

## WHITMAN'S VISIONARY POLITICS

The most vivid and yet most elusive presence among our writers, Whitman remains the least understood. He remains a great potentiality; his "bequest," as Hart Crane said, "is still to be realized in all its implications." A large reason for his apparent elusiveness, for the misunderstandings obscuring his implications, surely lies in what is called his politics: his resolute attachment to "democracy." With that word, difficulty and enigma arise at once. The ordinary senses of the word politics—negotiation of interest through established channels, the uses of power—seem hardly to cover his expansive notion of democracy, a word Whitman equates more with religion and morality than with representative government and universal suffrage: indeed in the assortment of memoranda which wondrously coheres into perhaps the major unacknowledged text of our political culture, *Democratic Vistas*, he speaks of a "New World metaphysics," an expression convertible with the word democracy and several others. In the wide reaches of his thought the word politics "converts" with other terms, such as art and poetry and justice and conscience. And yet, to compound the difficulty, it manages to retain enough everyday worldliness as the name of a distinct realm of practical life, the realm of voting, electing representatives, managing the daily turnings of the wheels of state, to base an inquiry upon.

The inquiry I want to propose within the modest limits of this little talk is not addressed so much to his actual politics, his particular views and positions toward the issues of his day (easy enough to chronicle and appraise), but what he *means* by politics, by democracy, and how these meanings figure in what makes Whitman so continually alive for us in the first place: the power of his poetry to beguile, to magnetize, to transform. As we shall see, he is not a figure about whom it makes any reasonable sense to say that he had "a" politics, supported this party or candidate or partisan program, but instead a figure for whom the notion of politics adhered so profoundly to fundamental thought and creativity that it makes even less sense to slice away his commitments, to bracket his egalitarian-

ism, for example, as accidental to his enduring art, no more than a mythos necessary for the release of his talent. More damage comes from ignoring or devaluing his politics than from misunderstanding it. He is decidedly our greatest *political* poet, a voice still relevant to our political culture, one whose bequest belongs to democracy or nothing at all.

Whitman's political vision remains a chief clause of a bequest unfulfilled not only in the obvious sense that the society he imagined, governed by a religious ethic of absolute equality, each person engaged in "the grand experiment of development," has failed to appear, but also in the failure of his best readers to confront the implications of his political vision. To ask why it has failed, and what prospects remain for truly egalitarian democracy, are imperative steps toward reclaiming the bequest. But my point now is that we need to consider his politics not only or even necessarily as partisans of democracy but as readers of his poetry, as students of his mind, of the ethos he imagined into poetry. Of course we might wonder if he can be read at all seriously in any spirit other than that of the complex egalitarianism he proclaims in the opening inscription of *Leaves of Grass*: "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,/ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse." This opening couplet marks the threshold to Whitman's world, the custom house, as it were, in which we first read the laws and rules of the territory ahead. We are greeted at once by the central enigma of the book: not merely how the self connects with the other, but how within the self the "I" who sings connects with the singular, irreducible "person"—an "I," moreover, further to be split in the following stanza of this opening inscription between a body and a soul, between physiognomy and form, between male and female. In the coupling of opposites performed by the tense conjunction "yet," contradiction appears, between the one and the all, the singular and the typical, the irreducible datum of experience and the organizing totality of the whole: no easy beginning but (excluding the title itself, the ambiguous "leaves of grass") the first of many shifty, evasive maneuvers that lie ahead.

"Yet utter the word Democratic." Whitman the prophet of democracy, in whom, as Santayana noted with bemusement, "democ-

