, at least temporarily, to assume. But such leadership is still based on non-sovereign equality, on the interdependence of Ultimate Concern.

The point of this seeming digression into existential phenomenology is not to claim Whitman as a proto-existentialist, but rather to acknowledge that Whitman was not a trifler, was indeed grappling with the major intellectual challenges posed by the concept of democracy. And though Whitman did not do so in an academic but in a more immediate, emotional and, to be honest, confused, manner - nonetheless grapple and wrestle he did.

But in fact, despite the congenital inability of Whitman to be precise about his terms and categories, it is plain that there is an immense distinction between Individualism and Personalism. Be it remembered that Whitman entitled the central article of Democratic Vistas "Personalism." And further, the Social Darwinist concept of Individualism, as that same essay makes clear, is antithetical to Whitman's concept of Democracy. The issue is of sufficient note to permit a rather extended quote from Allen on this point.

> What source, if any, Whitman had for the term Personalism is unknown, though it is unlikely that he made it up and used it accidentally in the same sense that it was already known in Germany in Schleiermacher's Discourses; but the German form Personalismus was apparently not translated into English until after Whitman's death. It is quite likely, however, that Whitman did encounter the word, with some indication of its philosophical meaning, somewhere in his wide and miscellaneous reading.[17]

---

[17] Allen, Handbook, p.303.

There is no question that Whitman was not a precise or exacting thinker, but as Allen goes on to note, ". . . he used this term to designate the fusion of the individual with the mass in an ideal democracy of the future. He never really defined the term and we need considerable help in understanding what he is trying to say . . ."[18]

The emphasis on the value of the self alone is not to be doubted, but that is most emphatically not the whole story. First Whitman had spent years close to the political world, both as a party man and as an editor. He was no naive neophyte or heady romantic. Hence if Whitman stressed the role of the individual, he did so within a societal and political context. And what is typical of the Transcendentalist philosophy in Whitman is his stress that only the self-aware Individual is fully capable of entering into a Union composed of like souls. The only true Democracy must be a Union of fully aware Individuals. "Only for such a person is inspiration, intuitive knowledge, and contact with the divine possible. (Which is to say that this person is both the ideal poet of the 1855 Preface and the ideal citizen of Democratic Vistas.)"[19]

Allen goes on to note that Bronson Alcott, whom Whitman knew and revered, had addressed himself explicitly to this point. "On February 12, 1858, he recorded in his Journal: ' . . . comes Emerson and asks me to accompany him home to tea. We talk on intellect and individualism, discriminating the latter from Personality.'"[20] And again, "Ten years later Alcott explains further in a letter:

---

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p.305.

[20] Ibid., p.306.

> The unity of the Personality; the difference is the Individuality. . . . We must grow into and become one with the Person dwelling in every breast, and thus come to apprehend the saying 'I and my Father are one' - that is, to perceive that all souls have a Personal identity with God and abide in him.'"[21]

Now Allen, who is eager to discern some variety of Pantheism in Whitman, may well draw overly ambitious conclusions from the speculations of Alcott, a man deeply versed in German Idealism and deriving his theological background from Unitarianism. But the real point is not the precise theological use to which one can put the concept of Personalism but rather its quite apparent distinction from Individualism. In fact the whole thrust seems to be toward unification, not to isolation. In other words, to use a contemporary analogy from physics, an Individual is a free atom, isolated and hence doomed to a momentary 'cloud chamber' life, whereas the true atom is one which maintains its integrity but combines with its fellows to form a molecule.

Thus as Allen summarizes, referring to Alcott, "In the philosophic vocabulary of his later years the antonym of 'Personalism' was 'Individualism' - a term into which he crowded all human ignorance, strife, misunderstanding, and even reform. All sin and error were due, he came to think, to the effort of individual wills to act as though they were independent of all other wills human and divine."[22] While Whitman lacks the clarity of exposition of his more philosophical friend, there is no reason to doubt, given the general and specific nature of his work, that his opinions were any less strong or differed to any marked degree. "So long as individualism is spiritual,

---

[21] Ibid., p.307.

[22] Ibid., p.309.

there can not be too much of it; but on the practical level, 'the singleness of man' may endanger political democracy, and the 'mass, or lump character, for imperative reasons, is to be ever carefully weigh'd, borne in mind, and provided for.' It is only by reconciling the individual and the mass that the development of the individual is possible."[23]

This organicism cannot be overstressed in any consideration of Whitman or of the American mid-nineteenth century Transcendentalist teaching. So much emphasis has traditionally been placed on the role of the isolated Individual - from Jefferson to Jackson and well beyond - that it requires a genuine effort of creative imagination and sympathy to recover the true tradition of American thought which from Edwards through Emerson and beyond stressed the role of the individual Soul only in order that it might rejoin and reinspire society through that spirituality which can be gained only by interaction with one's fellows.

After any brief acquaintance with Whitman it is absurdly plain that the tooth and claw sort of rugged individualism is wholly antithetical to Whitman's spirit and nature. As has on occasion been noted by perceptive observers, the Whitmanian or Jacksonian or, even the Jeffersonian Self is not in opposition to the Community but to the State. In fact the Individual finds his fulfillment only in Community. The State however is a different, because extraneous and non-personal, affair.

But if one concedes that the central theme of American philosophical thought, Edwards to Emerson to James, is an undeviating reliance on the value of action to insert the Subject into Experience and hence to enrich both the Individual and his

---

[23] Ibid., p.311.

Community, then Whitman clearly is wholly immersed in this traditional stream.

Perhaps the American Transcendentalist concept of Community can best be rendered to a present day audience by evoking that most purely American of arts, jazz. Even as each player can swing out into his own gig and rely on the support of his fellow instrumentalists, so too his foray and his grace notes are given meaning and context only by the melodic composition of the group as a whole. Jazz is the American art form; and in its free form grasp of the relation of the individual to his sustaining community, jazz is quintessencially Transcendental. Whitman's poetry and politics were no less.

If the goal of Whitman was to produce the democratic community comprised of fully conscious personalities, the major practical issue was the definition of means to that end. Leadie M. Clark in his attack on Whitman notes: "The use of 'I' and the emphasis on comradeship as the tie which would unite one man to another led Mark Van Doren to protest that Whitman could not be considered a prophet of democracy since he confused homosexuality and democracy."[24] As this paper has noted in examining the "Calamus" poems, the personal problems of Whitman are of very little moment. What is important is his affirmation that community depends upon warm and intimate interpersonal relationships.

> Comradeship became for Whitman not only the core spirit of the democratic army, but the ideal basis of society itself. He came to feel that conventional patriotic feeling and Unionism expressed in political terms were not profound and spiritual enough to be the true foundations of democracy.

---

[24] Leadie M. Clark, Walt Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man (New York, 1955), pp.146-7.

> . . . For Whitman, the organic community was desirable, but it had to come as the product of an inward urge, not an external force. It could only be "the idea of Love" that fuses and combines the whole.[25]

Frederickson goes on to admit that Whitman's ideal of comradeship could well be a sublimation of homosexual emotions, but he suggests that an equally cogent and more meaningful interpretation was to see comradeship as the answer to "the still unanswered question of how to give a genuine sense of community to an individualistic, egalitarian democracy. If the members of such a society were to avoid external authority and at the same time be held together by something more cohesive than self-interest, there would presumably have to be some awakening of the social instincts, some growth of 'love' or 'comradeship.'"[26]

It may well be, of course, that such an ideal is unattainable altogether. One of Whitman's more fastidious critics, George Santayana, has written, "This dream is, of course, unrealized and unrealizable, in America as elsewhere." Thus as Santayana magisterially and perhaps a little fondly concludes, "He would be the congenial patron of farmers and factory hands in their crude pleasures and pieties as Pan was the patron of the shepherds of Arcadia: for he is sure that in spite of his hairiness and animality, the gods will acknowledge him as one of themselves and smile upon him from the serenity of Olympus."[27]

The Greek element is indeed important to an appreciation of Whitman's idea of Democracy. Not only, as Arendt noted above, was Greek public life strictly differentiated from the

---

[25] Frederickson, p.148.

[26] Ibid., p.149.

[27] George Santayana, Interpretations of Poetry and Religion (New York, 1924), p.187.

life of the family, but it did not even concern itself much with legislation. "The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together, for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."[28] The purpose of the state, then, is to enhance the quality of interpersonal relations and not, as is so commonly assumed, to aggrandize the economy, et al. "This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them - like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world - do not live in it. No man, moreover, can live in it all the time."[29] Whitman's affinity for male comradeship, his disdain of economic interests and his abhorrence of the organized political parties which served them, all these would seem to establish Whitman firmly in the tradition of Greek democracy.

But can such an order hope to prevail in the context of the modern nation-state; surely not in these states as presently constituted. But as Allen has noted, " . . . Whitman emphasizes the tendency instead of the actuality. Liberty is still something to be attained - though the fact that it has not yet been achieved should not discourage the poet-leader."[30] And both the backward glances of Carlyle toward the organic communal spirit of feudal times and Ruskin's stress on the institution and spirit of the guilds were similar reflections offered by contemporaries of Whitman. And, as will be shown in a subsequent

---

[28]Arendt, p.177.

[29]Ibid., p.178.

[30]Allen, Handbook, p.345.

chapter, Whitman's thought has been stimulated and influenced by just such critiques as those of Carlyle and Ruskin.

But if the end in view is relatively clear, the issue still remains how society was to be inspired toward that goal of particapatory democracy. Clearly some sort of leadership and example was necessary. It was equally clear that the leaders usually proffered by the political parties had neither the vision nor the imagination requisite for the job. Hence Whitman, as was noted in discussing the 1855 Preface and Democratic Vistas, developed the figure of the divine literatus. As Asselineau has aptly summarized:

> Il est clair en tout cas que les personnages les plus importants de la société démocratique dont il rêve, ne seront pas les détenteurs du pouvoir temporel, mais les écrivains, représentants du pouvoit spirituel. Peu lui importe dans le fond que le régime démocratique soit ou non le meilleur moyen d'assurer, une répartition équitable des biens; ce qui compte c'est qu'il permette le libre développement des individualités et l'épanouissement en chacun du sens moral et religieux que les institutions féodales et ecclésiastiques habituellement étouffent.[31]

The facile objection has often been raised that Whitman's stress on the literatus is all too typical of romantic hero-worship from Carlyle to Nietzsche. The resemblance is there, but as Schyberg notes, "Whitman is a religious prophet in the same way and to the same extent as were Carlyle and Nietzsche; in fact, Whitman's democracy of 'great individuals' has at times a paradoxical resemblance to Nietzsche's 'superman' theories."[32] Assessing the nature of this 'paradox' is crucial to a rounded view of Whitman's political ideas. Put most concisely, "Whitman's divine literatus amounted to something like a combination

---

[31] Asselineau, p.450.

