WALT WHITMAN

Here and Now

Edited by
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Walt Whitman in carpenter’s garb: an engraving used as the frontispiece of the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855.

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16.
The American Context of Democratic Vistas
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Walt Whitman's Democratic Vistas (1870) is known today primarily -- perhaps even exclusively -- for its uncompromising and biting attack on the failures of American society in the immediate postwar years. Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, for instance, in their anthology American Literature: The Makers and the Making, describe the book as

a major document -- the first thoroughgoing survey of the American Republic in "The Gilded Age," that period of chaotic economic development, of financial greed and many kinds of gross corruption following the Civil War.

. . . Among others, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Henry Adams would also give an account of this disreputable but fascinating moment in our national history; but none would offer as scathing an indictment of postwar America as Whitman.

His report of his examination of contemporary America -- made "like a physician diagnosing some deep disease" -- is so powerful that this section, which appears early in the text, may color our reading of the entire work. We may forget, then, that Democratic Vistas, while magnificent in the force of its denunciation of immediate problems, remains our most far-reaching and inspiring "defense" of American democracy. The greatness of the work is due to its ability to combine a realistic and unspiring evaluation of the entire work, democracy with a full statement of its spiritual
potential. One key to this unique balance may be found in the unusual factors influencing its composition over a period of some three years, from 1866 to 1870.

The initial impetus for Democratic Vistas was Horace Greeley's publication in the Tribune for August 16, 1867, of the complete text of Carlyle's Shooting Niagara, an intemperate, even savage, attack on democratizing tendencies in England and America. The same day Greeley published an editorial defending American democracy from Carlyle's attack and this was followed by many others, including an essay by E. L. Godkin in the Nation. On September 7, Whitman wrote the editors of the Galaxy, two brothers, William C. and Francis P. Church, that he had in composition, an article, (prose,) of some length -- the subject opportunity -- I shall probably name it Democracy. It is partly provoked by and in some respects a rejoinder to, Carlyle's Shooting Niagara. The editors encouraged Whitman to proceed with the project, and the three major divisions of Democratic Vistas were conceived as separate essays for the Galaxy. "Democracy" appeared in December 1867, "Personalism" in May 1868, but the third, "Literature," was not published, perhaps because of its length. However, in preparing these essays for publication as a separate volume, Whitman made a number of substitutions and deletions and removed three paragraphs, written in a splendid imitation of Carlyle's own style, directly attacking the cantankerous old Scotsman. And he added, at the beginning of the volume, the passages condemning the business, political, and social corruption which he saw engulfing America, turning it into "a sort of dry and flat Sahara" (p. 372). Clearly, Whitman's diagnosis, his reading of what he saw under "the moral microscope," had changed (p. 372).

Whitman explained his changing perspective in a footnote he added to the published volume:

I was at first roused to such anger and abuse by this essay (Shooting Niagara) from Mr. Carlyle, so insulting to the theory of America -- but happening to think afterwards how I had more than once been in the like mood, during which this essay was evidently cast, and seen persons and things in the same light, (indeed some might say there are signs of the same feeling in these 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. (Pp. 375-76)
democrat living," Frothingham correctly remarks that "he is severe because he hopes so much, and sees so much at stake in the experiment of liberty."7

A writer who anticipated both Godkin and Whitman in this argument is the little-known Eugene Benson (1839-1908). A painter as well as an active magazineist, Benson saw himself as a "literary fronton," a writer always poised to attack the "Honored Munro-Jumbos" of society. His essay "To-Day," published in the Galaxy for November 1867, takes issue with virtually every aspect of the emerging "secular Creed" of the postwar years, particularly the identification of material with moral progress. Benson insists that while the material progress may have "added to our comforts," it has brought with it a pervasive corruption and "moral inertia." As would Whitman three years later, Benson argues that a nation is to be evaluated not by its material achievements, but by its moral and spiritual health, and from this perspective he lamented the decline:

We exist, and multiply mechanical forces, and increase in wealth, and the only correction of the grossness of our prosperity is now and then the disturbance of an ethical question in writing or in political action; but what can we show as an illustration of that ultimate life for which the noblest of the race have agonized and struggled? The more tools, the greater our work and wealth; but we have become dead to noble sensations.8

Denouncing the domination of business, he sadly concluded that "manufactures and trade" are the real gods of the people.