racy is carried into psychology and morals. The various sights, moods, and emotions are given each one vote; they are declared to be free and equal": this has been the most familiar guise of the "good grey poet," the bard of a mystical sense of the oneness of things. For Whitman's band of disciples, as for the critics and artists, notably the *Seven Arts* group of Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank and Randolph Bourne, who scouted a renewed culture of democracy in the period before and after World War One, Whitman's vistas held his most compelling if most difficult message. On the other hand, skeptical or hostile readers have judged his ideal oneness as naive, barbaric, lazy, and eminently unrealizable. In the years following Whitman's death in 1892 writers we would now call "elitist" created a picture of Whitman as a kind of sublime naif or fool, a crude genius with a worthless mind but who nevertheless exerted the strange, affecting appeal of a man who, as John Jay Chapman envyingly remarked in an essay of 1898, "did really live the life he liked to live, in defiance of all men." "Fortunately," Chapman writes, he was "so very ignorant and untrained that his mind was utterly incoherent and unintellectual. His mind seems to be submerged and to have become almost a part of his body." "Fortunately," that is, because the poet's deficiencies of mind allowed him a direct, "barbaric" sensuousness, "visual observations of life . . . first-hand and wonderful." "No man ever enjoyed life more intensely than Walt Whitman," notes Chapman, but as for his theories:

There is no intellectual coherence in his talk, but merely pathological coherence. Can the insulting jumble of ignorance and effrontery, of scientific phrase and French paraphrase, of slang and inspired adjective, which he puts forward with the pretense that it represents thought, be regarded, from any possible point of view, as a philosophy, or a system, of belief?

Or, in Santayana's words: "with Whitman the surface is absolutely all and the underlying structure is without interest and almost without existence."

Still, what a "delightful appearance, and a strange creature to come out of our beehive" (Chapman). Portrayed as "The Soul of a

Tramp" (the title of Chapman's essay), Whitman provided a vicarious release for many cultivated souls trapped in a gentility they despised, a whipping boy by which standards of cultivation could be both affirmed and spat upon at once: a kind of Rorschach screen upon which they might catch their own self-hatred flickering back at them. Thus while Whitman the "quack poet" (Chapman) "has filled his work with grimace and vulgarity," the raw genius "in some of his lines, breaks the frame of poetry and gives us life in the throb"—a feeling like that of "a man who leaves his office and gets into a canoe on a Canadian river, sure of ten days' release from the cares of business and housekeeping." So far from intending condescension, Chapman says about this "thrill of joy such as Whitman has here and there thrown into his poetry," that it may be "the greatest accomplishment in literature." Santayana echoes similar revulsion toward "those incapacities and solecisms which glare at us from his pages," even while drawn to the "mysticism [which] makes us proud and happy to renounce the work of intelligence."

Chapman and Santayana inaugurated at the turn of the century a line of elitist thinking about Whitman which not only discounts his theory of democracy but sees it as pernicious, destructive to his native talent—"the temperament is finer than the ideas," writes Santayana, "and the poet wiser than the thinker." Most offensive to Chapman, most threatening, to judge from the vehemence of his revulsion, was Whitman's camaraderie with "Manhattanese car-drivers and brass-founders displaying their brawny arms around each other's brawny necks"—"gush and sentiment . . . false to life." "No one else in the country was ever found who felt or acted like this." Thus Whitman was made out to fail most precisely where he claimed most, in his own ultimate test of "the word Democracy": "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." "The American mechanic would probably prefer Sigurd the Volsung, and understand it better than Whitman's poetry," cries Chapman. The unkindest cut of all is the denial to Whitman of his readers, of the "great audience" he not only desired with a lover's passion but knew that his poetry wanted for the discharge and realization of its fullest power: the power of its democratic principle. Santayana puts the severest counter-claims, makes most explicit the denial of even the possibil-

ity of such an audience as Whitman demanded, just eight years after the poet's death:

Therefore Whitman failed radically in his dearest ambition: he can never be a poet of the people. For the people, like the early races whose poetry was ideal, are natural believers in perfection. . . . Their chosen poets, if they have any, will always be those who have known how to paint these ideals in lively even if in gaudy colors. . . . Their hope is always to enjoy perfect satisfaction themselves; and therefore a poet who loves the picturesque aspects of labour and vagrancy will hardly be the poet of the poor. He may have described their figure and occupation, in neither of which they are much interested; he will not have read their souls. They will prefer to him any sentimental story-teller, any sensational dramatist, any moralizing poet; for they are hero-worshippers by temperament, and are too wise or too fortunate to be much enamoured of themselves or of the conditions of their existence.