[32] Schyberg, p.8.

of Carlyle's hero and Emerson's representative man, i.e., the representative man as hero: not in the role of superman, but in the role of the full-sized man, appropriate to Whitman's conception of spiritual democracy, symbol of the modern and prototype of the truly democratic citizenry to come."[33] Thus Whitman's deep admiration for Lincoln is a point in case. "S'il lui arrive de chanter Lincoln, il montre avant tout en lui, non pas un grand conducteur d'hommes, mais 'un homme representatif,' comme eût dit Emerson, un magnifique exemple des vertus de l'homme moyen que le pouvoir ne corrompt pas."[34] And in fact it is notable that Lincoln is, especially after Whitman's journalistic period, almost the only politician who would fully rank in this category. Rather, as the same critic earlier noted,

> Les grands hommes qu'il admire n'écrasent pas de leur supériorité l'humanité moyenne, ne font pas violence aux êtres et aux choses. Ce ne sont pas des hommes d'état, des chefs, mais, comme lui-même, des penseurs et des prophètes - des poètes comme il en réclame depuis 1855, qui inspirent et entraînent les masses, ou des héros qui se sacrifient pour elles, ou de grands ingénieurs qui travaillent pour leur bien-être.[35]

Arvin, led no doubt by his desire to discover a socialist Whitman, somewhat overstates the case, but he is essentially correct when he says:

> If in his politics he remained for the most part an old-fashioned individualist, in his freer thought - and in his work - he moved well beyond the simpler formulas of individualism. . . . Unlike some of his teachers in the school of

---

[33] Charles R. Metzger, Thoreau and Whitman: A Study of Their Esthetics (Seattle, 1961), p.57.

[34] Asselineau, p.432.

[35] Ibid., p.431.

> self-reliance, Whitman had had a sense, almost from the beginning, of the menace to democracy that lurked in that heady doctrine. For all his own announced determination to 'effuse egotism' - for all his insistence on the message, 'Produce great Persons, the rest follows' - Whitman had never succumbed to the Emersonian and certainly not to the Carlylesque idolatry of heroes.[36]

The point so often overlooked is that the divine literatus was not just the representative man, but rather this divine literarus was one with "the divine average." This latter is yet another of Whitman's special terms and is similar in flavor to such terms as the "common man." "Whitman's conception of the 'average' is, of course, closely related to his view of democracy and of the potentialities of America as the home of democracy."[37] And thus, "The average is for him a symbol of the infinite potential of individual personality. Political democracy provides the best nursery for personalities, with the poet as the best nurse."[38] The concept of the "divine average," then, is not exactly what one would associate today with the term the "masses." Rather it has a far more personalist tinge and one less corrupted by overtones of an elite leading the benighted masses to a new order.

Rather the relationship of the divine literatus and the divine average is parallel to Whitman's duality of the Individual and the Ensemble. "Il arriva tout naturellement en 1860 a la notion d' "homme moyen" et de "divine moyenne" qui est dès lors partout présente dans F d'H et dont il soulignera l'importance dans un de ses derniers poemes."[39] Asselineau refers

---

[36] Arvin, pp.268-9.

[37] David Daiches, Literary Studies (Chicago, 1956), pp.67-8.

[38] Ibid., p.70.

[39] Asselineau, p.430.

here to "On, On the Same, Ye Jocund Twain" (1891) in which the poet celebrates not only "My life and recitative, containing birth, youth, mid-age years. . ." but also the ensemble, "I chant from it the common bulk, the general average horde."[40]

Thus once again the problem resolves itself into the paradox of the one and the many. There is no need to go wandering afield into "mysticism" to understand the relationship between the divine literatus and the divine average. The solution was conveniently at hand in Romantic, Idealistic and Transcendental ideas so common at the time. Thus as Daiches states the problem in classical terms:

> It is the old Cartesian dilemma, of the relation between the perceiving mind and external reality, complicated by the fact that for Whitman external reality included both 'the whole of the material universe and laws' and the world of other perceiving selves. He solved his dilemma, not philosophically, but poetically. The sympathetic imagination, which was the poetic mind at work, was by a process of Einfuhlung, of empathy, able to project the poet's self into other selves.[41]

In other words, the divine literatus was clearly not the same as the divine average, any more than the Individual was the Ensemble. But at the same time, there was a sense in which they were and should be One. Empathy or adhesiveness was the solution, even as Eros was Plato's solution to the same problem. Arthur Briggs has stated, "Out of his institution of loving comrades Whitman evolved his glorified average man."[42] This statement is chronologically true in Whitman's development of the implications

---

[40] Blodgett & Bradley, p.540.

[41] Daiches, p.64.

[42] Arthur E. Briggs, Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist (New York, 1952), p.139.

of his idea of Democracy, but more accurately, the priority ontologically is the fact of the duality of Individual and Ensemble and of divine literatus and divine average. The "institution of loving comrades" is or should be a collolary of these dualities. There are, after all, other ways of solving the problem of the one and the many, philosophical or political, but adhesiveness, empathy or love is an organic, genuinely inter-personal solution and hence superior to mechanistic solutions such as those implied by interest groups or political parties and even superior to biological solutions such as the family, tribe or clan.

One critic who choses to interpret this problem in terms of Aristotelian Concrete Universals rather than in the somewhat easier if less clear Platonic terms, perceptively writes:

> It is the particular man which Whitman takes into consideration with his discussion of personalism: Each man with his idiosyncracies and pecularities must be accepted and respected for what he is. (This is more than tolerance; it is an expression of the working of what Whitman calls adhesive love.) On the other hand there exists the universal man. This is 'the People,' man en masse, inclusive ('embracing all,' Whitman would say), and unlimited. It is primarily universal man which Whitman has in mind when he refers to democracy. . . . Universal man is composed of individual men, yet it is more than the sum of those individuals; it becomes a mystical unity which is an end in itself. The purpose of a democracy, then, according to Whitman, is to achieve that unity, to realize universal man.[43]

Here several important notes should be emphasized. First the Ensemble is derived, enriched, and sustained by the progressive development of each Individual. As Daiches notes, "But what of the masses? What of his favorite concept, 'En-Masse'? In a nation of 'rich, luxuriant, varied personalism to which Whitman

---

[43] Robert Detweiler, "The Concrete Universals in Democratic Vistas," WWR, IX, 2(1964), p.41.

looked forward, will we not get something rather more like John Stuart Mill's view of society as expressed in his essay On Liberty (which Whitman admired)."[44] This element of traditional liberalism in Whitman's thought should not be overlooked in eagerness to affirm the neglected communal strands in Whitman's Democracy. Some attention will be paid to the similarities of Mill and Whitman in the subsequent chapter, but clearly the element of liberalism here accords well with the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian tradition so dear to Whitman. Second it should be underlined that democratic institutions are not in themselves an end, but solely a means by which to enrich the interpersonal community, the New Order. When Whitman speaks of Democracy, he is not talking about a political system of government. Allen, who consistently confuses religion with philosophy, does at least come close to the truth when he writes, "Democracy is not so much a political system as a'grand experiment' in the development of individuals. He in not concerned either with the romantic theory of the innate goodness of the masses or with the political theory of the sovereignity of the people, but with Democracy as a moral and ethical ideal - in fact a religion."[45] Hence the specific mechanisms of political democracy were to be judged on a wholly utilitarian norm - did they contribute to the building of Democracy or not? From his own experience it was abundantly clear to Whitman that the partisan political system, if anything, was a detriment rather than an asset. Hence the development of a cadre of independents seemed the first and most practical step to ridding the nation of that incubus and working toward a more apt

---

[44] Daiches, p.71.

[45] Allen, Handbook, p.189.

instrument.

Returning then to Whitman's Transcendental vision of the role of the divine average and the divine literatus, E. F. Carlisle has noted an important perspective on Leaves of Grass: "Thus, instead of thinking of the poem as simply a song of self, one must regard it as also a song of the non-self, too - as a dialogue between the self and the non-self. For in one sense, the self has become all of existence (the non-self); and in another sense the self, as a dominant egocentric presence, has disappeared at the end, leaving an experience and a vision."[46] This latter vision, accessible to the readers of his poetry, was to be the inspirational and pedagogic residue of the life of the poet. All of this, of course, presumes the universality and empathy of the poet. But in his famous critique of Whitman, it was on the very point that D. H. Lawrence launched his criticism, disparaging the looseness in Whitman and the amorphousness of his world. As Daiches notes, "Lawrence and Whitman agreed on the question of identity and self-fulfillment; they differed sharply on what Whitman called 'rapport'. . . . For Whitman, one individual could, as it were, subsume another by sympathy; the poet could symbolically become other people without losing his identity - indeed, in the very exercise of it."[47]

As has been noted earlier, not only is Whitman's belief in this universal rapport essential to his world-view, it is also the theme and device of such masterpieces as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "The Sleepers," and indeed lies at the root of most of Whitman's poetry. As Daiches explains:

---

[46] E. F. Carlisle, "Walt Whitman: The Drama of Identity," Criticism, X(1968), p.275.

[47] Daiches, p.81.

> Perception of Nature, and remembered perception of Nature, help at the same time to disperse identity, as it were, among different natural scenes and objects, and to enrich personality by making those scenes and objects part of the self. So by love the individual both disperses and fulfills himself, both scatters his ego and concentrates it.
>
> The true personality is thus a microcosm, containing within itself potential identification with all other true personalities and (in a somewhat obscure sense, it is true) all of Nature.[48]

This, of course, is basically the Transcendental concept of the microcosm-macrocosm, though carried into effect with an exuberance notably Whitmanian. The ground of this principle of microcosm-macrocosm is that of divine immanence, the awesome Immanence of the Transcendent.

> . . . Whitman shared Emerson's basic belief and assumption of divine immanence. For this reason, the persona - the 'I' - in Whitman's poetry is, like the 'self' described in "Self-Reliance," not merely individual but cosmic, and such as can participate in the experiences of all men and all parts of nature, in the same way that Emerson's Oversoul does.[49]

Two problems lurk here. First, Whitman does seem to overdo things a bit- he lacks the scholar's caution because he is so fully the believer. Second, it is dangerously easy to move from this concept of divine immanence into some more or less sloppy version of Pantheism. The Neo-Platonics were tempted down this path and Whitman on occasion leaned in that direction.

But in that direction lies only exalted confusion, philosophical, poetic, or critical. The point is that late and occasional excesses of Whitman need not bind one to the actuality of the statement of his corpus as a whole, poetic and

---

[48] Daiches, pp.65-6.

[49] Lawrence Buell, "Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form," AL, XL, 3(1968), p.333.

prosaic. And the exuberance, as Max Beerbohm wryly suggested in his famous cartoon of Whitman exhorting the American eagle, is more a cause of admiration in the present age of disbelief than of peevish censure.

And, in any case, Whitman has taken his option, just as any man who thinks on the grounds of things must chose from a limited number of first principles. Things follow from there; and having chosen divine immanence, Whitman's vision of Democracy must be different from that of one who has chosen the social contract or the class struggle. For in Whitman's view, as he says in "Song of Prudence," "Charity and personal force are the only investment worth anything."[50]

---

[50]Blodgett & Bradley, p.373.

CHAPTER VII

Contemporary Social Criticism

Whitman has so often been praised, and on occasion damned, as quintessentially American that the untutored observer might conclude that the New World began when Whitman stepped on the stage. Not, of course, in his perfervid attempts in old age to assure his fame as THE American prophet, that Whitman did much of anything to gainsay such impressions. In fact, even as Whitman's political beliefs were formed by the ideals and experiences of the Jacksonian era, so his broader philosophical vision eventuated from his literary mileu.