"To-Day" is one of a series of six essays Benson published in the Galaxy that treat many of the same themes as Democratic Vistas. The first five appeared before Whitman's "Democracy": "About the Literary Spirit," August 15, 1866; "Literary Fronton," October 1, 1866; "Literature and the People," April 15, 1867; "Solidarity and Democracy," June 1867; and "To-Day." The final essay in the series, "Democratic Deities," appeared in November 1866. Although Benson, who became a permanent expatriate in Italy in 1873, did not identify these essays as a group, they develop a consistent theme and so may profitably be considered together. In view of the importance of the Galaxy to Whitman at this time as a lucrative outlet for both prose and verse and as the publisher of John Burroughs' important "Walt Whitman and His Drum-Taps," which appeared on December 1, 1866, it is likely that Whitman read the magazine regularly and was familiar with Benson's work. Since both Benson's approach and many of his conclusions anticipate Whitman throughout, it is likely that a reading of Benson contributed to the formative thinking which preceded the actual writing of Democratic Vistas.

Although personally committed as an artist to painting, Benson, like Whitman, looked to literature as the primary vehicle through which the modern spirit would express itself. The first three essays in this series consider the broad questions of the function of literature in a democratic society. With the failure of the established social institutions, Benson looked to the writer to create an image of the world beyond the materialism which was so abhorrent to him and to stimulate critical thinking about social values. Measuring contemporary writing against his lofty expectations, he describes it, as would Whitman, with an abysmal scorn. He blames the "thin and lifeless" qualities of American writing on the failure of the writers to establish a vital connection with the actual life of the people. Paradoxically, he argues, the American "reverence for majorities" has been inappropriately transferred from politics to literature and is responsible for a "dreadful monotony and . . . low level of intensity."9 Whitman also attacked the levelling down in contemporary writing: "To-day, in books, in the rivalry of writers, especially novelists, success (so-call'd) is for him or her who strikes the mean flat average, the sensual appetite for stimulus, incident, periscope, &c., and depicts to the common calibre, sensual exterior life" (p. 408). Both writers insisted that very little of the great streams of material pouring forth from the printing presses could actually be called literature.

As the deprecatory reference to novelists in the passage quoted above suggests, Whitman did not envision an important role for prose fiction. He speaks instead of the need of "powerful native philosophers and orators and bards, these States, as rallying points to come, in times of danger, and to fend off ruin and defection" (p. 422). Novelists as "wielders of the musket," as "the dearest of novelists" (p. 408) was the "great modern medium of intercourse" between the writer and the people. Writing shortly before the appearance of John William DeForest's Miss Ravenel's Conversation (1867), generally regarded as the first novel in American realism, Benson lamented the "dearth of novelists on this side of the Atlantic" and recognized that the development of the novel in America lagged behind its growth in Europe.10
Benson was an appreciative reader of Whitman, and in some respects his broad literary philosophy may have been influenced by Whitman. Clearly, he shared Whitman's dedication to a democratic literature: "man in the free exercise of his faculties, free to choose his happiness, is the grand idea which must be set forth in literature for the people." From this perspective, he praised Whitman himself as potentially the great liberalizing poet, although he observed that it is still too early to form a final estimate of a body of work "which may be more and it may be less than what contemporary advocates [John Burroughs] claim." Appropriately, in an editorial dated January 3, 1868, the Nation identified Benson and Whitman as the two leading proponents of an independent national literature, a concept in which it did not see much merit.

