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WHITMAN AND THE VISUAL DEMOCRACY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

We all are aware of how much Whitman loved to be photographed; we may not all be aware of just how insatiable his desire was. He took to photography like no one else. He wanted nothing less than to be the most photographed person in the whole first generation of photographed people. "No man has been photographed more than I have" (WWC 2, 45), he once said, and many contemporary observers agreed with his assessment.

It's easy to view Whitman's love of his photographic image as part of his lifelong attempt to publicize and market himself shamelessly: the controlled creation of a series of images that would shape public perception of his character, from a working class rough to a Biblical prophet. But there was much more involved in Whitman's attachment to photographs. His adult life coincided with the development of photography, from the first photographic images when he was twenty to photography's evolution into a truly portable medium by the time of his death. I'd like to suggest today how Whitman's love of photography and his surprising uses of photography relate to his ideas of the democratic foundations of America. I'll be focusing on Whitman's positive responses to photography. We won't have time here to explore the profound and disturbing reactions Whitman had to what photography revealed during the Civil War: how the state of the art at the time lent itself to casting images of the war as haunting and horrifying aftereffects; scenes of amputations, hospital wards, discarded bodies on abandoned battlefields, living skeletons emerging from prison camps—images that would influence Whitman to center his own descriptions of the war in the hospitals rather than on the battlefields. Photography taught increasingly sober lessons during the course of the century, but, in characteristic fashion, Whitman initially sought the most generative and idealistic lessons from the new mechanical art.

No nineteenth-century writer more thoroughly searched the varied expanses of American culture than did Whitman in the quest of

verifications of the democratic foundations of America. He sought analogues for Constitutional principles in every conceivable manifestation of cultural activity. When Whitman said, for example, that baseball was "America's game: has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere—belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly, as our constitutions, laws . . . ," he was not making a casual or flippant remark, but rather was insisting on a seamless vision of a democratic America, a place where leisure-time activities would be woven into the democratic fabric, where sport—like everything else—would re-enact, endorse and reaffirm democratic principles through symbolic actions. If the country were going to be built on truly new foundations, then the culture's various activities were going to have to be new as well. In search of the new, Whitman examined all the cultural peripheries, aware that in a truly democratic society *nothing* would ever be truly peripheral; everything was its own center. Whitman remained vigilantly alert—his cultural antennae extended—for unsuspected possibilities, new activities that could be shaped to and that could help shape democratic ends.

Photography was one of those activities that came to seem to Whitman to be a perfect match for America, something that would stand firmly on and rise natively out of the culture's democratic foundations. It was an invention suited for a democratic country, one of those technological developments that embodied a uniquely American sense of the world. Photography, after all, was the merging of sight and chemistry, of eye and machine, of organism and mechanism, much as America was, and thus it took root more rapidly here than elsewhere, became the precise American instrument of seeing. Whitman knew that no culture was more in love with science and technology than America was, and the camera was the perfect emblem of the joining of the human senses to chemistry and physics via a machine.

Whitman was of the first generation to experience the representation of the world in photographic images; his poetry emerged at precisely the time photography was literally taking hold of the American imagination, and he was immediately attracted to the new invention, dwelling for hours in daguerreotype studios, entranced by

the faces on the walls. And so it was natural that photography would come to be one of the key tests for Whitman's poetics, a poetics built in large part on his attempt to meld the mechanical and the spiritual, to sing the deeper meanings of science. From the beginning, Whitman argued that in fact the scientists were "the lawgivers of poetry." Photography was clearly a scientific invention, emerging directly out of exciting developments in chemistry and physics, but it also clearly had an immediate impact on art, since it seemed to render more quickly and more accurately the same images of reality that painters trained so long and worked so hard to achieve. Whitman would often comment about how photography was part of an emerging democratic art, how its commonness, cheapness, and ease were displacing the refined image of art implicit in portrait painting: "I think the painter has much to do to go ahead of the best photographs" (WWC 4, 307). It was while looking at photoengravings and thinking about the implications of widely reproduced photographic images that Whitman announced, "Art will be democratized" (WWC 2, 107).