Strong, hard words, of a familiar cast. But the odd thing is that Whitman anticipated them, uttered such words himself, excoriated "the mean flat average" of "our current so-called literature," "the sensational appetite for stimulus, incident, persiflage, etc.," and the audiences "limitless and profitable" to writers who cater to it. Hardly fooled about the prospects for democracy—his vista included a moral scrutiny as severely unhappy as any—Whitman acknowledges the perception that "man, viewed in the lump, displeases, is a constant puzzle and affront to the merely educated classes." Against this "ordinary scansion," in which "the People" appear only as "ungrammatical, untidy, and their sins gaunt and ill-bred," he posits an "artist-mind, lit with the Infinite," which detects larger possibilities. As if preparing his case against future detractors, he writes: "Speaking generally, the tendencies of literature, as hitherto pursued, have been to make mostly critical and querulous men. It seems as if, so far, there were some natural repugnance between a literary and professional life, and the rank spirit of the democracies." What Santayana portrays as an absolute

condition, a fact of nature—the “people” as “natural believers” in the superiority of what is above them—Whitman takes precisely as the condition to be overcome, the present facts to be flooded by an opposing future.

The past generation, especially since the one hundredth anniversary of *Leaves of Grass* in 1955, has seen of course a drastic revision of critical attitudes, certainly a reclaiming of Whitman as “central man,” in Harold Bloom’s influential words, in the American literary tradition. But the terms of Whitman’s recent unqualified acceptance as a poet of major stature once more, though in a different register, relegates politics, the utterance of “the word Democratic,” to minor consideration. It remains common to hear in the academy that Whitman’s ironic fate has been to find his truest readers among other poets, themselves as much “elitist” as his own “real Me.” Whitman’s centrality, Harold Bloom has recently written, belongs not to “democracy,” to the “En-Masse” or aggregate ensemble among whom the poet wished to be absorbed, but to “American literary high culture,” in the poetry of Pound and Eliot, Stevens and Crane and Ashberry, and the prose of Hemingway. To be sure, to see and explain the presence of Whitman in the poetry of major later figures, even those who could not stomach “the word Democratic,” satisfies one of the “proofs” of his greatness, the absorption of his delicacy and finesse (to which the Chapmans and Santayanas seemed wholly deaf and blind) by those who know best how to use it. But the other, the “rough” Whitman, the theorist of democracy, does not so easily disappear. It seems forgotten how indeed the demotic Whitman has been read and absorbed, by angry, bewildered Populists in the 1890s who took courage in his words, by unionists and egalitarians, liberationists and socialists, and radical artistic experimenters throughout the world, among whom the rough Walt remains a heroic figure, and probably just as subtle and delicate as the Whitman of poets and critics.

The Whitman of recent criticism has become a *literary* performer almost exclusively, almost exactly as he warns in “A Backward Glance”: “No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism.”

Bloom’s own version of Whitman, perhaps the most luxuriously empathetic of recent readings, sees “what is most difficult and vital in Whitman’s work” as “the ambiguity of the self or selves and the curious relation between the Whitmanian self and soul”—not, that is, “art or aestheticism” primarily but psychology, the dialogue within: “The rough Whitman is democratic, the ‘real me’ an elitist.” “I suspect,” writes Bloom, “that Whitman’s politics paralleled his sexual morality: the rough Walt homo-erotic and radical, the ‘real Me’ auto-erotic and individualistically elitist. The true importance of this split emerges neither in Whitman’s sexuality nor in his politics, but in the delicacy and beauty of his strongest poems.”