Whitman was an outsider. He did not even know Melville who resided across the East River, and it is doubtful that he was considered more than a free lance journalist by the editors and critics who made up the New York literary set in the pre-war days. His gross and inept use of Emerson's congratulatory letter about the first edition of Leaves of Grass is a sure sign that Whitman both ardently desired admittance into the Master's charmed circle, and that he would have been hopelessly out of place within it.

And so, like most outsiders, he relied heavily on newsletters from the Magic Kingdom. Whitman read vorociously, but, not being privy to the inner circles and thus lacking guidance, his reading was eclectic and often superficial. In a way this was a blessing since it forced Whitman to take the Romantic and

Transcendental cliches he garnered and root them in his own more burly experience. It also, however, accounts for the muddleheadedness and eccentricity of his thought.

What made Whitman's case the more curious was his politicization of his art. Aside from J. F. Cooper, who was a special case much influenced by his long residence in France, few American authors adverted openly to the political scene. In so doing Whitman was acting more naturally than the rest, for the period between Jackson and Lincoln was an intensely political one. Further, in Europe the Romantics had dealt extensively with political events. Indeed the archtypal Romantic, Byron, was the symbol of the poet engagé. As E. J. Hobsbawn has noted:

> The most striking consequence of this junction of romanticism with vision of a new and higher French Revolution was the overwhelming victory of political art between 1830 and 1848. There has rarely been a period when even the least 'ideological' artists were more universally partisan, often regarding service to politics as their primary duty.[1]

It has long been observed that Romanticism and resurgent Nationalism consistently went hand in hand. The revolutions of 1848 were all prefaced and to a good extent inspired by various groups of youthful authors usually known by names such as "Young Ireland," "Young Italy," or, in the case of the United States, "Young America." One of the results of this alliance of political activism and literature was a marked increase in the quality and quantity of journalistic prose. "In another age a Lamennais or a Jules Michelet in France, a Carlyle or Ruskin in Britain, might have been poets or novelists with some views on public affairs; in this one they were publicists, prophets,

---

[1] E. J. Hobsbawn, The Age of Revolution (New York, 1962), p.317.

philosophers, or historians carried by a poetic afflatus."[2]

The literary theory of the two decades preceding the 1848 revolutions, then, was a frank acknowledgement of the social value and purpose of art. And Whitman, who was formed during this period and whose poetic nationalism was inspired by O'Sullivan's "Young America" and confirmed by Emerson's "American Scholar," was to remain loyal to the ideals of his youth well into the last decades of the century. This paper has consistently stressed the homogeneity of Whitman's political ideals and his notion of the role of the artist in a democratic society. After the failure of the 1848 revolutions in Europe, the cultured world shifted to an ever greater acceptance of the division of art from social concerns and the public or political sphere, and in the latter part of the century fully embraced the "art for art's sake" ethic. Such self-contained aestheticism, though prefigured in the art and criticism of Poe, was slower to catch hold in America - if only because America's revolutionary cycles were not in synchronization with Europe's and thus 1848 did not have equal impact in the States. The Civil War, or more exactly the let down and disillusionment of the post-war period, however, propelled American culture down a path similar to that already taken in Europe. Whitman however was unique in all this - he remained true to his early education and ideals. The late Whitman might have become more abstract and 'metaphysical,' but underneath the prophetic robes it was still the same Walt shouting his bardic yawp. The figure of Whitman in the last quarter of the nineteenth century is a sad and anachronistic one.

As Hobsbawn notes, "Romanticism is liberalism in literature. Writers had a predilection to speak in their prefaces about the

---

[2] Ibid., p.318.

future, about social progress, humanity and civilization."[3] And it was to such artists, theoreticians of the art of social committment, that Whitman turned for instruction, inspiration and solace. Thus Whitman was deeply indebted to Frances Wright, Margaret Fuller and George Sand. Emerson too was a magisterial presence for the budding Whitman. Nor did Whitman ignore the British social commentators. Indeed he read British journals extensively and continuously throughout his life. In this regard, J. S. Mill and Matthew Arnold presented challenges to his thought which were to prove of fruit. But two figures in particular merit special attention - both of them enjoyed splendidly eccentric mentalities and were seemingly out of step with their times, but both spoke volumes to Whitman and challenged and inspired him, Ruskin and Carlyle.

As has been previously noted, Whitman's most impressive prose work, Democratic Vistas, was written in response to Carlyle, but the influence of the Scots curmudgeon was not limited to that instance only. Writing in early 1881, Whitman in speaking of Carlyle on the occasion of his recent death noted, "As a representative author, a literary figure, no man else will bequeath to the future more significant hints of our stormy era, its fierce paradoxes, its din, and its struggling parturition periods, than Carlyle."[4] The point which Whitman never failed to recognize was that despite Carlyle's quite different point de depart, his critique of late nineteenth century life was strikingly similar to Whitman's own. The man rooted in his ideal of the past and the man rooted in his ideal of the future were at one in their brackbats against the present.

---

[3] Ibid., p.317.

[4] Stovall, I, 249.

It is fair to say that Whitman was all but obsessed with his Scots contemporary - so similar and yet so opposite. In his giganticism, Carlyle was clearly a figure against whom Whitman felt himself bound to measure himself, even as Carlyle's free and anarchic use of English must also have inspired Whitman's admiration.

But, above all, Whitman is quick to recognize that Carlyle raised the basic issue about democracy - namely, what element will bind together a nation of political equals. "The most profound theme that can occupy the mind of man. . . is doubtless involved in the query: What is the fusing explanation and tie - what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit, &c., on the one side, of and with the (conservative) Not Me. . . ."[5] Here, rather late in Whitman's career, and more than ten years after Democratic Vistas, the same problem is being addressed which was first heralded in the poetry of 1855: how to reconcile the Self and the En Masse.

The easy out, of course, is the Darwinian-Hegelian solution - an out to which the late Whitman was on occasion partial. But in Specimen Days in a section entitled "Carlyle from American Points of View" Whitman reveals both the incompatibility of his aspirations with those of Carlyle while strongly suggesting that America is sui generis and can not find its answers in Europe's past.

> In my opinion the formulas of Hegel are an essential and crowning justification of New World democracy in the creative realms of time and space. There is that about them which only the vastness, the multiplicity and the vitality of America would seem able to comprehend, to give

---

[5] Ibid., p.258.

> scope and illustration to, or be fit for, or even originate. It is strange to me that they were born in Germany, or in the old world at all. While a Carlyle, I should say is quite the legitimate European product to be expected.[6]

For as he notes, it is Emerson not Carlyle who is the physician to America. "Upon the whole, and for our purposes, this man's name certainly belongs on the list with the just-specified, first-class moral physicians of our current era - and with Emerson and two or three others - though his prescription is drastic, and perhaps destructive, while theirs is assimilating, normal and tonic."[7]

It has been fashionable to compare Carlyle's and Whitman's notions of leadership - the hero and the divine literatus. The key difference, the real distinction between the Tory and the Jacksonian, is well stated by F. M. Smith, "The difference between Carlyle and Whitman with reference to heroes is this: Carlyle believes some are born to be heroes and some to follow the heroes; Whitman believes that in America every man can be the Hero."[8] For when all is said and done, though such a notion might upset some, Whitman's leader is far more Nietzschean than Napoleonic. Carlyle, however little he liked the antecedents of the Corsican upstart, was more the political realist than was Whitman. Whitman preferred the ideal moral influence to the real political power every time. But still, even when speaking of Heroes and Hero Worship, Whitman is quick to note, "That his eyes are clear to the numerous ills which afflict humanity, and that he is a Democrat in that enlarged sense in which we

---

[6] Ibid., p.262.

[7] Ibid., p.261.

[8] Fred Manning Smith, "Whitman and Carlyle," AL, XX(1962), p.1159.

would fain see more men Democrats; - that he is quick to champion the downtrodden, and earnest in his wrath at tyranny - is evident in almost any one page of Mr. Carlyle's writings."[9]

In fact, Carlyle and Whitman share many traits. Carlyle was a stylistic iconoclast, though less theraputically than Whitman. And Carlyle was equally a political iconoclast - though such was less recognized by his peers than was his due. And above all, Carlyle was a probing but thoroughly unsystematic thinker who chose to cast his beliefs in a sufficiently unconventional form as to all but guarantee misinterpretation. But Carlyle and Whitman are offering an extremely personal view of politics. As the noted German social thinker, Ernst Cassirer, has written, "Carlyle's conception of history and politics always depends on his own personal history; it is much more biographical than systematic or methodical."[10] The same could be said altogether of Whitman. And again, Cassirer points out another striking parallel, "Carlyle's style had always been much more oratorical than philosophical."[11]

This paper makes no claim to establish lines of influence from Carlyle to Whitman, though citations will at least evince Whitman's interest in Carlyle's ideas. Rather the point is that Carlyle and Whitman were remarkably parallel and while Carlyle was unlikely to have been stimulated by Whitman, the obverse is demonstrably the case. But the term is stimulated, not led. For both men were great <u>believers</u>, but they were organicists and hence their differences are those dictated by

---

[9] <u>Gathering Forces</u>, II, p.291.

[10] Ernst Cassirer, <u>The Myth of the State</u> (New Haven, 1946), p.191.

[11] <u>Ibid</u>., p.195.

the differences of their traditions and backgrounds. But, and here is precisely the value of Carlyle in understanding Whitman, not only was Whitman deeply stimulated, at times to opposition, by Carlyle, but British literature offers no figure more comparable to Whitman in general attitude, specific criticism, and even in stylistic adventurism.

Both men were basically in wholehearted revolt against the political system bequeathed their world by Enlightenment Rationalism. Based on a mechanistic philosophy, and hence well open to manipulative intervention, such Enlightenment beliefs were wholly alien to the Romantic, organic, evolutionary patterns of thought which dominated the nineteenth century. As Cassirer notes, "Man will always form his image of nature after his own image. If he fails to see in himself an original and creative power, nature too becomes to him a mere passive thing - a dead mechanism. According to Carlyle this was the fate of the French Encyclopedists and the 'philosophers' of the eighteenth century."[12] What makes both men sympathetic to twentieth century thought is their rejection of the bloodless abstractions of Enlightenment politics and their stress on the historical dimension of the nation-state's development.

Further, what links the Scottish lover of feudalism and the American believer in egalitarianism is not merely a common detestation of Benthemite Industrialism, but, far more positively, a common belief in experimental political action and a trust that men must live and work together in communities based on something more than immediate interest or gain. In short, a reliance on communalism over individualism, a confidence in those qualities which bind men together rather than those which

---

[12]Cassirer, p.205.

pit their separate selves against each other. Carlyle and Whitman become wholly unintelligible unless this point is grasped: the moving force of humanity is not the lone competitive Self but the Self in Community.