For Whitman, the old hierarchy of seeing was represented by painting and sculpture which emphasized selectivity, patience, formal structuring and composing (and a formality of posing), which created objects that were never precisely what they portrayed but instead were distillations of reality—ideas *about* things. (You didn't have a portrait painted every month or two; they were expensive, took time, required the hiring of an immensely skilled craftsman. The one or two you had done were expected to distill your character in an approximation that transcended time. But photographs allowed people to track their aging, to watch themselves change step by step as they grew old. Photographs were, precisely, *moments* along life's continuum, were stuck *in* time, were in fact the sticking *of* time as opposed to painted portraiture which was the transcendence of life's continuum.) Painting's hierarchy of selectivity and distillation gave way to photography's brash informality and quickness. What may not have seemed worth a painter's time was, for the photographer, always worth a few seconds and a few cents. And, so Whitman's new poetry implied, what may not have been fit subject for a formal poet of classical education would slide effortlessly into the open forms of the democratic poet who is out to turn

America into the greatest poem, a poem that will take the risks of inclusiveness: "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,/ Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns." To make America the "greatest poem," as he set out in *Leaves of Grass* to do, would require a poet who would be so absorptive and nondiscriminatory that he could see that the prostitute has as much of a place in the overall pattern as the President has; the lunatic belongs as much as the scientist—it is a country "en-masse," a country that is truly a "United States," as we all are: warring and conflicting states of being (varied states) that are joined nonetheless in a wholeness, a personality, a fullness that will always be violated by ruling out any aspect of what is there.

The photographer, Whitman argued, for the first time in the history of art, gave us an "honest" represented image, unlike the painters who "add and deduct: the artists fool with nature—reform it, revise it, to make it fit their preconceived notion of what it should be." (WWC 1, 131) He liked the idea that technology, through photography, had arrived at a point where it seemed almost to have gained a soul, a democratic sensibility. He remarked how most ordinary painters were "beaten out completely" by a good photograph, and he believed the vast majority of competent painted portraits "would be entitled to be set aside" by competent photographs of the same subjects: "I say so knowing that photography involves a mechanism—is, as some might say it, without soul, spirit: think how much chemicals have to do with it all!"

But such chemical properties were not necessarily a negative quality for the poet who could celebrate the wonderfully renewing properties of an endlessly composting world, who could exclaim "What chemistry!" (L 369) as he observed how the earth "grows such sweet things out of such corruptions." Whitman was, after all, the poet of transmutation, and photography was the premier example of magical science, of chemistry transforming the ordinary into the valuable (chemistry is simply our modern word for alchemy), turning the fleeting into the permanent. "The photograph has this advantage," Whitman argued, "it lets nature have its way: the botheration with the painters is that they don't want to let nature have its way: they want to make nature let them have their way."

(WWC 4, 124-5) This is the key to Whitman's unwavering devotion to photography: precisely because it mechanically reproduced what the sun illuminated, it was a more honest representation of reality than the paintings of most artists, who let their various biases, discriminations, and blindnesses alter the world that was before their eyes. As such, photography was the harbinger of a new democratic art, an art that would not exclude on the basis of preconceived notions of what was vital, of what (or who) was worth painting.

As we might expect, Whitman quickly realized the implications of photography for his own art. The twentieth-century photographer Walker Evans saw the role of photographer as—both literally and figuratively—the "seer" of the culture: the artist always on the alert for the significant fleeting impression, the odd angle, the charged passing moment. The camera taught us to see beauty where we had not before sought it out, to see significance in the overlooked detail. So Whitman, in his 1855 Preface, defined the emerging American poet as an embodied imagination on the lookout for whatever had before been judged to be trivial or insignificant; like the absorptive camera, "The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer. . . ." (L 713) It is fitting, then, that one of the earliest reviews of *Leaves of Grass* should have used photography to define Whitman's radically new aesthetics: "the great poet is he who performs the office of the camera to the world, merely reflecting what he sees—art is mere reproduction." (quoted in Rubin, 382) Whitman, of course, would reject the notion of poetry as "mere reproduction." He knew that the camera represented the *marriage* of eye and machine, of the human and the technological, of the imaginative and the mechanical. He knew also that the photograph was not self-generated, that the photographer in his selectivity, framing, and alertness, joined with the remarkable mechanical attributes of the camera to create the new art. Discussing Alexander Gardner, the photographer he most admired, Whitman identified his genius in his ability to go "beyond his craft" for he "saw farther than his camera—saw more . . ." (WWC 3, 346) So also, for Whitman, would poetry do more than merely reproduce reality; like the photographer, the poet