An elegant argument, which says that in the end it is of course the beauty and the grace of the best poems that matters. But is not this fastening on the “real Me” of “Song of Myself” as the true poet and elitist (as presumably all true poets must be) another, more affectionate version of the older condescension which says that “he wrote better than he knew?” In his own words at least Whitman made no separation between his poems and his politics, and played out the drama of his self, soul and “real Me” on the stage of otherness, understood the drama of the self-contradicting self to lie in its further contradiction with the “En-Masse,” with “the word Democratic.” To be sure his denial of the literariness of his poems is another sly evasion, but we must take seriously his view that the radical difference in his poetry lies not solely in its metrical unconventionality but in its address to the reader, the “you” invited to play a role, to perform a part as a constituent, an off-setting presence and actor, in a manner uniquely Whitmanian. Whitman sought a basis for poetry in a new idea of encounter and assumption: “What I assume you shall assume.” In “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” he puts it this way:

One main contrast of the ideas behind every page of my verses, compared with establish’d poems, is their different relative attitude toward God, towards the objective universe, and still more (by reflection, confession, assumption, etc.) the quite changed attitude of the ego, the one chanting or talking, toward himself and towards his fellow-humanity. It is certainly time for

America, above all, to begin this readjustment in the scope and basic point of view of verse; for everything else has changed.

He goes on in the same passage to say that “the true use of the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common life,” without which “reality would seem incomplete, and science, democracy, and life itself, finally in vain.” Perhaps Whitman could not help himself—it is surely in the mode of his era, of Matthew Arnold and of Tolstoy if not of Nietzsche—to speak of the place, the mission, the function of art in relation to modernity. Whatever the source, the notion of a purpose beyond “art and aestheticism” marked itself indelibly in his art, and cannot be washed away without damage to our sense of it.

It is striking, in fact, how like Arnold Whitman appears in his discursive arguments about the function of poetry to foster a new religious attitude, to counter the materialism, the instrumental empiricism, and the cheap penny-press drivel of modern times. Arnold himself might have written that “reality would seem incomplete” without a vivifying art. But Whitman is radically unlike Arnold or other critics of modernity like Ortega y Gasset and T.S. Eliot in his notion of a “quite changed attitude of the ego, the one chanting or talking, towards himself and towards his fellow-humanity.” His own definitive vision of poetry, of poetry as politics, as democracy, begins here. It may seem outrageous and certainly against the grain of traditional interpretation to say so, but I believe that Whitman was one of the best critics of his own work, that he still serves (beneath the chaff and frequent bombast) as one of the surest guides to his poetry. Or at least, that his prose often provides important clues, that his discursive thought often helps us see and piece together the large, complex design of his work, the distinctive universe of his discourse. Whitman inhabits what he believed was a discursive totality, a wholeness. Or rather, he required a wholeness, and perhaps his modernity, his contemporaneity with us, lies most in the expression of that need, in the drama of his inventing himself and his book as one whole thing. To say that it is not a finished system but a becoming, an alternating ebb and flow—“one part

contradicting another,” as he writes at the beginning of *Democratic Vistas*, “for there are opposite sides to the great question of democracy”—is not to credit his need for totality any less but even more. “The fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me,” he confesses about the nation, but the same fear of personal disunity haunts his work throughout, transmuted into the great unclassifiable poems “Song of Myself,” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” “As I Ebb’d with the Oceans of Life,” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

Not only is the politics of democracy an essential part of Whitman’s design, but understood in this way, as figured in terms of I and you, part and whole, individual and mass, leaves and grass, I think it is basic, perhaps the gloss on everything else. All of Whitman’s key terms are charged with politics, translatable into politics, or, alternatively, as Kenneth Burke explained in a brilliant essay of 1955: the political is translatable into the experiential (in Burke’s words, “policy made personal”). Burke’s method is to identify “interrelations among key terms in Whitman’s language,” and I want to follow his lead in the rest of this talk by focussing especially on terms for vision, for seeing (the act), sight (the name of the act), and vista (what is seen in the widest, most distant and panoramic sense) in *Democratic Vistas*. Of course time permits only preliminary clues and indirections here, but the task seems indispensable for a recovery of the meaning and centrality of Whitman’s visionary politics.