As a "literary fronteur," Benson saw himself as a critic of the culture as a whole and as such was centrally concerned with the concept of culture. In "Personalism" Whitman observed sadly that "culture" was then the great modern word and that contemporary writers never seemed to tire of insisting that Americans acquire as much of it as possible. "To prune, gather, trim, conform, "Benson and Whitman said, "is the pressure of our days" (p. 394). Whitman argues for a "radical change of category, in the distribution of precedence." Culture must be understood, he insists, not as something apart from the people, but as the reflection of their actual lives and values. Any "programme or theory" must be of "a scope generous enough to include the widest human area. It must have for its spinal meaning the formation of a typical personality of character, eligible to the uses of the high average of men -- and not restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses" (p. 396). Of all contemporary writers, Benson's position on this subject is closest to Whitman's. The focus of his treatment of the question was an attack on the literary establishment, "the proper gentlemen who sit in editorial chairs." This group finds itself far more typical to things British than to American life and so is guilty of attempting to impose foreign standards on its own land. They form "a separate and selfish class deriving their intellectual capital from an older society, and from a civilization different from the hybrid and half-developed but virile civilization of our own land." Both Whitman and Benson, then, utterly detested the attempt of the leading editors and writers to force American art and life to fit the cultural models of Europe and spoke out vigorously against it.

Still, there is an unease and even indecision in Benson's treatment of American life. He seems to be characterizing his own position in speaking of the "sincere but cultivated man" who "finds it difficult which he must prefer -- the heartless culture of the critic who follows the lead of the foreign reviewer, or the raw and local barbarisms of the untravelled American mind." Perhaps nothing better expresses both how close Benson as a writer came to the American civilization and yet how far he remained from it than his statement that the writer, "to serve the people, must not go "down to the level of their common life" but should instead appeal "to their consciousness of the highest life." As literary men we must share their ideas; as literary men we must correct and advance their ideal." As reflected in his eventual expatriation, Benson experienced a sense of separation and distance not present in Whitman's more radical formulation of the problem, both as creative artist and theorist of culture.

Benson's fourth essay, "Solitude and Democracy," corresponds roughly to Whitman's "Personalism." Both essays formulate strategies for the maintenance and development of personal identity in the modern world. Like Whitman, Benson places the highest possible value on individualism. For Whitman, the only large and historic justification for democracy is the "copious production" of "rich, luxuriant, varied personalism" (p. 392). Both writers recognize that solitude is absolutely essential. To use Benson's terms, it provides a "centre of resistance" to the familiarity and fusion of modern life:

I know of no condition more foreign to the whole spirit of American life than that of solitude. And yet solitude, which begets contemplation, which begets reverie, the two essential conditions of philosophy and poetry, is the source of all ideas that enable man and address his highest nature.

Whitman too spoke of the recourse to solitude in rapturous, religious language: "only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality may the spirituality of religion positively come forth at all... Only here... the meditation, the devout ecstasy, the soaring flight" (pp. 398-99). Solitude served Benson, much as Personalism served Whitman, as a vital concept, an essential mediating term, to set beside the levelling, destructive forces of the modern world.

Benson's last two essays in the series, "To-Day" and "Democratic Deities," are slashing attacks, in the spirit of the literary fronteur, on the pervasive corruption, the shameless worship of the material, and
the mindless conformity of the new age. Nowhere does he approach the inspiring vision of the religious potential of democracy that Whitman formulates, especially in his essay "Democracy." Here Whitman approaches democracy not only as a political system and an idea which encourages full individual development, but also as a source of value which brings to the individual a sense of brotherhood, a vital human "solidarity." In this, as throughout the work, Whitman's genius is reflected in the ability to bring seemingly opposite ideas, individuality and human brotherhood, the self and the group, into a vital, creative tension. Democracy, he writes,

seeks not only to individualize but to universalize. The great word Solidarity has arisen. Of all dangers to a nation... there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn... To work in... and justify God, his divine aggregate, the People... this, I say, is what democracy is for; and this is what our America means, and is doing. (P. 362)

As throughout Democratic Vistas, Whitman's vision here is simply more profound than Benson's.