must accurately work with the materials of the world, but must do so for the purpose of revealing the significance and beauty of those materials. Rejecting the purely mechanical role of camera—"No useless attempt to repeat the material creation, by daguerreotyping the exact likeness by mortal mental means"—Whitman celebrates instead the true poet's "image-making faculty" which is always "coping with material creation, and rivaling, almost triumphing over it." The poet, Whitman demands, must begin with facts, absorb them, but must make sure they are framed in such a way that they "tend to ideas," for only then will he be able to "endow [the material creation] with an identity." (PW 419) The poet, in other words, does "photograph" the world around him, but he catalogues it in the service of collecting the real materials out of which a perfected democracy will be constructed. Photographs helped teach Whitman to see how all the actual stuff of the world was crucial to its wholeness. Over his adult years, Whitman had an increasingly high regard for photographers, for the way their eyes and their spirits turned a photograph into a convincing image of identity, for the way they made the actual things of the present suggest ideals and possibilities, for the way they made the overlooked or discarded details of the world glow with a newfound beauty.

From the 1840s on, as first daguerreotypes then photographs entered human consciousness and redefined the way we see the world, words began to alter their relationship with reality in some analogous ways. Photographs were voracious and endless; they were quick and absorptive; they were relentlessly focused on the present moment and on the real. They were bound to a first person perspective, and the perspective itself defined what was seen and how it was to be viewed. They were democratic in their seeing; the first photographs stunned people with their clutter—every detail of a scene insisted on equal emphasis, and nothing was ignored. Nothing was left out because it was considered irrelevant or unaesthetic or inessential. The photographic field, then, was purely democratic territory. The lens and the light-sensitive plates were radically egalitarian; they absorbed what the light revealed. If we want to capture the whole, photographs seemed to argue, we must not miss *anything*. Every detail contributes to the fullness. A camera and film would not discriminate, not prefer one aspect over another. Only

photographers could do that, and even then photographers would end up surprised at what the camera had absorbed that they had not seen. Photographs in the mid-1800s were often called "sun-paintings"—Whitman called early photographers "Priests of the Sun" (Rubin, 283)—for it was as if the sun itself had done the detail work, bringing to our attention what we had not noticed before. To be as democratic and as inclusive as the sun—this was, for Whitman, the goal of the new American poet: "He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing." (L 713)

Susan Sontag discusses how "photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flaneur*," how the photographer "is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes." (55) "The *flaneur*," Sontag says, "is not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, its neglected populations . . ." (55-6) Whitman, of course, as a newspaper reporter in the 1840s, identified himself as a *flaneur*, described how he "sauntered forth to have a stroll down Broadway to the Battery," and in the 1850s his identity as a poet would emerge as exactly that of the voyeuristic stroller, looking into bedrooms, dreams, operating rooms, wandering alone to the city dead-house to confront the corpse of a dead prostitute on the abandoned sidewalk, always absorbing the extremes, celebrating the neglected, casting words into the dark corners of existence, the solitary walker.

When Sontag calls photography a "promiscuous form of seeing" (129), she means that there is no limit to the areas of reality that photography will record. It is voracious, it transcends all attempts to guide its development or limit its realm. It wants nothing less than to turn all of reality into images. As such, photography is closely allied with Whitman's democratic poetics, a promiscuous poetics that was out to break down all walls between "art" and "reality," to open the poem to all words, to all that words could represent, the verbal record of everything the senses contacted during the soul's transit through the world. For Whitman, taboos were nothing but signals of resistant pockets of reality that had not

yet been shown by the poet to fit into the ecstatic fullness and wholeness of life. They needed only to be translated into art to be seen as embraceable and finally as necessary components of a truly democratic art.