Let us take *Democratic Vistas* as the central text, recognizing that it incorporates ideas and sentiments uttered as early as 1856 in “The Eighteenth Presidency!” and its companion poem “Respondez!” a phenomenal sustained nightmare of political irony, repeated many times in later prose. The work can hardly be called propositional in any systematic sense, but at least three leading statements emerge as proto-propositions: (1) that political democracy, representative government and the process of establishing it through suffrage, while essential to full democracy, is by itself not enough; (2) that the central issue for democracy, for the States, is the reconciliation of the one and many, of states’ rights and the rights of Union,

of individual rights and the rights of the mass; and (3) that what seems to be true at the moment need not be true forever, that in fact a future already awaits and impinges upon the present. It is this third I want to attend to, a proposition which may sound more an act of faith than a provable hypothesis; Whitman's task, more in the spirit of religious than political discourse, is to make the statement seem *necessary* even if not demonstrably true, or true by virtue of our necessity in holding to it rather than by its intrinsic persuasiveness. We must believe in a future different from the present in order to believe in the present. This is what Burke calls Whitman's "futuristic cult of the present." What is moribund to our eyes in the present political scene (the Gilded Age "dry Sahara") must be seen as the merely visible in relation to the as yet invisible future.

I want to close in on the several versions and uses of the eye-sight, tropes of vision, in the *Vistas*. The essay presents itself in its title as an act of vision, and proceeds in an argument in which vision ranges up and down the scale of focus from microscopic scrutiny of the contemporary "spectacle" to far-reaching vista, to the visionary vision of the concluding paragraphs. Just as the line of the argument shifts and slides, the point of view represented in images of sight contracts and expands as if in obedience to an inner rhythm: from seeing "dimly" with "the superficial eye" to being "lit with the Infinite," from "ordinary scansion" to "the luminousness of real vision," from "the ostent of the senses and eyes" to the "prophetic vision . . . which others see not," from the "retrospect of past time" to "prospecting thus the coming unsped days." The speaker sees out of both sides of his head at once: retrospect and prospect, behind and ahead, past and future. The "vista" comprehends multiple acts of vision. No one can doubt Whitman's deliberateness, his craft and artifice in fashioning a point of view which includes "temporary sight" and "penetrating eye," "severe eyes, using the moral microscope" and "eyes of calm and steady gaze, yet capable of flashing." Visibility is the method and also the theme, the means and end of this extraordinary work which, "one part contradicting another," asks "to be read only in such oneness, each page and each claim and assertion modified and temper'd by the others." In addition to eyes and acts of seeing we find buried metaphors of vision: "spectacles" and "speculations," "shams,"

"masks," "phantasms" and "phantoms," "appearance," "illusion," "apparitions," "show," "prospects," "survey," and words like "illustrious," "resplendent," "beams," "sunshine," "chandeliers," "beacons," "orbs," "crystalline," all contributing to the intricate dialectic of vision which makes up the "vista."

"Far, far, indeed, stretch, in distance, our Vistas!" The aim is to outstretch visibility itself, to bring into view an *emergent* reality accessible only to a certain act of seeing. In the following passage we find almost diagnostically the skeletal form of the visionary process:

Fearless of scoffing, and of the ostent, let us take our stand, our ground, and never desert it, to confront the growing excess and arrogance of realism. To the cry, now victorious—the cry of sense, science, flesh, incomes, farms, merchandise, logic, intellect, demonstrations, solid perpetuities, buildings of brick and iron, or even the facts of the shows of trees, earth, rocks, etc., fear not, my brethren, my sisters, to sound out with equally determin'd voice, that conviction brooding within the recesses of every envision'd soul—illusions! apparitions! figments all! True, we must not condemn the show, neither absolutely deny it, for the indispensability of its meanings; but how clearly we see that, migrate in soul to what we can already conceive of superior and spiritual points of view, and, palpable as it seems under present relations, it all and several might, nay certainly would, fall apart and vanish.

Here the "futuristic cult of the present" interestingly appears in a curiously qualified construction of negatives: "we must not condemn the show, neither absolutely deny it." Which is to say, we must not negate the palpable present, though the process of vision which contains this mild admonition culminates exactly in the most complete of negations: the palpable world of the present falls apart and vanishes. Appearances disappear. As the invisible comes forward, the visible recedes. Earlier in the essay the same appearance/disappearance act takes place explicitly on a figurative stage, the

proper site of course for illusions and apparitions: "True, indeed, behind this fantastic farce, enacted on the visible stage of society, solid things and stupendous labors are to be discover'd, existing crudely and going on in the background, to advance and tell themselves in time." And later, "But sternly discarding, shutting our eyes to the glow and grandeur of the general superficial effect, coming down to what is of the only real importance . . ."

