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## **WHITMAN AS JEREMIAH**

Whitman's faith in American democracy and his zealous commitment to an American millennial idea of history account for much of the exuberant tone in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. His idealism stemmed, more than anything else, from a sacred notion of the common man: a new breed of human being cut from the trunks of the virgin forest, unhampered by class structure, elite culture, old world manners. The American democrat would be the alembic through which history would pass as it propelled civilization toward a utopian age. Whitman's unique synthesis of Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Emersonian values was largely responsible for the vision of his antebellum poetry. As an articulator of a version of popular democratic values, Whitman divined himself with a halo that has ever since been synonymous with the poetic apotheosis of America. While there are images of a cautious, troubled, and even tragically inclined Whitman in the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*, the enduring image of the young Whitman is an engraving of a humanity-hugged bard extolling the virtues of the folk, empathizing with the down-trodden, praising the moral virtues of frontier democracy: an American Virgil singing of arms (anatomically) and a man, Open Road style.

The publication of Whitman's long essay "Democratic Vistas" in 1871 marked a dramatic shift in the poet's thinking, and forces one to consider another side of America's poet—a Whitman closer to Melville and Hawthorne. That "Democratic Vistas" is a dark prophecy seems obvious, and that its portrait of the Gilded Age is full of criticism, anger, and at times, outrage seems as evident as the black type on the white page. Yet critical response to this essay has been peculiarly devoid of a real sense of Whitman's despair. All Whitman's commentators (including Gay Wilson Allen, Emory Holloway, Roger Asselineau, Kenneth Burke, Justin Kaplan, Newton Arvin) see "Democratic Vistas" as a statement of American affirmation. Richard Chase, who has written most extensively about the essay, characterizes almost all of this critical response by asserting that the essay expresses Whitman's "faith in the status quo," a

view of history as "maternal and beneficent," and a continual manifestation of a "buoyant democratic idealism." Similarly, essays by poets fail to note any lack of continuity between the antebellum Whitman and the author of "Democratic Vistas." Randall Jarrell, Karl Shapiro, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda, among the most distinguished poets of recent years who have written about Whitman, hail him as the father of the new world language and the poet of liberty, equality, faith, charity, and sexual freedom. It is as if the Whitman of 1855 had expressed such an ideal view of America that to admit that historical circumstances and a maturing mind might have altered that vision would be to deny Whitman and betray America, or all the Americas.

The radical shift in Whitman's view of America that "Democratic Vistas" expresses reflects his personal experience of the catastrophic 1860s—the Civil War and the anarchy of Reconstruction and the Johnson and Grant administrations—as well as a larger reorientation in American intellectual values. As historians John L. Thomas and George M. Frederickson have maintained, the Civil War marked an end to the era of Romantic thinking. The shift from the iconoclastic individualism, anti-institutionalism, and perfectionist reform of the 30s, 40s and 50s to the inclination toward unionism, nationalism, and centralization that the Civil War and its aftermath set in motion affected a poet even as bohemian and romantically inclined as Whitman. His new misgivings about the common man, his shaken faith in progress, and his new notion that an American literary culture would serve as a "republican form" binding the nation can be seen as reflections of anti-Romantic sentiments that cannot be found in the antebellum poems.

"Democratic Vistas" is in no way a simple or schematic piece of writing. And this may be one reason why it has been interpreted as it has. The essay discloses Whitman as a poet in spiritual and intellectual crisis; an idealist relinquishing previously held beliefs about democracy and American history. He vacillates between assertions of faith in democratic ideals and invectives against a contemporary America that is betraying itself. The conflict between Whitman's waning antebellum idealism and his growing cynicism about his wayward Zion is dramatized in the alternating currents of

his rhetoric. In sections of the essay, Whitman sounds like the old Walt who proclaimed the "scent of [his] arm-pits aroma" and glorified the urban multitudes. At such moments he returns to the cataloging techniques and paratactical strategies that are so quintessential to his early poems and prose. However, his tone and perception shift so dramatically, at times from paragraph to paragraph, that one senses a kind of schizophrenia underscoring the whole shape of the piece.

While the essay opens with some of the residual proclamations of 1855 about the need for a new literary tradition to ensure democracy's triumph, Whitman's warning discloses his new sense of uncertainty: "the United States are destined to surmount [sic] the gorgeous history of feudalism or else prove the most tremendous failure of all time." The implications of this admonition reverberate throughout the essay. As the essay evolves, Whitman emerges as a social critic:

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. . . . The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men (496).

Far from confirming the national ethos, Whitman sounds more like a modern day Isaiah excoriating urban industrial capitalism and the politics of the republic:

The depravity of the business class of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, maladministration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism. In fashionable life,

flippancy, tepid amours, weak infidelism, small aims, or no aims at all, only to kill time. In business (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by all means, pecuniary gain. The magician's serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and moneymaking is our magician's serpent, remaining today sole master of the field. The best class we show is, but a mob of fashionably dress'd speculators and vulgarians (496).