Both Whitman and Carlyle agree that the salvation of the whole, indeed the very constitution of the whole, is dependent upon the initiative of the individual. But the emphasis is on initiative, not on individual. Further, the most archtypal philosopher of the age chose precisely to emphasize action. "In Fichte's philosophy Descartes' Cogito ergo sum is changed to the maxim: Volo, ergo sum. But Fichte is neither a 'solipsist' nor is he an egoist. The 'I' find itself by a free act. . . . But it cannot act without a material to act upon. It demands a 'world' as the scene of its activity. And in this world it fonds other acting and working subjects. It has to respect their rights and their original freedom."[13] Such an attitude accords so well with the American tradition as to be self evident. Action, experimentation, in short pragmatism, are the order of the day. And this, in the area of politics, is precisely Whitman's solution. Enough, he says, of the stale forms of Enlightenment politics, a political order which relies on the balance of conflicting interests and within which the State serves only as an impartial broker of the interests of particular factions. Time now to see State not as an aggregation of Leibnitzian monads, but as an organic whole, a people. Of course, Whitman does not propose a new scheme of political structure; rather Whitman, like Fichte and others, says experiment, work it out, play it by ear, be pragmatic.

Here, of course, several distinctions between Whitman and

---

[13] Ibid., p.214.

Carlyle become evident. First, Carlyle's organic order was one of hierarchy not of equality. Therefore Carlyle's hero is automatically not that of Whitman. Whitman, given his wholehearted belief in equality, was aiming for a society, equally communal, but far different from Carlyle's feudal vision. Whitman's vision was one which could have eventuated only in an American context. And hence, unlike Carlyle's world, Whitman's inately harbored ambiguities which were scarcely perceived because so commonly accepted. Whitman was far more communal in his aspirations than was usual in the post-Civil War America, precisely because the egalitarian and reformist beliefs of the Jacksonian era had never been abandoned by him. Hence when Whitman speaks of the American hero, the divine literatus, he is speaking of an egalitarian hero, a Lincoln. It is not sufficient for Whitman merely to be from the masses; one must be of the masses and distinctly apart from real power. To guide is not to rule but to persuade. Real leadership is moral not political; and the best form of political leadership is moral not manipulative.

If Carlyle were Whitman's twin and hence also his mirror image - everything identical but reversed - the other major British social-literary figure of the latter nineteenth century, Ruskin, was far more Whitman's comrade in arms. Ruskin's critique of Industrialism, economic and political, was quite similar to Whitman's and his solutions were far more palatable to the American author. At the height of his powers between 1854 and 1860, Ruskin collapsed physically in 1878; Whitman was at his height from 1855 to 1867 and collapsed physically in 1872. Further, Carlyle was among the first and most generous to lavish praise on Ruskin. Indeed Ruskin's view of society not only

originated in antagonism to Carlyle's Industrialist enemies, but Ruskin followed Carlyle's lead in discerning elements of virtue in the medieval world. But there was a significant difference. Ruskin chose to emphasize the communality of the guilds rather than the hierarchical order so dear to Carlyle.

For Ruskin, even more than for Carlyle, the entire point of Western civilization was to perfect a democratic and universal form of communal life. And, like most intellectuals of the nineteenth century, he discovered the basis of such a life in the traditions of the churchly Middle Ages. The essence of his vision was less theological or political than social - the ideal of the pre-industrial village where each was dependent upon and socially linked to the other. Industrialism had quite literally reduced men to machines, or more exactly, one functioning part of a machine. But in the medieval period human activity was not yet reduced, to use Arendt's terms, to mere labor. The medieval still produced durable good by use of his skilled hands. In short the Middle Ages did not labor but rather worked. Hence, as Ruskin saw it, their society was more respectful of the person, both in his productive effort and ultimately in his spiritual value. And, in the totalist spirit of the nineteenth century, Ruskin was quite willing to make a very moralistic Victorian effort to recreate the conditions necessary to rekindle the spirit of the medievals.

To understand Whitman it is necessary to start from Jacksonian egalitarianism and more distantly from Jeffersonian ideals of the yeoman farmer, but for Ruskin one must start from that to which he was opposed - Industrialism.

> But mercantile economy, the economy of 'merces' or of 'pay,' signifies the accumulation, in the hands of individuals, of legal or moral claim upon, or power over, the

> labor of others; every such claim implying precisely as much poverty or debt on one side, as it implies riches or right on the other.
>
> Now the establishment of such inequality cannot be shown in the abstract to be either advantageous or disadvantageous to the body of the nation.[14]

In short, Ruskin is very quick to link acquisition of money to inequality. In this, of course, he is rather more perceptive than Whitman.

Further, Ruskin is most explicit and idealistic in his goals for a just society. "'The greatest number of human beings noble and happy.' But is the nobleness consistent with the number. Yes, not only consistent with it, but essential to it. The maximum of life can only be reached by the maximum of virtue."[15] And such a state, Ruskin quite correctly contends, is, "A strange political economy; the only one, nevertheless, that ever was or can be: all political economy founded on self-interest being but the fulfillment of that which once brought schism into the Policy of angels, and ruin into the Economy of Heaven."[16] Now Whitman, despite Arvin's hopes, was never sufficiently a student of the Industrial age to grasp fully the critique implied here by Ruskin.

However, Ruskin, despite the modernity of his critique, based his solutions on remedies and, more importantly, on grounds wholly at one with Whitman's Jacksonian credo. Thus in as noble a sentiment as likely to be found in all British literature of the period, Ruskin in "The Eagle's Nest" writes, "The true strength of every human soul is to be dependent on as many

---

[14] John D. Rosenberg, ed., The Genius of John Ruskin (New York, 1963), p.246.

[15] Ibid., p.270.

[16] Ibid.

nobler as it can discern, and to be depended upon, by as many inferior as it can reach."[17] This is, of course, a rather earlier and more religious statement of Lenin's famous motto, but one cast less in economic terms than in transcendental ones. It is a statement, especially in the note of reliance and support toward others, which is of the core of Whitman.

Like Emerson or Thoreau, Ruskin's critique can at first glance appear quite distant from the driving forces of the late nineteenth century, and this similarity lies in the fact that all their critiques were based not on political economy but on moral economy. "Obviously these are the questions of a moralist, not a political ideologue; and in an age accustomed to political panaceas, Ruskin's social philosophy with its stress on the need for a right condition of the human heart must seem sentimental. In reality his social thought is more radical than that which we have received from the liberals."[18] And it is in the amaterialistic grounds of his stance that Ruskin so aptly parallels Whitman. For as one critic notes, Ruskin was to England what Tolstoy was to Russia, and Whitman tried to be to his nation - a post-Christian ethical critic of the social order. In all three cases, revolution was not the answer - for that would be an external imposed solution. "His social philosophy resembles Tolstoy's in that he is convinced that the reformation of the social order can not be brought about from without."[19] Rather a change of heart, of life style, of basic philosophy is needed. And if one sets out to conduct a campaign to change

---

[17] Kenneth Clark, ed., Ruskin Today (New York, 1964), p.303.

[18] John Ruskin, Unto This Last, ed. Lloyd J. Hubenka (Lincoln, Neb., 1967), p.XI.

[19] Ibid.

men's hearts - it is not the politician but the preacher who must be the catylist of change.

And, lest such an attitude be smiled upon by the more 'tough minded' - it is well to remember, "This tradition, for lack of a better term, may be called 'transcendental' in that those who shared this tendency of mind believed that there existed sanctions of a higher order than Benthamite individualism. . . . How much more radical these precepts are than any pronouncements made by liberal pundits would be apparent to anyone who attempted to live by them in our acquisitive society."[20] For if the most advanced Western nations were demolishing their social, and ultimately their political fibre, in their quest for material ease, as was abundantly apparent even to less perceptive spirits than Ruskin or Whitman, then the courage and toughness for which Ruskin called was exactly what was needed. "Thus in opposition to the atomistic, competitive, and mechanistic civilization which was rapidly rising up about them, the transcendentalists tried to revivify the communal devotion to the ideals of cooperation and human solidarity which had irradiated the pre-industrial and pre-capitalist civilization of the Middle Ages."[21]

This, historically viewed, is the central debate of the Modern Age. The view of Ruskin or Whitman, and to an extent of Carlyle, was profoundly anti-liberal.

> In their view neither legislation nor political reform would materially improve society; indeed, they believed that the measures proposed by the liberals in Parliament to further the aims and hopes of democratic and capitalistic society, would probably make society a good deal

---

[20] Ibid., p.xii.

[21] Ibid., p.xiii.

> worse. To the transcendentalists, it was precisely this sort of society, with its emphasis on individual liberties and the pursuit of money, which had corrupted the social order.[22]

Now, without doubt, Whitman as a man nurtured in the American political and Radical Protestant religious traditions could celebrate the Individual with more abandon than the critics of more historically conscious societies. But in the final analysis, Whitman was an organicist not a liberal, as understood in the sense of Madison or Mill. What was crucial to Whitman was the whole, the mass - each individual celebrated in his own way, of course, but each individual considered fully himself, only to the extent that he was part of the whole. And, most importantly, the whole is not an artificial, mechanistic device such as a political party, but rather one's social group - in short an organic social grouping. And any brief glance at Whitman's catalogues will underline that he saw the individual as part of his work group, local community, etc. Whitman's citizen is ever bound by nature to his fellows - and here Whitman's emphasis lies not in stepping aside from such a natural order but rather in adding the deeper element of comradeship to the bonds within which and by which the Individual is already tied to the Ensemble.

Unfortunately, in England this type of social criticism had run its course earlier than in America. Thus while Coleridge could proclaim an organic vision of society in On the Constitution of Church and State in 1830 and his contemporary Robert Owen could attempt to integrate the guild and the factory, by the last third of the century the lure of Empire and the striking division of social classes had become too great. An aged Carlyle might fulminate out of a former era, or a timid Christian

---

[22] Ibid.

Socialism might be preached - but by 1870 in England aestheticism, religious and literary, was the most obvious and palatable route for thoughtful men. And if America was a few decades late in following the example of the Mother Country, Whitman was, by virtue of his early training, wholly unadaptable to the ethos of Henry James and Henry Adams.

Thus, Ruskin was more 'advanced' than Whitman, and also more decadent, if one is to define decadent as aestheticism. Where Whitman still had the courage to laud and to be the artist, Ruskin was willing to settle for the artisan. Hence the apparent contradictions between the divine literatus and the craftsman of the decorative arts, the call for epic poetry compared with the production of Morris chairs. Further, despite all of the New World antipathy both politically and religiously to the traditions of medieval Europe, the difference between Ruskin's Utopian but nostalgic yearning for the ideals of the Middle Ages and Whitman's confident embrace of a future heralded by the transatlantic cable are less a sign of differences in their Utopian ideals than in their recognition of the power and ambiguity of industrial Progress. America had not yet, in Whitman's time, learned to treasure nostalgia.