Images and figures accumulate so densely that we need to pause and sort out certain key terms. The democratic vista requires that we open our eyes, and also shut them. We open them to see the "farce," the "glow and grandeur" which stand for the "terrible" truth of the "failure" of "our New World democracy . . . in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results." We shut our eyes to failure in order better to see, in the distant vista, its negation: to see present failure (itself a negation of the ideal) in light of the future makes the present vanish. The echo of Emerson is unmistakable: "A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and will be seen no more." Both Emerson and Whitman take revolution to mean something like a turning away from: seeing things differently will make them seem different, and in a world in which reality depends on seeing, a *seeming* difference is a real one.

It is clear enough, then, that a visionary politics in Whitman's sense veers dangerously toward an inevitabilist idealism, a buoyancy in spite of all, a cheerful theodicy in the face of swine and spiders. But for Whitman vision is only half the issue, the rest of which is speech and writing. In the visionary passages just quoted above, recall the conjunction of terms: "fear not, my brethren, my sisters, to sound out with equally determin'd voice . . .," and the "solid things" which "advance and tell themselves in time." It is voice, the act of telling, the living word, upon which Whitman bases his primary hope for a religious democracy: "a new theory of literary composition for imaginative works of the very first class . . . is the sole course open to these States." The central memoranda in all of *Democratic Vistas* follows:

Books are to be call'd for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast's struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-train'd, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers.

The passage is embedded in the final section of the essay, a lengthy rhapsody punctuated by the repeated refrain: "we see." What next needs to be understood, then, for a clearer sense of Whitman's visionary politics, is the relation, the nexus, between seeing and saying, between vision and poetry.

The text throws up some hints and provocations. We read: "then the interior consciousness, like a hitherto unseen inscription, in magic ink, beams out its wondrous lines to the sense." The line yokes together the visionary and the lexical, but the relation is metaphorical. The impalpable—interior consciousness—makes itself known both as light: "beams out . . . to the sense," and yet as text: like an "inscription in magic ink" (which appears invisible to the natural eye), a wondrous line. The meaning seems to me this: what is unseen—say the future, the interior possibilities of the present—becomes known to us in and as light, something sensible; yet we attain this experience of the sensible, of what is prior to language, only through language, through inscription, through lines of verse. In a doubling of the metaphor, writing itself is figured as a beam of light, the medium within and through which vision takes place. The passage continues, with a decisive clarification: "Bibles may convey, and priests expound, but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of one's isolated Self, to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commune with the unutterable." Priority thus lies not with the text, the bibles, but with the vehicle of the metaphor: light, the medium of the unutterable. Else-

where in the essay Whitman makes passing mention of "the untellable look of some human faces." What is truly seen cannot be said. Yet only in the saying is the unutterable made present to us.

Another revealing statement of this paradoxical ascendancy of vision over speech appears in a key passage in "Song of Myself":

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would  
kill me,  
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me . . .

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,  
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and  
volumes of worlds.

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure  
itself,  
It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,  
Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?

Come now I will not be tantalized, you conceive too  
much of articulation,  
Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are  
folded? . . .

My final merit I refuse you, I refuse putting from me  
what I really am,  
Encompass worlds, but never try to encompass me,  
I crowd your sleekest and best by simply looking toward  
you.

Writing and talk do not prove me,  
I carry the plenum of proof and everything else in my  
face,  
With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic.

Speech is the sun-rise the poet sends out of himself, in offsetting emulation of the sun itself. Yet speech finally cannot tell all; the silent face itself, disclosed in the light of the sun, is the plenum, the fullness of proof. Speech, in short, creates the conditions of silence, in which light and vision prevail. "Writing and talk do not prove me," but only writing and talk can prove that issue, make it palpable, restore the primacy of the eyesight and its visions of the unutterable.

