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WHITMAN THE RADICAL DEMOCRAT

In an 1850 biographical sketch of Walt Whitman, the New York editor James Brenton tersely described him as follows: "Mr. Whitman is an ardent politician of the radical democratic school."[1] Whitman used similar words in describing himself. He once wrote that his poetry was centered on "the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me" and the "Not Me, the whole of the material universe."[2]

What exactly did Brenton and Whitman mean when they used the phrase "radical democratic"? I have found that the phrase had a distinct, special meaning that helps us locate Whitman more firmly in his contemporary cultural context. Walt Whitman grew from a forgotten literary fellowship of socially minded American writers that I call the radical democrats. We are all familiar with Whitman's early affiliations with the liberal, freesoil wing of the Democratic party and his subsequent disillusionment first with the Democratic party and then with the newly formed Republican Party in the 1850s. But more essential to Whitman's development than his party affiliations was his connection with a group of popular writers of the 1840s who sought literary, imaginative alternatives to a social system they viewed as corrupt and fragmented. When we evaluate Whitman against the background of these literary radical democrats we realize that *Leaves of Grass* was to a large degree an extension of central themes and rhetorical devices of these popular authors.

Who were the radical democrats and what kind of literature did they write? Among the most prominent radical democrats of the 1840s were George Lippard, A.J.H. Duganne, George Foster, and George Thompson—plus scores of other popular novelists and journalists. The fiction and newspaper writings they produced was by far the most abundant and popular American literature of the 1840s, the very decade that Whitman threw himself into the cauldron of New York popular culture as a hack story-writer, journalist, temperance author, and freesoil politician. When we look at the main preoccupations of the popular radical democrats, we see that he learned much from them.

I am concentrating on the phrase "radical democrat" in order to point to the profound doubleness in the sensibility of these writers, a doubleness that Whitman shared. As the name suggests, there were two sides to the radical democrat: a radical, subversive side, set staunchly against the social and literary establishment; and an intensely patriotic side, seen in these writers' impulse to mythologize the American past in an effort to resurrect the democratic ideals that they thought had been betrayed in contemporary society. The 1840s were a time of severe economic and social instability in America. In the wake of the panic of 1837, there was a prolonged period of widespread unemployment, widening class divisions, and working-class unrest. For many working-class advocates, it suddenly seemed as though a cadre of upper-class figures were conspiring against the poorer classes and living hedonistically off the fruits of their labor. At the same time, there was an increasingly cynical awareness of the institutionalized hypocrisy and greed associated with slavery.

The radical democrats posed the sharp question: how did the democratic ideals of the Founding Fathers square with the social realities of the American 1840s? The answer they gave was: not well at all. They therefore took upon themselves the dual mission of exposing what they saw as the social horrors of the present and of simultaneously recreating the lost glories of the American past. In their criticism of contemporary society, the radical democrats were vitriolic and abrasive; they went to blackly humorous, often "pornogothic" extremes in the attempt to expose what they regarded as the corruption and immorality of America's ruling class. In their recreations of the legendary past they were ardently patriotic, often mawkishly so. In both cases they were rhetorically flamboyant and excessive. Because their passion could not be contained in sober prose, it quickly sought other outlets—blistering journalistic diatribes, politicized poems, popular exposé-novels and equally popular "legends" of the American Revolution.

Where does Whitman fit into this picture? In many ways he was, as he later admitted, a "radical, democratic" writer typical of

midnineteenth-century America. He manifested the deep division of the radical-democrat sensibility: he had, on the one hand, an abrasive, militantly subversive side; on the other, a nostalgic, sentimentally patriotic side. Indeed, because these cultural polarities bristled so actively in his consciousness, he developed an almost schizophrenic relationship with American society, a complex feeling of loathing and love. If either this loathing or this love had not been as intense as it was—that is, if Whitman had not been so ardent a radical democrat—then *Leaves of Grass* would have been a very different kind of poem than it turned out to be. It is precisely because he saw so clearly the gap between bygone democratic ideals and the inequities of modern society that he tried so persistently to refashion American democracy in his poetry.

As was true with the other radical democrats of the day, Whitman's veneration for the principles of the Founding Fathers manifested itself in an intense, emotional patriotism. As Daniel Aaron has pointed out, Whitman could wax sentimental in his portraits of the American past, especially when they involved George Washington.