In an early notebook, Whitman works out a cosmology based on the poet's attraction to such hidden and forbidden beauty:

I think ten million supple-wristed gods are always hiding beauty in the world—burying it every where in every thing—and most of all in spots that men and women do not think of and never look—as Death and Poverty and Wickedness.—Cache! and Cache again! all over the earth. . . .

For Whitman, the poet would follow—or lead—the photographer into the areas of life that had been off-limits to art, places where beauty was not believed to lie. Then, performing the democratic feat of translating death, poverty, and wickedness into life, worth, and goodness, the poet would open America's eyes to hidden beauty. "I do not doubt but the majesty & beauty of the world are latent in any iota of the world . . . I do not doubt there is far more in trivialities, insects, vulgar persons, slaves, dwarfs, weeds, rejected refuse, than I have supposed. . . ." (quoted in Sontag, 29)

Whitman's faith, then, was photography's faith: any object, experience, process, when imprinted onto the blank page of the absorptive poem, would emerge in a new importance, as an organic part of the whole scheme of existence. Whitman set out to make poetry as absorptive and nondiscriminating as photography, to cast the blank page as treated photosensitive paper, to allow the impress of experience to develop and set into the lines of a poem. The poet, like the photographer, would literally become the seer embracing the world.

If clutter, fullness of detail, a wholeness of many parts, beauty hidden in the overlooked, was part of the democratic lesson photography taught to Whitman, its other great lesson was the lesson of

time's effect on the self, the way the passage of time etched an eroded landscape onto the face. Whitman once referred to the difficulty of describing the chaos of Civil War battles as "like trying to photograph a tempest." But there was another tempest that photography came to reveal to Whitman, and that was the ceaseless tumult of life, the ravages of *tempus* recorded on the human face. Before photography, no one had seen a full series of accurate images of any single life. Photographs taken of the same person over a long period of time revealed that life itself was something of a tempest, an irreversible process of aging and dying. As an old man, Whitman was part of the first generation of humans who could observe themselves as young people, who could examine traces of themselves along a visual continuum leading directly up to the image of themselves in the present. This revelation was quickly seen at the advent of photography as one of its most revolutionary aspects. For Whitman (at least the pre-1870 Whitman), the soul was an accumulating transit through the world, an absorptive embodiment of palpable experience: "Was somebody asking to see the soul?/ See, your own shape and countenance, persons, substances, beasts, the trees, the running rivers, the rocks and sands" (L 23). Like an endless roll of film, the soul was a connected string of impressions ("glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings" [L 160]), a collection of the traces of the experiences that the lenses had opened themselves to. The self (and the song of the self) was the album composed of the resultant photos, a life's experiences strung like beads on the soul.

As we cast back to the mid-nineteenth century, when Americans began to come to grips with the new reality that photography was developing before their eyes, we find that it was this aspect of the new discovery that generated the most awe. In 1862, as *cartes de visites*—small cheap photographic calling cards that allowed for the true democratization of the photographic image—became the American rage, *Scientific American* called them "a blessing to the world" and began to imagine for the first time just what might be revealed in the coming generation:

One of the most interesting results of the ease and cheapness with which photographs are produced is the

prompting which it will give many persons to have their likenesses taken frequently during their lives. What would a man value more highly late in life than this accurate record of the gradual change in his features from childhood to old age? (quoted in Gilbert, 82)

Around the same time, Oliver Wendell Holmes was ruminating over the revolution in perception that "sun-painting" had brought about, and he dwelled on the same phenomenon, imagining the sometimes awful truth that photographs were about to demonstrate:

The new art is old enough already to have given us the portraits of infants who are now growing into adolescence. By-and-by it will show every aspect of life in the same individual, from the earliest week to the last year of senility. We are beginning to see what it will reveal. Children grow into beauty and out of it. The first line in the forehead, the first streak in the hair are chronicled without malice, but without extenuation. . . . Each new picture gives us a new aspect of our friend; we find he had not one face, but many. (Holmes 1861, 14)

Whitman's generation, then, was the first to actually look back on its youth in a distant mirror. The power of photography, Whitman said, was in its "knack of catching life on the run, in a flash, as it shifted, moved, evolved" (WWC 3, 23).