And what has this paradox of a writing essential to the experience of its own insufficiency to do with visionary politics, with the democratic vista, with Whitman's theory of America? It should be clear at least that it has everything to do with the "new theory of literary composition" upon which Whitman rests his case for a religious democratic culture, for only a poetic language which knows its limitations, its subordinance to life itself, to experience of the world through the medium of sight (and also touch and sound and smell), can produce the gymnastic books called for, in which the reader plays a part, his or her completeness of greater moment than the completeness of the book or poem. But more: planted throughout the text are indications of the formative power of certain "great" words. "The great word Solidarity has arisen," as if a visible presence in the world. For Whitman the Hegelian idealist such words portend the making of history. "We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps . . . It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted." The enactment of the history of the word, which is Whitman's politics, awaits the enactments of such poems as Whitman calls for: poems which lead and inspire by indirection, by denying their permanence and fixity, by compelling readers to open their eyes and see themselves in their worlds. Whitman opens *Democratic Vistas* by declaring that "I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms." America too is a word, less a particular polity than a poetic trope, another possibility of vision (though Whitman with his severe eyes and moral microscope upon the age of Grant and Credit Mobilier and the coming betrayal of Reconstruction never relinquishes sight of the actual society).



Like "democracy" the word "America" named for Whitman a universal human possibility, the modern possibility, indeed necessity, in the age of republican forms and industrial production (promising, as he and Karl Marx together believed, the end of want). We may rightly reply that Whitman takes much too sanguine a view of what he considers the two foundation-stages for true democracy, the institution of the republic and of mechanical industrial production, and probes much too little into the recalcitrance of the social system of bourgeois democracy and industrial capitalism. A democrat, Whitman was no socialist; a Hegelian, not a Marxist. There is no selfconscious workingclass in Whitman's thought, the agents of positive social change. And unless we misconstrue his inspired band of divine literati as Lenin's vanguard party, there is no theory of social revolution, nor even any hint of its desirability; he believes the real American to have achieved already the middling prosperity necessary for religious democracy. Clearly Whitman failed to reckon with the intractable power of class interest which rapidly consolidated itself in post-Civil War society, although he was not blind to its dangers, its corrupting effect upon the democratic ethos. However, the issue here is not an evaluation of his politics but an account of it, of its place in the large design of his work.

In that design the word precedes the vista, necessary to its enactment, just as the vista itself precedes even as it prophetically encompasses the history. All the difficult complexity and challenge of Whitman's idealistic bequest of a democratic politics inseparable from a democratic poetry lies compacted, half-hidden but just enough revealed to make for an athletic exercise of reading in the following summary passage:

Thus we presume to write, as it were, upon things that exist not, and travel by maps yet unmade, and a blank. But the throes of birth are upon us; and we have something of this advantage in seasons of strong formations, doubts, suspense—for then the afflatus of such themes haply fall upon us, more or less; and then, hot from surrounding war and revolution [the Civil War or War of the Rebellion], our speech, though without

polish'd coherence, and a failure by the standard of criticism, comes forth, real at least as the lightnings.

Speech as real as light, speech as the instrument of vision and vista: such written speech, like an unmade map of a new, still blank terrain, was Whitman's most strenuous and challenging notion of the political. Such is the speech which writes the vision of his grandest poetry, and to fail to read its politics is to refuse the challenge, the *ascesis*, the gymnastic exercise and the revived body-politic it envisions.

Whitman's politics of democracy, like his social criticism, is a "story," Roy Harvey Pearce wrote in 1969 in a commendable essay on "Whitman and Our Hope for Poetry," "we have not yet clearly read," yet one which "has increasingly great significance for us." It is time to reclaim the political Whitman, in all his enigmatic difficulty. Professor Pearce puts so well the issues at stake I can do no better than conclude with his words:

The history of American poetry could be written as the continuing discovery and rediscovery of Whitman, an ongoing affirmation of his crucial relevance to the mission of the American poet: which is, as it is everywhere, simply to tell us the truth in such a way that it will be a new truth, and in its newness will renew us and our capacity to have faith in ourselves, only then together to try to build the sort of world which will have that faith as its necessary condition.