Still, in a time not especially notable for self-criticism, both Whitman and Benson consciously adopt the role of the social critic. Both insist that a society is to be evaluated by the quality of its life, not its material achievements, and both, to use Whitman's terms, find the "spectacle... appalling." Acutely aware of the threat to personal identity in this world, both celebrate the essential value of solitude as an antidote to the pressure of the mass. In the absence of a shared religious faith and with the failure of other secular guides and teachers, both place great, perhaps unrealistically great, faith in the writer as a source both of social criticism and the creation of larger cultural values. Dealing scornfully with contemporary writing, both denounce the reliance of the literary establishment on foreign, particularly British, literary values. Both redefine accepted notions of culture, seeing it as, in its deepest sense, the reflection of the entire life of the people.

Democratic Vistas is not ostensibly based on a sure, three-stage concept of the unfolding of America. The first two stages, the political and material, have established the basis for the third, a "sublime and serious Religious Democracy sternly taking command, dissolving the old, sloughing off surfaces, and from its own interior and vital principles, reconstructing and democratizing society" (p. 410). The prophetic literature for which Whitman called would serve as the "support and expression" of this new democracy. Benson, of course, had no such vision; indeed, far more than Whitman, he senses the dangers of materialism and the new mass economy. He puts greater stress than does Whitman on the writer's role as social critic. Benson's discussion of the growing importance of a realistic prose fiction for the new age may suggest a keener insight into the contemporary literary situation. Today's reader, however, need not attempt to reconcile such differences and decide between them. Adopting something of Whitman's dialectical method, he can see them as two writers who, in thinking seriously about the same problem, reached many of the same conclusions, but whose differences -- the one implicitly pessimistic, rejecting the emerging material culture, the other, pronouncedly optimistic, accepting the material as the basis of a higher growth -- may provide the terms for a productive and continuing inquiry into the meaning of the American experience.

NOTES
3. For a complete discussion of these events, see Edward C. Griswold, "Walt Whitman, The Galaxy, and Democratic Vistas," American Literature, 23 (Nov. 1951): 332-50.
11. Ibid., 876.
12. Ibid.
Whitman's *Drum-Taps*
Reviewed: The Good, Gray, Tender Mother-Man and the Fierce, Red, Convulsive Rhythm of War

WILLIAM BURRISON

Whitman, above all others, emancipated American verse. As far back as 1927, however, Amy Lowell contended otherwise. In an essay entitled "Walt Whitman and the New Poetry," Lowell pointed to the French Symbolists as instrumental to her own imagist deviations. But too many "free" modern American poets -- from Stephen Crane and Hart Crane to Ezra Pound, Stephen Vincent Benét, Robinson Jeffers, Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Gary Snyder, Imamu Baraka, and Allen Ginsberg -- have attested (by confession or craft) to Whitman's influence for us not to now grant it.

He sang of the open road of experience, of sex and the body, of the pulse and heartbeat of an "athletic" democracy, of a great leader's death and the mystery of sea and stars and of a single spear of grass as powerfully and originally as few poets ever have. For this we love him. We also love him because, in his rich, large humanity, as he fostered that intimate personal engagement between the almost ever present "I" and "you" of his poems, Walt Whitman contradicted himself -- with all his multitudes, his questions and exclamations, his widening latitudes and lengthening longitudes -- yet without seeming the hypocrite. He was too frank, too gross with appetite for life, too apparently lacking in guile or venality, and too long-lived and prematurely "wooly white" to be dismissed as a hypocrite. And like the preacher from the Bible one can extract from Whitman citations in support of almost any viewpoint under the "splendid silent" sun.