As a writer of popular fiction in the 1840s, he wrote a typical patriotic story, called "The Last of the Sacred Army," in which an old soldier who had fought with Washington appears in modern life as a kind of Christ figure offering redemption for a fallen America. Whitman's legend of Washington's tearful farewell to his troops after the Battle of Brooklyn, which he first wrote for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and then later incorporated in "The Sleepers," is exactly in the spirit of radical-democrat stories of the "man-god" Washington in popular works like Joel Tyler Headley's *Washington and His Generals* or George Lippard's *Legends of the American Revolution*. He also sounded much like these writers when in his poem "Chants Democratic 6" he wrote: "Remember the purposes of the founders,—Remember Washington."[3] He was also typical in his ardent praise of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Occasionally all his patriotic impulses came together in an outburst of jingoistic zeal, as in the 1856 poem "By Blue Ontario's Shore," which contains these lines:

> Have you consider'd the organic compact of the first day
> of the first year of Independence, sign'd by the

> Commissioners, ratified by the States, and read by
> Washington at the head of the army?
> Have you possess'd yourself of the Federal Constitution?[4]

But when he surveyed contemporary American society, Whitman realized that such questions, sadly enough, could only be answered in the negative. He was alarmed that his nineteenth-century countrymen had *not* retained the spirit of the Founding Fathers but in fact had by and large betrayed them. As with the other radical democrats, the very intensity of his patriotism bred a correlative horror before perceived injustices in modern society. And as with them, this perception in turn led to much radical social criticism. This radical impulse was evident from the early 1840s, when as a journalist for the *New York Aurora* he impugned the social elite, through the days here in Camden when he became the center of a group of adoring followers, many of whom were social and religious radicals. Like other radical democrats, he made pronouncements on American democracy that were at once patriotic and sharply critical, as in "Notes Left Over," where he writes: "I can conceive of no better service in the United States, henceforth, by democrats of through and heart-felt faith, than boldly exposing the weaknesses, liabilities and infinite corruptions of democracy."[5] It was the radical Whitman who used the sarcastic, Gothic rhetoric that abounds in such prose writings as *The Eighteenth Presidency!* (1856) and *Democratic Vistas* (1871) and in key passages of his poetry. Whitman, as we know, shied away from active involvement with radical causes of his day, such as women's rights, abolition, labor reform, socialism, and so on. But he often adopted the radical *rhetoric* that proponents of such causes often used. When he indulged in this subversive rhetoric, he could be just as "porno-gothic" as the harshest of the popular radical democrats. America's leaders, he wrote in *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, eat excrement and sit on cushions drenched in human blood. American society, he declared in *Democratic Vistas,* is "cankered, crude, superstitious, rotten."[6] In some passages in the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* (many of which he wisely deleted from later editions of the poem) he descended from the subversive to the downright silly. His 1856 poem "Respondez!," for example, is a blackly humorous manifesto in which Whitman calls for the complete overthrow of all social conventions. In the poem he grimly writes that criminals and judges should exchange places, God should be proclaimed dead, insanity should take charge of sanity, men and women should fondle each others' genitals and think only obscenely of each other, and so on for sixty-seven scathingly subversive lines. In "Respondez!" he is revelling exuberantly in the dark moral inversions and sheer rage released by the radical democrat culture of his day. He shared the fury of the popular writers but left behind their specific programs for social change.

If he gets a bit excessive in "Respondez!," in his better poetry he directs this rage toward moving proclamations of rebellion. We feel inspirited when he writes in "Song of Myself," "[I] beat the gong of revolt,"[7] or when he universalizes his radical-democrat rage in "The Sleepers" by asserting,

> I have been wronged. . . . I am oppressed. . . . I hate
>   him that oppresses me,
> I will either destroy him, or he shall release me.[8]

Here and elsewhere in his poetry Whitman vents the radical-democrat fury of America's subversive culture and leaves behind narrow reform programs. He had been liberated so fully from constricting conventions that he could proclaim militantly in "Song of the Open Road," "My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion,/ He going with me must go well arm'd."[9] He extracted from radical-democratic culture not so much a certain plan for social activism as a suprapolitical *spirit* of rebellion, one that could inspire him to write daring lines like these in an 1860 poem:

> To be absolv'd from previous ties and conventions, I
>   from mine and you from yours![. . .]
> To have the gag remov'd from one's mouth![. . .]
> To escape utterly from others' anchors and holds!
> To drive free! to love free! to dash reckless and
>   dangerous!
> To court destruction with taunts, with invitations![10]

Although linked with the popular radical democrats in his combined patriotism and rebelliousness, Whitman differed from them in the vigor with which he sought a specifically literary solution to America's social ills. The truth was that the popular writers rarely went beyond naive hero-worship of the Founding Fathers and sensational exposés of modern life. Whitman recognized that popular literature itself was one of America's problems. In *Democratic Vistas* he criticized the uncontrolled sensationalism of popular novels and newspapers and argued that America would be rescued only by a race of poetic "bards" who would register the many facets of modern society, link them together, and infuse into them a religiosity and humanity they had lost in what he called the "dry and flat Sahara" of American society.[11] Whitman himself, as we have seen, occasionally descended to naive patriotism and Gothic excess, those conventions of the radical-democrat style. But at his best he forged in his poetry a brand new kind of radical democracy, one that went beyond narrow social protest and opened toward the universals of human experience. Whitman moved into a poetic realm in which both patriotism and subversiveness were redefined. It his best poetry he became subversive in the largest sense—he beat the gong of revolt, but it was a gong that was far more resounding than any which came from any popular writer. His was a comprehensive revolt against anything that repressed or inhibited the human spirit. Likewise, democracy for him was not merely sentimental nostalgia: it was a transformed, humanized democracy, a radical openness to the physical pleasures and mystical suggestions of the world around him.

While the popular radical democrats lost their individuality in their zeal for social causes, Whitman restored a strong sense of the self, of the living, breathing personality to radical democrat themes. The universal quality of his outlook is suggested in his statement that as a poet he was trying to develop "the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me" and the "Not Me, the whole material universe." He infused into popular themes the kind of intensely personal dialogue between the self and the world that the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin identifies as a main ingredient of great literature. The famous opening lines of "Song of Myself" show that he

was indeed radically democratic but was at the same time radically individualistic:

> I celebrate myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to
>   you.[12]

Whitman's radical democracy was distinguished from that of his popular contemporaries not only by its intense individualism but also by its sanitizing freshness, its relative cleanliness. It might seem odd to hear Whitman, our daringly erotic poet, being called clean. But when we compare his best writing with the often scabrous works of the popular radical democrats, he seems clean indeed. I have mentioned that writers like Lippard and Thompson often became perverse in their literary attacks on the social elite: in their effort to expose immorality, they regularly portrayed upper-class figures engaged in private sexual amours and nightly carousals. Whitman was so keenly aware of this popular sensational literature that he once declared that popular novels in America featured only "a sickly, scrofulous, crude, amorousness."[13] In his best poetry Whitman's eroticism was vibrant and direct, as opposed to the lurid indirections and gory violence of the popular writers. Whitman made a mighty effort to connect sex with candor and physiology, with nature and spirituality.

The largest distinction between Whitman and the popular radical democrats pertained to style. Although many of the radical democrats were preliterary and stylistically experimental, none of them recognized that style itself could serve as a redemptive agent for the modern social critic. Whitman took the politics out of the notion of democracy and demonstrated his allegiance to it in poetic expression. Like the other radical democrats of his day, he felt that social change was going to be achieved neither through political parties nor through established social institutions. As he wrote in *Democratic Vistas*, "these savage, wolfish parties alarm me."[14] Unlike the other radical democrats, however, he rose above mere wallowing in bitter social criticism or simple nostalgia. Instead, he created a fully democratic poetic world in which multitudinous images from American culture, from the religious to the sexual, were brought into a vibrant dialogue with each other.

Precisely in what ways was his poetry democratic? It was democratic in its use of an expansive first-person persona which retained its individuality but nevertheless sympthetically identified with the most disparate things and with persons of all races and creeds. One thinks, for instance, of Section 33 of "Song of Myself," in which the "I" becomes absorbed into a remarkably varied succession of people, including a bridegroom, a felon, a witch burned at the stake, and a fugitive slave shot down by pursuing whites. "All these I feel or am," Whitman writes; and later in the poem he proclaims, "I am large. . . . I contain multitudes."[15] His poetry was also democratic in its long catalogues of the most heterogeneous things, catalogues in which succinct vivid description preserves the individuality of each thing while the juxtaposition of the various elements places them on a common level. The catalogues enforce his basic premise, stated in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass,* that "Of all mankind the poet is the equable man . . . He is the equalizer of his age and land."[16] It was democratic too in its constant use of what might be called equalizing images, such as the grass, the ocean, sleep, time, death—those larger phenomena of experience before which all human beings stand equal.