The Whitman whose imagination once somersaulted across the great western expanse is now forced to admit the illusion of progress and the failure of manifest destiny:

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. . . . In vain do we march with unprecedented strides to empire so colossal, outvying the antique, beyond Alexander's, beyond the proudest sway of Rome. In vain have we annex'd Texas, California, Alaska and reach north for Canada and south for Cuba (496).

However, in the course of successive paragraphs Whitman's point of view shifts dramatically and without transition. While one might want to call this confusion, it is confusion with a significance, revealing a mind in violent oscillation seeking order. After having inveighed capitalism for its *spiritual depravity*, what are we to make of Whitman when he exclaims in one long breath:

I hail with joy the oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age, our States. But woe to the age and land in which these things, movements, stopping at themselves, do not tend to ideas. As fuel to flame, and flame to the heavens so must wealth, science, materialism—even this democracy of which we make so much—unerringly feed the highest mind, the soul (539).

In the next paragraph, musing over his Old Brooklyn stomping grounds, he manages to recapture his old epic wonder:

I am now again (September 1870) in New York City and Brooklyn, on a few weeks' vacation. The splendor, picturesqueness, and oceanic amplitude and rush of these great cities, the unsurpassed situation, rivers and bay, sparkling sea-tides, costly and lofty new buildings, facades of marble and iron, or original grandeur and elegance of design, with the masses of gay color, the preponderance of white and blue, the flags flying, the endless ships, the tumultuous streets, Broadway, the heavy low, musical roar, hardly ever intermitted . . .

Yet such moments of 1855 enthusiasm are cut short when he reminds himself that to "severe eyes" that use "the moral microscope upon humanity":

a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics. Confess that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, barroom, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity. . . .

Again, in a succeeding paragraph, the foreigner who once told Whitman about the rottenness of democratic institutions sounds indeed like a persona for Whitman's gloomy self:

I have everywhere found, primarily, thieves and scalliwags arranging the nominations to offices, and sometimes filling the offices themselves. I have found the north just as full of bad stuff as the south. Of the holders of public office in the Nation or the State or their municipalities, I have found that not one in a hundred has been chosen by any spontaneous selection of the outsiders, the people. . . (510).

In short, juxtaposed and even dovetailing with his scalding observations are numerous passages in which Whitman sounds like the Junior Chamber of Commerce member who once sang of his nation's millennial destiny. He is even capable of espousing what sounds like a kind of patriotic eugenics: Describing a "model or portrait of personality for general use for the manliness of the State," he asks if the time will come when "fatherhood and motherhood shall become a science—and the noblest science? To our model, a clear-blooded, strong-fibered physique is indispensable" (519). Or, having continuously lamented the failure of manifest destiny to bear out the moral evolution of the nation, Whitman here reverts to his Jacksonian frontier expansionism:

In a few years the dominion-heart of America will be far inland, toward the West. Our future national capital may not be where the present one is. It is possible, nay likely, that in less than fifty years, it will migrate a thousand or two miles, will be refounded, and everything belonging to it made on a different plan, original, far more superb (508).

The wailing and ululating that surround these moments of antebellum-like optimism become increasingly bound up in Whitman's concern with the function of a national literature. Sometimes it takes a "gymnast's struggle" to follow the sinuous progression of Whitman's thinking on this matter. His obsession with the need for an American literature brings him to such tirades that even his attempts to hail the future and extol the common man are consumed by his sense of America's failure to create democratic literary forms that will generate a unifying national culture. He spares no one: popular culture, genteel society, the literate audience, even the folk are to blame for America's spiritual failures. In one of the most contradictory passages in "Democratic Vistas," Whitman blames genteel culture for its elitism: ("Literature, strictly considered, has never recognized the People, and . . . does not today") and then goes on to excoriate the common people for being "ungrammatical, untidy, their sins gaunt and ill bred" (501). The poet whose devotion to the common folk was religious in 1855 now exclaims, "I myself see clearly enough the crude defective streaks in all the

strata of the common people." The whole process of American culture from its writers to the makers of its pulp press are to blame for America's depravity: "everybody reads, and truly nearly everybody writes, either books, or for the magazines or journals . . . But is it really advancing? . . . in the field of imagination present not a single firstclass work, not a single great literatus" (529). For the poets Whitman has nothing but scorn: "do you call those genteel little creatures American poets? Do you term that perpetual, pistareen, paste-pot work, American art, American drama, taste, verse?" (512). There is none of the 1855 exuberance in his harangue about the need for a "new world literature," "a religious Democracy," "a prophetic literature of these States" that will be a prophylaxis against civil strife. The American scene has changed; the cankered urban world and the value system of Gilded Age capitalism no longer provide the virgin possibility that "Song of Myself" once embodied. At the close of the essay, Whitman crescendos with the apocalyptic rhetoric of Old Testament prophecy:

the problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast. . . . Unwieldly and immense, who shall hold in behemoth? who bridle leviathan? Flaunt it as we choose, athwart and over the roads of our progress loom huge uncertainties, and dreadful, threatening gloom. It is useless to deny it: Democracy grows rankly up the thickest noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all—(542).