In the course of the American recognition of the social and communal detriments attached to industrial progress, the 1920's and 1930's witnessed both a resurrection of the Transcendentalist thinkers and an attempt to cast them, according to the times and the politics of the interpreter, as bathed in a golden light of the true faith or suffused with incipient radical revolt. Both interpretations, of course, owed more to the attitudes of their interpreters than the attitudes of actual mid nineteenth century thought. But no matter, for the central issue, was that any religious or humanistic thinker

automatically grounded his system of values on the worth of the individual, and, as became more apparent yearly, the industrial system did not consider the person as an end but as a means. And in that contradiction between industrial practice and cultural values eventuated the whole split between thought and practice, religion and science, art and politics, etc., which served to alter the entire terms of modern thought. Ruskin consciously grappled with these issues. Whitman, a man born earlier and born into a more isolated and naive nation, was slower to acknowledge the shift in terms, and when he did so he did so both unreflectively and optimistically. If Ruskin seems, for all his Victorianism, closer to present day thought, the reason is, perhaps, that he was a pessimist in his hope - Whitman still reflected the faith of the Enlightenment. And hence Ruskin could propose a unified, if anarchistic, social order, whereas Whitman's social ideals were anything but unified in practical detail, but by their origins in the Enlightenment optimism and the ideals of the early Romantics, were both more hopeful and less realistic than Ruskin's seeming anachronisms.

Thus, Ruskin drew both more apropos and more pragmatic immediate solutions from his social critique than did Whitman. For example, Ruskin argues for a fixed wage, a salary, for industrial workers and he also stressed that the wealth of a nation be judged by its services to the community, e.g., health services, a clearly socialist norm. Whitman never really addressed himself to such practicalities. In fact Whitman was, as were all the Trandcendentalists, more a man of the Enlightenment than of the Industrial Age. Thus, though Whitman was well aware of Jackson's struggle with the National Bank, his sentiments about the State were aroused on political not economic grounds. And even more telling, Whitman reverted to the Democratic Party when

the Republicans advocated a tariff and opposed free trade. Again, however, the reasons for this switch in his old age were based not on the economic realities of the late nineteenth century, but on the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian opposition to mercantilism. Where in specifics Ruskin was a proto-Fabian, Whitman was closer to the sloppy but, nonetheless, innovative spirit of an FDR.

The differences between Ruskin and Whitman were quite simply those between a European scholar and an American journalist. No doubt Ruskin's specific thought on matters social and political was more apt to his age than were Whitman's. But, and herein lies the value of the comparison, Whitman's critique was less acute precisely because he had less traditional thought to draw upon. And yet, his solutions, though grounded in the same respect for community, were far more reaching and all embracing. The best that Whitman would do was to suggest that an independent electorate by ending the grip of party rule and advancing the most worthy leader regardless of sponsors would open up the system to the possibility of change. And such a prescription, if lacking in specifics, is indeed supremely democratic.

If then Carlyle and Ruskin represented, in their somewhat contrary ways, the organic tradition in British social criticism, there was another pair of outspoken literary figures who stood closer to the political center, who indeed stood for orthodoxy, and against whom Whitman had to measure his 'independent electorate,' Matthew Arnold and J. S. Mill.

Where Carlyle and Ruskin were ideologues in their way, even as was Whitman, Arnold and Mill were less severe, more pliant, and, by that fact, more immediately influential on political events. Carlyle was old enough and famous enough and

eccentric enough to write, "In brief, all this Mammon-Gospel, of Supply-and-Demand, Competition, Laissez-faire, and Devil take the hindmost, begins to be one of the shabbiest Gospels ever preached; or altogether the shabbiest."[23] But such anathemas out of the mouths of Arnold or Mill would have been unseemly. Their stature in the Anglo-American world of the later nineteenth century was more genteel and more practical. Where Ruskin and Carlyle could be dismissed as extremists, both Arnold and Mill were definitely of the main stream.

In any case, however, Arnold and Mill were major interlocators to Whitman, however little they realized it, and as such serve to place Whitman's views both in perspective and in chiar oscuro.

With Arnold, as indeed with Ruskin and Carlyle, the major themes were culture, religion, poetry, and tradition. Plausibly one might see between the rather stuffy Arnold and the free wheeling Whitman no parallels and only crass contrasts. But as one critic notes, "Whitman and Arnold are personalities so antithetic that any correspondence of views is surprising. It can hardly be set down as mere coincidence, for the nature of poetry was for many years a central concern of both men."[24] In short what bound these two dissimilar men together was the concept of the poet as teacher and all but religious leader. Arnold, in the footsteps of his pedagogical father and treading o'er the touchstones, inculcated in generations of Imperial servants the notion that Tennyson, Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser were integrally involved in their bureaucratic duties

---

[23] Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (New York, 1918), p.212.

[24] R. B. McElderry, "Poetry and Religion: A Parallel in Whitman and Arnold," WWR, XIII, 4(1968), p.81.

as servators of the King-Emperor. Even the grandiose literary tradition of the French mission civilatrice could not equal Arnold's force. How India or Nigeria was hence served is scarcely the issue here; the question is how were Anglo-American letters and culture served by this doctrine.

Many critics prefer simply to note the effusion of connotation and the lack of denotation which Arnold's criticism furthered. No doubt. But Arnold did ascribe to an Imperial aim - and it was ironically identical in many respects to Whitman's Democratic ideal - the divine literatus. As Arnold writes in his essay "Numbers," ". . . the remnant always bears a small proportion to the majority. The grave things for States like Judah and Athens is, that the remnant must in positive bulk be so small, and therefore so powerless for reform. To be a voice outside the State, speaking to mankind or to the future, perhaps shaking the actual State to pieces in doing so, one man will suffice."[25] The point here, so central to Arnold and to Whitman, as indeed to all the literary men adverted to in this chapter, is as one would expect, classically stated by Arnold when he writes, "Let us do homage, also, to Isaiah's indestructible conviction that States are saved by their righteous remnant, however clearly we may at the same time recognize that his own building on this conviction was premature."[26]

The key phrase, clearly, is "righteous remnant." This phrase would strike an immediate chord in the vocabulary and instinct of Emerson, and indeed of an English-speaking Protestant audience, especially of the Methodist or Evangelical

---

[25] Matthew Arnold, Discourses in America (London, 1885), p.22.

[26] Ibid., p.25.

variety. Indeed the phrase could well fit the mouth of Milton. For the saving remnant is a standard image in radical Protestant theology. And while the notion of the saving remnant, those few who have been blessed with the Grace of the Redeemer, would seem too Hebraic and too exclusive to merit the attention of an egalitarian American - there can be no doubt that even as Winthrop saw the citizens of Boston as a lumen gentium so too every sundry American with a 'notion,' included himself among this elect. The result, doubtless, in less sect ridden, more ecumentical, times can be considered sheer folly. But at the time it was indeed a powerful spiritual force, and a force from which in varying degrees every author here considered drew strength and, however converted to secular energy, carried with it the dynamism of the great Reform tradition. Indeed, the concept of a mere writer as a font of salvific wisdom is inconceivable outside the Reform tradition. Unless one understands the sacral tradition of the Anglo-American literary world, especially as reinforced by the fire of the Miltonic age and the ice of the Victorian age, he can not grasp the figure of even so secular a character as Whitman's divine literatus.

But theology aside, for a Whitman or Arnold, the issue was to engender a state comprised of, or more likely inspired by, such a remnant. "It is impossible to overrate the importance of the new element introduced into our calculations by increasing the size of the remnant. And in our great modern States, where the scale of things is so large, it does seem as if the remnant might be so increased as to become an actual power, even though the majority be unsound."[27] Here the very

---

[27] Ibid., pp.25-6.

title of the essay becomes significant, "Numbers." While the allusion to the Old Testament book is evident, the preaching is quite different, indeed contradictory. For the Hebrews, the saving remnant was never expected to exceed the tribal bounds. For the Victorian Arnold in the flush of a very vital, if transitory, empire, the bounds knew no limit. In short, Old Testament Israel was to be adjusted to Democracy - the believers could convert or at least inspire a majority. Not, of course, a unique notion - but one significant in light of the imperial and democratic experience of the nineteenth century.

Arnold does not hesitate to speak of the world at large as "the world of the unsound majority." Such peoples were, of course, open for the advancement of European Reform civilization. And the blatent suggestions of Whitman for the conquest of Canada and much of Latin America are very much of the same cloth. In neither case does the author advert to, or most likely even think of, national rivalries or economic interests -- the point is ever to spread the compass of those institutions most apt to increase the number of the saved, religiously or politically.

But Arnold carefully, and wisely, distinguishes among the uses to which the doctrine of the remnant can be put. "If we are to derive comfort from the doctrine of the remnant (and there is great comfort to be derived from it), we must also hold fast to the austere but true doctrine as to what really governs politics, overrides with an inexorable fatality the combinations of the so-called politicians, and saves or destroys States."[28] Thus, the moral principle must take precedence over the political one, however well motivated and well

---

[28] Ibid., pp.31-2.

phrased. Or to be more precise, Arnold, in these series of addresses made to American audiences, dares to define the principle of the saving remnant in quite non-egalitarian terms. "If we are to enjoy the benefit, I said, of the comfortable doctrine of the remnant, we must be capable of receiving also, and of holding fast, the hard doctrine of the unsoundness of the majority, and of the certainty that the unsoundness of the majority, if it is not withstood and remedied, must be their ruin."[29] The point is a quite ordinary one advanced from the time of the Enlightenment, bolstered by the genius of Tocqueville and quite evident to any man of historical vision. But it does indeed fly in the face of the tradition of Jacksonian America and must have given Arnold a pause before he so boldly enunciated it before an American audience. Whitman, of course, is not unaware of the dangers - but he would blame them on the party system and propose other equally egalitarian, indeed more egalitarian alternatives. Arnold, needless to say, does not belong to this school.

What is perceptive in Arnold's analysis and quite similar to Whitman's critiques of democracy, is revealed in this passage from Arnold. "But I suppose that in a democratic community like this, with its newness, its magnitude, its strength, its life of business, its sheer freedom and equality, the danger is in the absence of the discipline of respect; in hardness and materialism, exaggeration and boastfulness; in a false smartness, a false audacity, a want of soul and delicacy."[30] In short, Arnold the schoolmaster notes the unruliness of the lads and suggests a bit of discipline. Fine stuff, no doubt, in an ordered and

---

[29] Ibid., p.56.

[30] Ibid., p.66.

stable hierarchical world, but sheer insanity as applied to the American one. Whitman's solution is not more discipline but more freedom.

But, however lacking in Whitman's embrace of the multitudes, Arnold is not deficient in his acknowledgement of the role of America in the destiny of the saving remnant. "'The remnant shall return;' shall 'convert and be healed' itself first, and shall then recover the unsound majority. And you are fifty millions and growing apace. What a remnant yours may be, surely! A remnant of how great numbers, how mighty strength, how irresistible efficacy! Yet we must not go too fast, either, nor make too sure of our efficacious remnant. Mere multitude will not give us a saving remnant with certainty."[31] But as ever, Arnold by his very cautions indicates that the saving remnant not only is not the majority, but even suggests a diplomatically stated suspicion that the majority may never quite fully measure up. While eminently accurate politically, such an opinion would have been anathema to Whitman.

Consider further his most notable essay, Culture and Anarchy. If, as this paper has maintained, Whitman's view of democracy was a cultural rather than a political one and if his cultural bond can be basically if loosely described as anarchic, then surely Arnold in this essay should provide significant illumination of Whitman's theories. Thus, in a passage so typical of his preachy style, he notes:

> Culture does not try to teach down to the level of the inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current

---

[31] Ibid., p.68.

> everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, where they may use ideas, as it uses them itself, freely, - nourished, and not bound by them.[32]

Now there is implied here an ideal of a classless society - but clearly it remains in a realm close to the Parousia. Rather Arnold preaches not equality but noblesse oblige. Hence, deal fairly with your lessers, in fact better than fairly - but they are your lessers, as must be noted. All of which could well be true and good advice, but it is scarcely Whitman's view of life, at least in dealing with Americans, even immigrants. And yet no one can deny Whitman's outright denial of egalitarian rights to the freed slaves and his enormous suspicion of enfranchised Catholic immigrants. However, as has been suggested earlier, the basic issue here is less "prejudice" than a belief that such voting citizens would be less genuinely free to exercise the spontaneity which Whitman considered essential to suffrage.

But then, consider Arnold's clear superiority and yet nobility in a key statement. "This is the social idea; and the men of culture are the true apostles of equality."[33] Now if, as is clearly the case, Arnold is elitist in his belief in the pedagogical role, as was Whitman, he differs from Whitman's public, if not from certain late and private views of Whitman, in emphasizing tradition and order. "And thus that profound sense of settled order and security, without which a society like ours cannot live and grow at all, sometimes seems to be beginning to threaten us with taking its departure."[34] Hence, of course, the "authority" mentioned in the title of the essay.

---

[32] Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy (New York, 1924), p.38.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., p.52.

The difference from the ancien regime consisted, for Arnold, in the qualifications for the role of authority. Here Arnold again comes quite close to Whitman in recommending an elite not necessarily based on heredity, though such men have their merits, but better based on ability. As he notes, "The State, the power most representing the right reason of the nation, and most worthy, therefore, of ruling . . . is for Mr. Carlyle the aristocracy. For Mr. Lowe, it is the middle class with its incomparable Parliament. For the Reform League it is the working class. . . ."[35] Arnold, ever the even handed academic, notes the pluses and minuses for each of these categories, but opts in the end, quite predictably, for achievement, a course open to all. All very bourgeois and all quite sympathetic to Whitman. Sympathetic because Arnold stresses the necessity of a humane attitude and largeness of spirit. In short, like all too many intellectuals from Plato on down, though without Plato's rigor and honesty, Arnold is opting for rule by the intellectual bureaucratic caste. Now Whitman would be enchanted by the overall notion, but simultaneously would be appalled by the exclusiveness of the notion. In fact neither Arnold or Whitman quite foresaw the havoc which the intellectual hubris of their candidates for power wield and wreak. In this at least Whitman does indeed have his feet more firmly planted on democratic, if only more egalitarian, soil.

It is a matter of difficulty to distinguish exactly Whitman from Arnold in these discourses since both share antipathies and sympathies. Indeed, the very fact of similarity speaks volumes as regards Whitman's basically organic and traditional, though not hierarchical, vision of society. On the

---

[35] Ibid., p.53.

other hand, Arnold never hesitates to proclaim his ultimate and primary respect for Order. And yet, and here Arnold is quite close to Whitman, this Order is based not primarily on Hierarchy but on Harmony - that is, the principle of organization is not imposed but is integral, organic. " . . . because we have no ideal of harmoneous human perfection before our minds, to set our work in motion and to guide it. So the rest of the world, desiring industry, or freedom, or bodily strength, yet desiring these not, as we do, absolutely, but as means to something else, . . ."[36] Arnold here is celebrating the natural, non-rational, organic nature of British society, which by setting goals as ends rather than means somehow muddles through to them without impairing the freedom of the citizen or the strength of the State. And, quite curiously, Arnold sees this natural organic congeries, this togetherness, as engendered by, " . . . the love and enthusiasm excited by others who have laboured for these very things."[37] Such sentiments are close indeed to Whitman.

What Arnold enjoys, and Whitman has no real knowledge of, is a tradition, both political and philosophical, which inculcates order and moral equality and which still allows hierarchical orders. In short, Arnold is European and Whitman, American. Thus Arnold can finally conclude, "If we look at the world outside us we find a disquieting absence of sure authority. We discover that only in right reason can we get a source of sure authority; and culture brings us toward right reason."[38]

All this being the case, why should Arnold be introduced

---

[36] Ibid., p.148.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., p.149.

here, for he would seem to lack even the eccentric passions of Carlyle. True enough, but Arnold offered the same criticism of his age - the avariciousness and lack of cohesion - which Ruskin noted, and Arnold offered in general many of the same solutions which Whitman embraced - e.g., a return to an organic order. The difference lies only in the fact that Whitman was an egalitarian and Arnold was not.

If Arnold, the stuffy Victorian cheering on the lads at the Eton playing fields, so surprisingly parallels and illumimates Whitman, J. S. Mill who largely opposed the communal and traditional bent of Ruskin and Carlyle and Arnold reflects a different and more difficult prism in which to view Whitman. While Tocqueville's has become the standard critique of egalitarianism, J. S. Mill's has become the Bible of the celebrators of Anglo-American political democracy. What Tocqueville is to the intellectuals, Mill is to the politicans.

Max Lerner, surely Mill's most faithful contemporary American disciple, has noted of Mill's great work of 1859, On Liberty, Mill still saw society not as an organic whole, with a life of its own, but as a collection of individual atoms. " . . . Mill came close to seeing society as a congeries of these individual sovereignties, each with complete authority over himself provided he did not hurt others."[39] That such liberalism is the due extension and consequence of Enlightenment philosophy is apparent.

As Lerner continues, Mill emphasized two points, first that the freedom of the individual was more than, in Erich Fhrom's distinction, 'freedom-from,' but also involved 'freedom-for.' Hence, in Mill's competitive liberalism the major

---

[39]Max Lerner, ed., Essential Works of John Stuart Mill (New York, 1961), p.250.

task of democracy was to allow free play to all positive manifestations of freedom. In this, of course, he was recognizing and attempting to meet the critique of Tocqueville on the inevitability of the tyranny of the majority. Unfortunately, as has been well proven by subsequent history, there is, in competition, absolutely no guarantee that the better will prevail - merely that the more forceful or more expedient will do so. And in any case, whatever the practice in the American democracy, the competitive spirit was wholly alien to Whitman's view. Comrades are moved by love not envy.

But there is yet another point of contact between Mill and Whitman -- their conception of the role of leaders. ". . . Mill counted upon those who have been in advance of society in thought and feeling. This comes close to a theory of a creative elite, although Mill shrank from making it explicit. He was committed to the idea that the mass of the people would somehow rise through education."[40] On this point Whitman and Mill were quite at one, even if Whitman was less restrained and more sanguine.

Since it is generally conceded that Mill's essay On Liberty most aptly characterizes the form of political society which obtains in the Anglo-American world, some brief notice of salient points in this essay may well serve to clarify Whitman's thought.

Mill's most central doctrines, and his most crucial assumptions, may be gathered from a passage entitled "Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual." "Each will receive its proper share, if each has that which more particularly concerns it. To individuality should belong the

---

[40] Ibid., pp.251-2.

part of life in which it is chiefly the individual that is interested; to society, the part which chiefly interests society."[41] Two presuppositions are evident here. First that Society, by which Mill means not Community, a notion rather foreign to his thought, but the State, is innately at odds with the Individual. And in this analysis Whitman would be quite willing to concur. But there is a second further implication, that Individuals are, among themselves, also inately antagonistic.

Thus, having rejected the patently legalistic creation of the social contract (" . . . no good purpose is answered by inventing a contract in order to deduce social obligations from it . . .")[42] Mill reverts to the soundly British Hobbesean tradition, but with a difference. Where Hobbes gloried in the State as the justicar of conflict, Mill sees conflict, genteelly defined, as the norm of societal life. And let not the gentility disguise the root fact - Mill's world is one of unceasing conflict and opposition. Mill offers only one restraint, "A person should be free to do as he likes in his own concerns; but he ought not to be free to do as he likes in acting for another under the pretext that the affairs of another are his own affairs."[43] And as he had earlier stated:

> Having said that Individuality is the same thing with development, and that it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well-developed human beings, I might here close the argument: for what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs, than that it brings human beings themselves nearer

---

[41] Ibid., p.322.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., p.350.

to the best thing they can be?[44]

The basis of this emphasis on the role of the Individual was typically Romantic in origin - the celebration of the 'genius.' "Genius can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, ex vi termini, more individual than any other people - less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without harmful compression, into any of the small number of moulds. . ."[45]

Now, if one presumes that men are made to vie with one another and that this rivalry elevates some to a position of educative influence, then the whole question of egalitarianism becomes quite moot. Nor is the legal term 'moot' loosely used, for Mill recognized that only the Law could provide sufficient protection of minorities to defeat the pervasive and ultimately stiffling influence of those competitive victors of the moment. "I have said that it is important to give the freest scope possible to uncustomary things, in order that it may in time appear which of these are fit to be converted into customs."[46] In short, competition must be artificially preserved so that historical change may be served, preferably with that smooth continuity so meritorious in British history. Rarely has parochialism been more subtly or grandly universalized.

On all of this, Whitman, for all his advocacy of the preceptorial role of the Poet and his celebration of the Individual, is plainly operating from a quite different basis. Once one grants egalitarianism, all of Mill, save for certain Tocquevillean cautionary devices, collapses. If only, however,

---

[44] Ibid., p.312.

[45] Ibid., p.313.

[46] Ibid., p.315.

one can grasp that equal need not be competitive. And in this case what is crucial is how one views equality. Equality of opportunity is innately competitive, or at least susceptible to hierarchical developments. The sort of equality celebrated in Leaves of Grass, however timid, or more precisely blind, Whitman was to the economic consequences of Industrialism, was an absolute equality, Not that Whitman, as is clear by his advocacy of the role of the divine literatus, failed to recognize to gradation of talents; rather Whitman is not really concerned with the Individual alone and isolated, but instead with the Individual as enhanced and personalized by his interaction with his fellows. And since all are moral equals, the race for superiority no longer really counts.

Thus, however well Mill's analysis of the Anglo-American political structure rings true, however much he attacks the subjugation of women within familial bonds, however much he champions the voice of minorities, however tirelessly he lauds the role of the intellectual elite, all Whitmanian themes, the rift between Mill and Whitman is fundamental and radical. Equality and empathy were the bases of all Whitman's politics; Mill could not envision empathy, and his brand of equality in fact precluded empathy. Nor is it insignificant that not only did Mill acutely analyze the Anglo-American political system, but he has remained to the present moment its most complete champion. Whitman, in rejecting the party system, was doing more than rejecting the corrupt transitory parties of his day; he was rejecting the foundations and presumptions which that system so necessarily reflected. The concept of the independent electorate, despite its innocuous sound and its apparent reflection of Mill, is spiritual worlds apart. Mill was attempting to insure a just and continuous evolution of the Whig political traditions.

Whitman was, if he be faced boldly, proposing a revolution - for the entire concept of an adhesive electorate strikes at the very root of Mill's assumptions.