As we have seen, portrait painting set up various hierarchies of importance: by selecting those who were deemed important enough to be painted, and then by selecting those one or two moments out of such a life deemed most representative and thus most worth preserving. But the preservation in paint of the wealthy and privileged was undermined by the superior accuracy of the camera and its knack for producing portraits frequently. Fine portrait-painting took time, money, and immense skill, but very serviceable photographs could be done for anyone cheaply and quickly. Not only human faces were thus made more familiar by frequent representation, but so were all aspects of reality. Vast realms of reality became for the first time represented, turned into representations, and the changing

face of every individual over time was part of the new pile of images photography brought into consciousness. Holmes could hardly wait for a whole generation to pass so that photography would finally yield up "a precise study of the effects of age upon the features," so that for the first time we could "study of the laws of physical degeneration." (1863, 10) "Nature," he notes, "is very exact in the tallies that mark the years of human life," for the "sun is a Rembrandt in his way, and loves to track all the lines in these old splintered faces." (1863, 9)

It is probably something of a cruel irony that the first person to illustrate, fully and dramatically, such a process of aging through photographs was Walt Whitman. If Whitman's project of having himself photographed so regularly began as an effort to control his image and disperse it as he desired, the sheer number of images quickly got out of hand, and began to reveal things about himself that he had not anticipated. As he tried to puzzle out the meaning of the process that the photos revealed, his concerns were deeper than just determining the effects of age on his features; his photos seemed to him to track an identity, to capture in the changing contours of his face the sweeping changes in his life. Whitman performed, via his photographs, a self-examination of the kind that Holmes foresaw—the great variety of "outward appearances" tracking "the mental and emotional shapes by which [the] inner nature made itself known to us." (1863, 10)

At times Whitman seemed fatigued with the profusion of images: "I have been photographed, photographed, photographed, until the cameras themselves are tired of me." Looking at the hopeless clutter of photographs scattered around him in his Camden room in the late 1880s, unable to identify the dates and circumstances of many of them, Whitman lamented, "I have been photographed to confusion" (WWC 2, 454).

Stumbling upon photos of himself he had forgotten had been taken, he joked, "I meet new Walt Whitmans every day. There are a dozen of me afloat. I don't know which Walt Whitman I am" (WWC 1, 108). Different photographers brought out different angles, shadowed different features and highlighted others, until the

number of miraculous mirrors began to add up at times to a bewildering fragmentation of self: "What a study it all is—this of portraits: no two of them identical: every interpreter getting another view. What amazing differences develop in the attempt of a dozen observers to tell the same story . . . there are as many views as there are people who take them." (WWC 2, 45) This "confusion" of Whitman's created something of a jocular identity crisis, but Whitman's tone often turned more serious as he thought about what all these images over the years suggested about the wholeness of his life: "It is hard to extract a man's real self—any man—from such a chaotic mass—from such historic debris" (WWC 1, 108). While he knew that "the man is greater than his portrait" (WWC 1, 108), he also knew that his photographs over a lifetime were adding up to something, were capturing a persisting quality that had never before been seen in human experience: "The human expression is so fleeting—so quick—coming and going—all aids are welcome" (WWC 5, 478). When Horace Traubel suggested that "A photograph is a fragment [but] a painted portrait may be a whole man," Whitman rejected the implied slight to photography; he saw that photography affirmed his belief that identity was not some transcendent quality but rather was an embodied process: "I am getting more and more in spirit with the best photographs, which are in fact works of art" (WWC 4, 434).