How do these poetic devices enable Whitman to transform the themes of the popular radical democrats? A look at one of his best poems, "The Sleepers," illustrates this transforming process. As you may recall, I've already mentioned "The Sleepers" in two contexts: one passage in the poem, about Washington's tearful farewell to his troops, echoes the sentimental patriotism of the radical democrats; another passage, in which Whitman vows violent rebellion against "him that oppresses me," manifests radical democrat anger. But in the poem these typically radical-democrat passages are subsumed within a larger artistic mosaic created by a truly comprehensive democratic imagination. In "The Sleepers" the main elements of Whitman's democratic style—the all-embracing persona, the sweeping catalogues, the equalizing images—interweave subtly and animate each other. The "I" of this poem is an extraordinarily flexible, democratic "I," one who identifies with an amazing range of social types, from the slave to the capitalist, from the onanist to the President. The catalogue passages about the varied sleepers have both a sharp descriptiveness and a broad comprehensiveness. And the central equalizing images of the night and sleep serve to place all these disparate social types on the same level. It becomes immediately clear that Whitman is talking not only about sleep but about eternal sleep, about that equalizer of all equalizers, death itself. But the poem is not sad or depressing, because Whitman's democratizing devices breed acceptance, hope, and renewal. The very process of forging democratic poetry works to transform the subjects being treated. Therefore, the poem ends with miraculous images of universal rebirth and social comradeship:

> The call of the slave is one with the master's call . . .
>   and the master salutes the slave,
> The felon steps forth from the prison . . . the insane
>   becomes sane . . . the suffering of sick persons is
>   relieved, [. . .]
> Stiflings and passages open . . . the paralysed become
>   supple,
> The swelled and convulsed and congested awake to
>   themselves in condition,
> They pass the invigoration of the night and the chemistry
>   of the night and awake.[17]

Whitman was therefore a radical democrat in the largest sense, one who had many themes in common with popular writers but who also affirmed a more comprehensive kind of democracy in his poetry. That is why, despite his deep love of the America's national traditions, he could actually rise beyond these traditions in the interest of reaching mankind at large. As he writes in his poem "A Song for Occupations":

> We thought our Union grand and our Constitution grand;
> I do not say they are not grand and good—for they are,
> I am this day just as much in love with them as you,
> But I am eternally in love with you and with all my fellows upon the earth.[18]

Whitman's brand of democracy could best be described in cosmic, primeval terms. As he puts it in those clarion words in ''Song of Myself'':

> I speak the password primeval. . . . I give the sign of
> democracy;
> By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their
> counterpart of on the same terms.[19]

Leaves of Grass is proof that the centrifugal forces of American society could be shaped by a poetic personality that infused depth and suggestiveness into cultural images that remained perverse and anarchic in their crude native state. Whitman's gift to America was a reconstructed radical democracy, one that retained the patriotism and the rage of the popular writers but that affirmed the poet as the redeemer and the poetic image as a powerful unifying force.

NOTES

[1] *Voices from the Press,* Ed. James J. Brenton (New York, 1850), p. 88.

[2] Walt Whitman, *Prose Works, 1892,* ed. Floyd Stovall [hereafter cited as PW], I (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 258.

[3] *Leaves of Grass. A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems,* ed. Sculley Bradley *et al.*, I (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 252.

[4] Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* [hereafter cited as *WCP*] (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 477.

[5] *PW,* II, 529.

[6] *WCP,* p. 938.

[7] *WCP,* p. 50.

[8] *WCP,* p. 113.

[9] *WCP,* p. 307.

[10] *WCP,* p. 263.

[11] *WCP,* p. 939.

[12] *WCP,* p. 27.

[13] Walt Whitman, *Notes and Fragments,* ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (Ontario: E. Tallbot & Co., n.d.), p. 146.

[14] *WCP,* p. 990.

[15] *WCP,* p. 87.

[16] *WCP,* pp. 8–9.

[17] *WCP,* p. 116.

[18] *WCP,* p. 93.

[19] *WCP,* p. 50.