But if Whitman could be relatively free in his dialogue with his British colleagues, Emerson was another matter. Emerson was too close and too towering to challenge. And in fact, as has been demonstrated time and again, Emerson was an inspiration to the young journalist and so merited a filial piety which never failed. But, like most sons of illustrious fathers, Whitman was not incapable of rather sharp judgments. As he writes in "Notes Left Over," "Not passion or imagination or warp or weakness, or any pronounced cause or speciality, dominates him. Cold and bloodless intellectuality dominates him. (I know the fires, emotions, love, egotisms, glow deep, perennial, as in all New Englanders - but the facade hides them well - they give no sign.)"[47] For it is precisely the gentility of Emerson which, to employ an apt cliche, gets Whitman's goat. "No, no, dear friend; though the States want scholars, undoubtedly, and perhaps want ladies and gentlemen, who use the bath frequently, and never laugh loud, or talk wrong, they don't want scholars, or ladies and gentlemen, at the expense of all the rest. They want good farmers, sailors, mechanics, clerks, citizens - perfect business and social relations perfect fathers and mothers."[48] Thus, as Whitman in his mature reflection can say:

> The reminiscence that years ago I began like most youngsters to have a touch (though it came late, and was only on the surface) of Emerson-on-the-brain - that I read his writings reverently, and address'd him in print as 'Master,' and for a month or so thought of him as such - I retain not

---

[47] Stovall, II, 516.

[48] Ibid., p.517.

> only with composure, but positive satisfaction. I have noticed that most people of eager minds pass through this stage of exercise.
>
> The best part of Emersonianism is, it breeds the giant that destroys itself. Who wants to be any man's mere follower? lurks behind every page. No teacher ever taught, that has so provided for his pupil's setting up independently - no truer evolutionist.[49]

But it is well to remember that Whitman was a sly and proud man in quest of Democratic immortality; it was of some moment to him to try to cover his footprints along the path to Olympus. In the second series of Essays, published in 1844, Emerson in two noteworthy pieces, "Politics" and "The Poet," had deliniated most of the themes Whitman was to make his own. Hence, despite later caveats, given the biographical facts, it is useful to consider what Emerson had to say a full ten years before the rocket of Whitman's genius launched itself most improbably from Rome's print shop in Brooklyn.

If Emerson has had two drawbacks to subsequent generations they surely are his aweful aptness for apothegems suitable for quotation on all and sundry occasions and his deplorable taste in failing to die at the proper moment. The late Emerson veered ever rightward till in the end even Harvard accepted back her prodigal son; the early Emerson was so steeped in the oratorical tradition that he frequently preferred the bland but boldly stated truism to the forthright celebration of things as they were. And in all this, of course, he was simply a smoother and earlier version of Whitman, a Jacob to his compatriot's Essau.

In "Politics," written a mere four years after the hurley-burley of the first mass electoral campaign, Emerson has aptly sized up the significance of the new egalitarian democratic order. And, unlike the enthusiastic elan of so many of his age

---

[49] Ibid.

and talents, Emerson was cautious. "Every actual State is corrupt. Good men must not obey the laws too well. What satire on government can equal the severity of censure conveyed in the word politic, which now for ages has signified cunning, intimating that the State is a trick?"[50] This was, of course, eminently within the Jeffersonian tradition. But what is one to make from the mouth of one merely in his early forties of this detached, almost disinterested, judgment which shortly followed.

> Of the two great parties, which, at this hour, almost share the nation between them, I should say that, one has the best cause, and the other contains the best men. The philosopher, the poet, or the religious man will, of course, wish to cast his vote with the democrat, for free-trade, for wide suffrage, for the abolition of legal cruelities in the penal code, and for facillitating in every manner the access of the young and the poor to the sources of wealth and power. But he can rarely accept the persons whom the so-called popular party propose to him as representatives of these liberalities. They have not at heart the ends which give to the name of democracy what hope and virtue are in it. The spirit of our American radicalism is destructive and aimless; it is not loving; it has no ulterior and divine ends; but is destructive only out of hatred and selfishness. On the other side, the conservative party, composed of the most moderate, able, and cultivated part of the population, is timid, and merely defensive of property. . . . From neither party, when in power, has the world any benefit to expect in science, art, or humanity, at all commensurate with the resources of the nation.[51]

Such even handedness is disheartening at best, when not simply paralyzing.

But what is being revealed here, in the days when Whitman was out stump speaking for his party, was a clear disillusionment with the whole notion of parties. "The vice of our leading

---

[50] William H. Gilman, ed., Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York, 1965), p.353.

[51] Ibid., p.354.

parties in this country (which may be cited as a fair specimen of these societies of opinion) is, that they do not plant themselves on the deep and necessary grounds to which they are respectively entitled, but lash themselves to fury in the carrying of some local and momentary measure, nowise useful to the commonwealth."[52] And what, apart from immediate and surface ills, does Emerson lay to the blame of the parties? The inanition of the Individual, his subjugation to majorities and his manipulation by interests over which he has no control. Hence, Emerson recommends a return to the strict Jeffersonian ideal, a not inconsiderable recommendation from a New England Brahmin. "The antidote to this abuse of formal government, is, the influence of private character, the growth of the Individual; the appearance of the principal to supersede the proxy; the appearance of the wise man, of whom it must be owned the existing government is but a shabby imitation."[53] And quite in the line Mill was later to adopt, Emerson continues, "The tendencies of the times favor the idea of self-government, and leave the individual, for all code, to the rewards and penalties of his own constitution, which work with more energy than we believe, whilst we depend on artificial restraints."[54]

But, unlike Mill, Emerson is no advocate of a Benthamite version of Hobbes. His solution is, in light of what Whitman was later to propose and celebrate, nothing less than startling. "Are our methods now so excellent that all competition is hopeless? could not a nation of friends even devise better ways? . . . thousands of human beings might exercise toward each other

---

[52] Ibid., p.353.

[53] Ibid., p.357.

[54] Ibid., p.358.

the grandest and simplest sentiments, as well as a knot of friends, or a pair of lovers."[55] Had not tradition formed an image of Emerson as the Venerable Minister to America, what might critics have made of "knot of friends" and "pair of lovers?" Whitman merely lacked Emerson's delicacy. But what is so splendid is the identity of both men in their critique of American political practice and in their proposed solution - empathy, comradeship; whatever one chooses to term it, it is scarcely the competitive individualism of the American political world which Mill had cannonized.

As one might well expect, Emerson was eager to celebrate the role of the poet within his comradely democracy. In a lengthy and diffuse essay of the same series, "The Poet," Emerson defines both the need, the public role, and the personal character of the poet of the new age. As for the need, he notes, " . . . the great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature."[56] But, and this is a point as crucial to understand Emerson's vision of the poet as it is to understanding Whitman's divine literatus, the poet is a "representative man."

> The breath of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stand among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth. . . . The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart.[57]

---

[55] Ibid., pp.359-60.

[56] Ibid., p.308.

[57] Ibid., p.308.

All this is from the early passages of the essay. Emerson, ever the Harvard man, then proceeds to survey the history of poetry, laying particular emphasis on the epic poets who were seen, in those days, to have literally molded the temper of their nations. And then in a burst of hubris which might have astonished even Virgil, Emerson boldly calls for an American Homer - an earthy, vibrant, and popular poet whose work would so pervade the new American culture as to unify all sections and classes beyond the strifes and factions of the moment.

> Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillaniminity of honest men, the Northern trade, the Southern planting, the Western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.[58]

It is impossible to believe that Whitman in his slough of despond of the early 1850's did not receive this as his call to greatness. For surely he desperately attempted to follow every prescription of the Master. In fact, one suspects, that the most wholly satisfying and triumphant moment of Whitman's life was the moment he opened the congradulatory letter from Concord written the day after Emerson had received a copy of the first edition of Leaves of Grass.

But, if, as one transfers one's gaze from the literary-social critics of the Mother Country to the Master of the New World, one narrows the gap between Whitman and his peers, some reservations must be made. First, one must recognize the distance between Concord and Brooklyn. Emerson was ever above the fray; Whitman was grappling with existential reality the whole

---

[58] Ibid., p.324.

time, as the third edition gives terrible evidence. And it was the third edition which finally soured Emerson on Whitman, not surprisingly. Whitman, in dealing with real emotions and real events, personal and political, was worlds apart from the Olympian Emerson. Second, there is the matter of generational differences. Though born only sixteen years apart, one must remember that Whitman was unusually late to take hold. For a poet of his lyrical power in the Romantic tradition a start quite literally from nowhere in his late thirties was extraordinarily late. And as has been noted when speaking of Whitman's journalistic career, he scarcely began to think independently before the early 1850's. By then Emerson had, by dint of the astounding opprobrium heaped upon his discourse at Harvard Divinity School in 1838, decided that prudence and circumspection were the path to influence. Where rejection, at least initially, made Whitman the more bold, it prematurely aged Emerson. Finally, Emerson did not really care at all about politics. Under the guise of Jeffersonian ideals, Emerson claimed to be advocating a new order. In fact he was profoundly apolitical - he was simply too much the Protestant preacher to believe that public policy or action ever counted for much. The heart, the heart above all! Environmentalism was scarcely his concern; but then Concord was not Brooklyn.

But, granted all this, still of all the authors considered in this chapter only Emerson fell upon Whitman like a theophany, complete with symbolic manifestations. Howsoever Whitman attempted to disengage himself from the influence of the Master, he never personally succeeded and certainly never convinced anyone else that he had ever really tried. The sad note in this discipleship is that the Master aged into verbose and sententious senility so early and so rapidly - and that having

proclaimed the need for an American Homer, Emerson lacked the courage, ever a failing with him, to acknowledge the fulfillment of his own prophecy. A sad case indeed.

This chapter has attempted to illustrate that Whitman was not, as has been so often suggested, a fringe phenomenon. Rather Whitman was solidly situated in the Anglo-American tradition of literary-social criticism. Beyond doubt his point of view was unique and individual, but no less so than that of Ruskin or Carlyle. And further, Whitman explicitly grappled with the concepts either suggested or championed by such men. In addition, the more moderate views of Arnold or Mill were not wholly in disharmony with Whitman's opinions. In short, Whitman was very much in the mainstream of the Anglo-American dialogue on the shape of democratic ends and means, and he was also forceful in his advancement of the peculiar American contribution of egalitarianism.

No one would doubt that Whitman's vision of Democracy was so personal and ideosyncratic, to say no more, that it scarcely cohered with the authoritarianism of Arnold, or the feudalism of Carlyle, or the liberalism of Mill, or the romantic anarchism of Ruskin. Whitman was singular, as were each of these men. But he started from a different base, egalitarianism, and the Protestant iconoclastic attitude toward tradition. Both were unfortunate to the extent that they deprived Whitman of a genuine holistic European tradition, but without these prejudices Whitman could scarcely have become what he was.

But the example of the wit, courage, and thought of Carlyle and Ruskin, the lesser if more challengingly realistic thought of Mill and Arnold, and the frank notions of Emerson offer several lights on Whitman's political thought. First, they measure him against varying standards of seriousness among his literary peers.

Second, they afford by their very contrast and similarity a clearer definition of the uniqueness of Whitman's thought.