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Certainly, "Democratic Vistas" is a jeremiad of sorts and is characterized by many of the qualities Sacvan Bercovitch ascribes to this form that has become a national genre. While Bercovitch understands "Democratic Vistas" as a jeremiad and is sensitive to its tone of lamentation and concern with cultural affliction, he ends up not far from Whitman's other commentators by maintaining that the essay champions America's national ideology. This is part of Bercovitch's mono-mythic theory that all American jeremiads "simultaneously lament declension while celebrating the national dream." In saying that the jeremiad is finally only a working out of a national "ritual of consensus," he robs this genre of its power to be

social criticism. Given Bercovitch's umbrella idea of the jeremiad, even Mr. Iacocca's advertising slogan, "the pride is back," might fall into this genre. I would not deny that Whitman aspired to mend the old covenant in this post Civil War tract, but his "purgation by incantation" (the phrase is Perry Miller's) is an expression of pious outrage, and is a statement of deep misgivings about the national dream and the idea of progress fostered by a middle-class capitalist ideology. It is clear to me that "Democratic Vistas" is full of all the personal angst and teleological terror of good Old Testament prophecy.

Surely as American mid-twentieth century conservative-liberal optimism has given way to the sobering reality of our culture's predicament and place in a global context, we can begin to reassess the meaning of "Democratic Vistas." And certainly the parallels between the Gilded Age and our post-1965 era of Vietnam, Watergate, and Ivan Boesiskism make "Democratic Vistas" a timely jeremiad. We can no longer pretend that the global nuclear infrastructure, which we have had such a large hand in creating, does not undermine our notion of human and natural history, teleology and progress, ontogeny and phylogeny. Intellectuals can no longer mouth—as once some could, even after Teddy Roosevelt—that "the path of progress is strewn with the wreck of nations." We know nature no longer possesses Hopkins' "dearest freshness deep down things," we are forced to admit that whether we believe in Christ, Darwin, Emerson, or Wilhelm Reich, the organic world is not ever-replenishing. Everyone who lives where I live learns that in the light-bathed rolling hills that spread an ideal contour around my college campus in central New York there is malignant force embedded in the landscape—that only miles away in Rome, New York is Griffis Air Force Base where nuclear weapons are poised on the brink of the nothingness they promise. Whitman's wilderness—fact and typological emblem—is endangered. And, if our nation's heroic mythology of frontier expansionism has become so militant and egocentric as to give rise to something like Star Wars—then indeed any ties between our late twentieth century society and our hopefilled Victorian ancestors has been severed. President Reagan may be a variant of Captain Ahab, certainly, but without the brains, imagination, or sense of tragedy.

The social and political consequences of a century of American economic imperialism force us to reject that idea of American manifest destiny that will not die in the bureaus of State. The racism, sexism, and economic inequality that exist side by side with the greatest concentration of wealth in the world should force us to rethink the idea of citizenry. Holes in the ozone, acid rain in the lakes, PCBs in the rivers compel us to reevaluate our sacred national belief in technology and progress. That Ivan Boesky was willing to pay a fine of \$100 million after being convicted of violating SEC regulations this past fall says something about the failure of postindustrial capitalism.

Whitman's example as Jeremiahus Americanus may be more important to American poets now than the archetypal image of Whitman as Moses or Adam. Whitman's Mountain of Liberty and Garden of possibility are sacred to our national myth and give our culture perpetual meaning. This is surely a major part of Whitman's legacy. But, that our most American poet-Father might also contain the type of Jeremiah is a source in our poetic tradition that has many implications and resonances. By his inclination, the poet as Jeremiah turns his poetically transforming rhetoric toward a public forum. As long as a poet can generate metaphor that has dimension enough to contain social experience and can find conventions for rhetoric that address history or society in ways that are not merely editorial, a poet is able to create a jeremiad out of verse. Such poetry can act as cultural prophecy, or serve as memory raised to the level of myth. I make these qualifications because there is much poetry written with sincere social conviction that fails to engage the conventions of art, becomes mere editorializing in the shape, but not the substance of the poem. The consequence for such writing is usually an early death. Since the sentiments have already been expressed better by historians, journalists, or essayists, that kind of poem is seldom reread. But, if the poet can bring an uncompromised art into a social realm, he might heed the darker side of America's "orbic bard." While the twentieth-century Whitmanesque procession has been primarily an Adamic or Mosaic one, poets who are, in certain ways, indebted to Whitman also have given new expression in our age to the jeremiad. Robert Lowell's "For The Union Dead," Allen Ginsberg's "America," and Stanley

Kunitz's "Well Fleet Whale," to name three, are different kinds of prophetic poems or lyric jeremiads that remind us that issuing from Whitman's Garden is also a language that can transform our history into myth.

All excerpts are from *Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose*, ed. Sculley Bradley (San Francisco: Rinehart Editions, 1962).