He carefully read and interpreted his photos, looking for clues to their individual and momentary significance, sounding much as he did when he talked about any aspect of life, always concerned with how the single separate parts formed an ensemble, how the individuals formed an "en masse." So with his photos, he looked for ways the single images added up to a totality, ways the "elements" formed a "compound": "I guess they all hint at the man" (WWC 6, 395; 2, 156). Most of the photos, he believed, were "one of many, only—not many in one," each picture an image that was "useful in totaling a man but not a total in itself" (WWC 3, 72). In a poem he wrote about one of his photographs, he calls the image of his face "This heart's geography's map" (L 382), and as he examined his photographs, he applied the metaphor, trying to read the images like a map—a series of visible shorthand signs cast on paper that would guide him to the nature of his invisible heart. Late in his

life, the photographs became an equivalent for his earlier fascination with phrenology; he was always looking for an external map to interior and invisible regions, for a way the physical shape could suggest spiritual contours. When in "Song of Myself" he imagines that his "palms cover continents," he is offering up a vision of continental phrenology, his hands (and the poems that emerge from those hands) reading the character of a country through the contours of the land that formed that character (just as later he would claim he found the "law of [his] own poems" in the jagged contours of the Rocky Mountains [PW 210]). So, in thinking of his photographs, he conceived of the image of his face as "this limitless small continent" (L 382), a landscape on a different scale to be mapped and read. Sitting with a hundred images of his face surrounding him, Whitman was still reading heads, still looking—as he had forty years before—for positive qualities and traits in his physiognomy, and he was sometimes confused by the conflicting signals the various images of himself returned to him.

Wandering through a daguerreotype gallery in 1846, he mused: "We love to dwell long upon them—to infer many things, from the text they preach—to pursue the current of thoughts running riot about them" (GF 116-117). Forty years later, the gallery of faces he would be dwelling upon would be a legion of himself, and he maintained his curiosity about the text that his own fixed and gazing eyes preached over the years.

There was no doubt for Whitman that his portraits tracked a life *in* time and demonstrated that life was a process of continuity and change. And he even began to wonder whether the photos finally demonstrated that life was "evolutional or episodal," a unified sweep of a single identity or a jarring series of new identities: "Taking them in their periods is there a visible bridge from one to the other, is there a break?" (WWC 4, 424). Whitman tried to maintain the faith that his photos finally were like the catalogues in his poems, an infinite and contradictory variety that piled up in its randomness to create a unity, a form and a plan, a happiness. *Leaves of Grass* was modeled on the procession of a life from the starting through the parting, and it set out to embrace the shifting moments of change into an overarching identity: "It is not chaos or

death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness” (L 88). Whitman looked at his photos and said, “We judge things too much by side-lights: we must have a care lest we pause with the single features, the exaggerated figures, individuals, facts—losing thereby the ensemble” (WWC 1, 283).

Photography handed to Whitman a puzzling and endlessly fascinating clutter of images of himself—images more conflicted, more mysterious, and ultimately more illuminating than any painted portrait, for built into painted portraits were meaning and unity of impression. Built into a lifelong series of photographs were fragmentation and change, and it was in reading that fragmented and shifting process of his life that Whitman finally prevented himself from resting in a simplistic summary of his identity. His photographs helped turn the moments of his life into something of a democracy, a democracy of various versions of the self in time, each claiming equal status, each insisting on its own identity, its own mystery, each demanding attention, even while each clearly merged into the overall process of the life: single, separate selves, yet part of the overall life’s “en masse.” To the end, his photographs helped keep the self a mystery, offering only indirect paths on his heart’s geography’s map.

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Eric Trethewey

PERIPHERY

You can’t see, beyond the borders, the hills
singed by the season. It’s the old place
outside Shubenacadie. He’s standing there

in the wagon ruts, hand on her bridle,
the bell mare, his railroad cap pulled low
against the afternoon sun. Behind him

there’s the barn—and what the photo leaves out:
manure, horseflies, the stamp and whinny
from stalls restless with September heat.

Turning, he’d see the river unruffled by wind—
a blank mirror until banked clouds move in,
water returning them trembling to themselves.

I can see him back her into the staves,
hitch up for the long trot to town,
the buckboard vanishing in the distance
with the last green haze on those burning hills.