Whitman was both cognizant of and receptive to the sort of social criticism offered by his British literary contemporaries. Further, the stimulus of both their anti-egalitarian notions and also their unswerving committment to parliamentary democracy served to focus the issues more plainly and concisely than the helter-skelter American system, with which in any case Whitman had long been disillusioned, could do. Thus Whitman had to measure his critique of the American political scene and its democracy against the corrupt practices of the immediate political system, against the political egalitarianism of his basic belief, against the disillusionment of the collapse of the ideal of comradely union of men in arms, against the intellectually seductive but quite unegalitarian norms of his British peers. Thus Whitman had to walk a very thin line between the deplorable practices of American politics and his comradely, ideal Democracy. And further this was an exercise carried out over a stretch of time during which the social and economic conditions of the nation were in serious flux.

Thus, when speaking of influences upon Whitman, quite genuinely one must admit that there were no secret or even actively partisan sources. Whitman was native, original, perhaps even ingenuous. In later periods he tempered his ideas of Democracy against the standard social and literary critics of his time. In his youth he absorbed a quite simplistic creed which was found abundantly lacking in the face of the collapse of the party system under the strain of the slavery issue. The period of Whitman's greatest creativity was a time of tension, both in the Democracy with which he so closely identified, and a time of ambiguity and doubt within the person of the poet himself.

Before he might have railed against the folly of hopelessly inept political parties, shortly after he may have found temporary solace in comforting the wounded, and in the end he may have chosen simply to ignore what he no longer had the stomach to see. But for one sublime moment Whitman was America, not just for then but for always, and in that moment, a span of some five years, or so, Whitman captured all that he need say.

And what, of course, his message was, despite early and late negative strictures, basically quite affirmative - namely, the Person - the One who could connect by love and sympathy with Another. For a poet little more need be said. Carlyle and Ruskin, Mill and Arnold, for all their elaborate schemata rarely touch the soul or the heart, merely the mind. But then the United Kingdom was sublimely self confident and successful, whereas the United States had endured failure, civil strife, and sheer banditry. Still Whitman perdured as did his ideal - however eccentric and unrealistic.

In the end, Whitman was his own creator. Even as he sang his song over the years, so too he created his life out of his work. It is not presumptuous to say that Leaves of Grass is more truly Whitman than the man himself.

CHAPTER VIII

Conclusion

Throughout his long career, Whitman displayed both amazing consistency in his critique of the American democracy, and also a surprising ability to alter and enlarge his solutions to the problems which he saw besetting that democracy.

Most biographers and critics of Whitman have not failed to note both his continuous celebration of the concepts of liberty and equality as embodied in the Union of the States, and also his frequent and sharp criticism of some of the political and social practices which he discovered in the daily life of the Republic. What more often has been neglected is the manner in which Whitman's editorial criticisms of practical details led on to his gradual disillusionment in what has come to be considered one of the bases of American life, the political party system.

Few latter day observers would fault Whitman's distaste for the operations of the political parties as they revealed themselves in the decades preceeding the Civil War. But Whitman's critique went farther than mere suggestions for party reform. Such reform movements, even to the extent of founding new parties, were not, after all, unheard of or untried. Indeed, at first Whitman advocated just such reforms, and in time even joined fringe parties in order to effect the needed changes in the parties of the day. But Whitman gradually came to see such reform

efforts within the party system as inadequate. Hence, privately in "The Eighteenth Presidency" (1855) and publically in Democratic Vistas (1872), Whitman came to advocate what he termed an "uncommitted electorate."

The notion of an independent electorate which would be free of party loyalty to pick and choose among the candidates for office was, at the time, a rather startling notion, smacking of disloyalty and willful caprice. Today, however, with the enormous growth both of 'ticketsplitting' and of the voter who chooses to register independent, Whitman's suggestion of an "uncommitted electorate" has all but become the norm of responsible citizenship. And, as Whitman predicted in Democratic Vistas, this "uncommitted electorate" has come to exercise major influence on the selection of party candidates and the conduct of the parties generally.

But, whereas the editorials and political tracts of Whitman were directed at the operations of the political parties, from the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855, and especially from the crucial third edition in 1860, Whitman had begun to question the nature of political parties within the Democracy. And it is here that modern critics have all too frequently overlooked or misinterpreted Whitman's efforts. Some commentators have seen this second phase of Whitman's critique as an irresponsible withdrawal into a private world of friendship, while others see it as a sign of his irresolute and impractical utopianism. But a more discerning interpretation of Leaves of Grass in light of the traditional analyses of the nature of democracy and in light of the contemporary political and literary critiques of democracy, leads, this paper would maintain, to the concept of the "adhesive electorate."

The concept of the "adhesive electorate," while undoubtedly in part inspired by experiences in Whitman's personal life, can not be simply dismissed as a personal abberation writ large. For the whole history of Western civilization from Plato's Republic through the family of Christendom to the modern ideals of fraternity and class solidarity - all have been a search for an organic cohesiveness among citizens. If Whitman is seen against this perspective of the search for a unity which retains and enhances the diversity and distinctiveness of the individual person, then his solution, "the adhesive electorate," is more easily recognized as a substantial and sensitive contribution to the concept of a democratic community.

Criticisms of Whitman's vagueness and lack of rigor are easily made. But such criticisms are facile indeed when compared to Whitman's almost unique stance as mid-nineteenth century America's explicator of Democracy. For, where other political observers and Transcendentalist thinkers all too frequently overstressed the role of the Individual, Whitman never fails to situate this Individual within that context which alone can render the Individual meaningful and whole, the Ensemble. For as he notes in the opening inscription to Leaves of Grass, "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,/ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse."

Bibliography

Allen, Gay Wilson. The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman. New York, 1960.

_____. "The Two Poets of Leaves of Grass," Patterns of Committment in American Literature (Toronto, 1967).

_____. Walt Whitman Handbook. New York, 1946.

Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. Chicago, 1958.

Arnold, Matthew. Culture and Anarchy. New York, 1924.

_____. Discourses in America. London, 1885.

Arvin, Newton. Whitman. New York, 1938.

Asselineau, Roger. L'Evolution de Walt Whitman. Paris, 1954.

Blodgett, Harold W. and Bradley, Sculley, eds. Leaves of Grass. (Comprehensive Reader's Edition) New York, 1965.

Borges, Juan Luis. "Achievements of Walt Whitman," Texas Quarterly, V, 1(1962).

Bowering, George. "The Solitary Everything," Walt Whitman Review, XV, 1(1970).

Bowers, Fredson. Whitman's Manuscripts. Chicago, 1955.

Briggs, Arthur E. Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist. New York, 1952.

Brinton, Crane. The Political Ideas of the English Romanticists. New York, 1962.

Buell, Lawrence. "Transcendentalist Catalogue Rhetoric: Vision Versus Form," American Literature, XL, 3(1968).

Carlisle, E. F. "Walt Whitman: The Drama of Identity," Criticism, X(1968).

Carlyle, Thomas. Critical and Miscellaneous Essays. New York, 1899.

_____. Past and Present. New York, 1918.

Cassirer, Ernst. The Myth of the State. New Haven, 1946.

Chase, Richard. Walt Whitman Reconsidered. New York, 1955.

Clark, Kenneth, ed. Ruskin Today. New York, 1964.

Clark, Leadie M. Walt Whitman's Concept of the American Common Man. New York, 1955.

Cooke, Alice L. "Whitman as Critic," Walt Whitman Review, IV, 2(1959).

Daiches, David. Literary Studies. Chicago, 1956.

Detweiler, Robert. "The Concrete Universals in Democratic Vistas," Walt Whitman Review, IX, 2(1964).

Drucker, Peter F. Men, Ideas and Politics. New York, 1971.

Feidelson, Charles. Symbolism and American Literature. Chicago, 1953.

Frederickson, George M. The Inner Civil War. New York, 1965.

Freehling, William. "Spoilsmen, Interests, and Calhoun," Journal of American History, LII, 1(1965).

Furness, C. J. Walt Whitman's Workshop. New York, 1928.

Gilman, William H., ed. Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York, 1965.

Grier, Edward F., ed. The Eighteenth Presidency. Lawrence, Kansas, 1956.

_____. "Walt Whitman, the Galaxy, and Democratic Vistas," American Literature, XXIII (1951).

Griffith, Clark. "Sex and Death in 'Calamus'," Philological Quarterly, XXXIX (1960).

Hindus, Milton. "Whitman and Morality in the Democratic Republic," Walt Whitman Review, VII, 3(1962).

Hobsbawn, E. J. The Age of Revolution. New York, 1962.

Holloway, Emory and Schwartz, Vernolian, eds. I Sit and Look Out. New York, 1932.

Holloway, Emory, ed. The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman. New York, 1921.

Hubenka, Lloyd J., ed. John Ruskin's Unto This Last. Lincoln, Neb., 1967.

Hungerford, E. "Walt Whitman and His Chart of Bumps," American Literature, II (1931).

Kinnard, John. "Paradox of American 'Identity'," Partisan Review, XXV (1958).

Lerner, Max, ed. Essential Works of John Stuart Mill. New York, 1961.

McCormick, Richard P. The Second American Party System. Chapel Hill, 1966.

McElderry, R. B. "Poetry and Religion: A parallel in Whitman and Arnold," Walt Whitman Review, XII, 4(1968).

Matthiessen, F. O. American Renaissance. New York, 1941.

Metzger, Charles R. Thoreau and Whitman: A Study of Their Esthetics. Seattle, 1964.

Miller, Edwin H. Walt Whitman's Poetry: A Psychological Journey. Boston, 1968.

Miller, James E. "Whitman's 'Calamus'," PMLA, LXXIX (1964).

Murry, J. Middleton. Unprofessional Essays. London, 1956.

Nisbet, William and Burnham, Walter, eds. The American Party Systems. New York, 1967.

Passen, Edward. Most Uncommon Jacksonians. New York, 1967.

Rising, Clara. "Vistas of a Disillusioned Realist," Walt Whitman Review, VII (1962).

Rogers, Cleveland and Black, John, eds. The Gathering of Forces. New York, 1920.

Rosenberg, John D., ed. The Genius of John Ruskin. New York, 1963.

Rubin, John Jay. "Whitman: Equal Rights in the Foreground," Emerson Society Quarterly, XX (1952).

Rubin, John Jay and Brown, Charles H. Walt Whitman of the New York AURORA. University Park, Pa., 1950.

Santayana, George. Interpretations of Poetry and Religion. New York, 1924.

Schyberg, Frederik. Walt Whitman. New York, 1951.

Sedwick, Theodore, ed. Political Writings of William Leggett. New York, 1840.

Shepard, Esther. Walt Whitman's Pose. New York, 1938.

Smith, Fred Manning. "Whitman and Carlyle," American Literature, XX (1962).

Stovall, Floyd, ed. Whitman: Prose Works. (Comprehensive Reader's Edition) New York, 1964.

Tillich, Paul. Love, Power, and Justice. Oxford, 1954.

Traubel, Horace, ed. An American Primer. Boston, 1904.

Van Nostrand, Albert D. Everyman His Own Poet: Romantic Gospels in American Literature. New York, 1968.

Waterman, William Randall. Frances Wright. New York, 1924.

Wells, Carolyn and Goldsmith, Alfred E., eds. Rivulets of Prose. New York, 1928.