

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 18 (2006)

Artikel: "The United States Themselves [Are] Essentially the Greatest poem" : fraternity, personalism, and a new world metaphysics in Democratic Vistas
Autor: Kern, Louis J.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100035>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 01.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

“The United States Themselves [Are] Essentially the Greatest Poem”: Fraternity, Personalism, and a New World Metaphysics in *Democratic Vistas*

Louis J. Kern

Although Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* (1871) has often been considered his reaction to Thomas Carlyle's acerbic critique of popular democracy, *Shooting Niagara: And After?* (1867), neither its basic arguments nor its broader philosophical concerns were influenced or provoked by Carlyle. Many of the essay's main lines of argument were anticipated in precedent editions of *Leaves of Grass* and the text of his *Blue Book* (1860-61). The evolution of the text can also be traced to three preliminary drafts, the essays "Democracy" (1867), "Personalism" (1868), published in *The Galaxy*, and the unpublished "Orbic Literature." This paper traces the process through which Whitman transformed these materials into the final text of *Democratic Vistas* and reconsiders the validity of the presumption of Whitman's uncritically optimistic faith in a nation in the process of becoming an ideal, inclusive democracy.

Although several of the central ideas of *Democratic Vistas* first found expression in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, and more obliquely and cryptically in poems of that and subsequent editions, it has become customary to trace the immediate origins of the piece to Whitman's 1867 response to Thomas Carlyle's vitriolic attack on popular democracy, *Shooting Niagara: And After?* (August 1867). Certainly, Carlyle's conception of representative democracy as a product of "Swarmery" (irrational mobocracy) and his contempt for the common man led to a contumelious rejection of the American system of universal manhood suffrage. As Carlyle expressed it, the

divine commandment *to vote* ("Manhood Suffrage," – Horsehood, Doghood, ditto not yet treated of); Universal "glorious Liberty" (to Sons of the

Devil in overwhelming majority, as would appear); count of Heads the God-appointed way in this universe, all Other ways Devil appointed [was little better than] a palpable incredibility and delirious absurdity. (4)

Though stung by Carlyle's tone and his insistence that the "Nigger Question" would upset the balance of American society, Whitman's reaction to the essay was considerably more complicated. In the two pieces later reworked and expanded to produce the pamphlet-length *Democratic Vistas*, Carlyle is not mentioned by name. In the first of these pieces, "Democracy," there is no direct allusion to the Carlyle essay until half-way through the article, where it is mockingly and satirically dismissed as "a comic-painful hillabaloo and vituperative cat-squalling . . . [is] this about 'the Niagara leap,' 'swarmery,' 'Orsonism,' etc." (Whitman, "Democracy" 926). Deftly turning Carlyle's contemptuous depiction of ardent democrats as deranged, "rabid Nigger-Philanthropists, barking furiously in the gutter" ("Shooting Niagara" 14), Whitman likens the "utterance of the eminent person" to the "Bedlam let loose in [a] crowded, colored Carolina bush-meeting" (Whitman, "Democracy" 125).

In a contemporary entry in a notebook (Autumn 1867), Whitman observed that

the perceptive reader will see that what is said in this article is not by any means intended as a formal rejoinder & answer to Mr. Carlyle. What he has offered is after his own manner, frank, bold, & incisive – & is as it should be for the vast, the aged and ever-changing Edifice of politico-humanity, he, as architect, has presented his plan of repair, – his idea of strengthening, & revivifying. It seems to embody & stand for, what many shrewd persons & just persons, here in America & there in Europe, think, believe or dread, in some form or other. Largely considered, Time alone can finally answer all these things. But as a substitute of an answer, as in passing, here are thrown out a few suggestions, indirections of that other plan, in the new spirit. (Whitman, *Notebooks II* 854)

In contemporary letters Whitman expressed the relationship of his essay to the Englishman's in more agonistic terms. In a letter to the editors of *The Galaxy*, W.C. and F.P. Church, that accompanied his submission of the manuscript of "Democracy," Whitman observed that "it is partly provoked by, & in some respects a rejoinder to Carlyle's *Shooting Niagara*." A few weeks later, after the essay had been accepted for publica-

tion, he called it "a counterblast or rejoinder to Carlyle's late piece, *Shooting Niagara*" (Whitman, *Correspondence* I 38, 342).

After Carlyle's death (1881), Whitman expressed a more ambivalent attitude towards the influence of the elder thinker on his own construction of democracy. In an essay entitled "Late Thoughts and Jottings: Carlyle From American Points of View," which embodied his most extensive discussion of Carlyle's paradoxical impact on American thought, Whitman emphasized the "inexplicable *rapprochement* (all the more piquant from its contradictions) between that deceased author and our United States of America" (Whitman, *Prose Works* 254).

Specifically, in reference to his own response to Carlyle, he observed:

Whether I succeeded or no, I, too, reaching across the Atlantic and taking the man's dark fortune-telling of humanity and politics, would offset it all (such is the fancy that comes to me,) by a far more profound horoscope – casting of those themes – G.F. Hegel's. (*Prose Works* 254)

Given the rather cryptic and oblique references to *Shooting Niagara* in "Democracy," and their relatively minor role in the essay taken as a whole, Whitman's comment seems fantasy indeed unless it is understood to apply more broadly to the text of *Democratic Vistas*. Such a reading of Whitman's recollections of the genesis and evolution of his thoughts on democracy is borne out by the more palpable presence of Hegel's ideas in the latter text as well. Ironically, the influence of both thinkers was more by indirection than immediate consideration of the specifics of their discussion of American social and political conditions. They were concerned, and then only indirectly, more with the long-term tendencies and potentialities of the American polity than its contemporary praxis. As Whitman noted,

Although neither of my great authorities during their lives considered the United States worthy of serious attention, all the principal works of both might not inappropriately be this day collected and bound up under the conspicuous title: *Speculations for the Use of North America, and Democracy there, with the Relations of the Same to Metaphysics, Inducing Lessons and Warnings, (Encouragements, too, and of the Vastest,) From the Old World to the New.* (*Prose Works* 262)

It was through his "lessons and warnings" that Carlyle exerted his influence on Whitman. He played a catalytic role in bringing into sharper focus the poet's often amorphous and enigmatic musings on national

identity and its expression in American political life. Carlyle's "reactionary [. . .] scornful analysis of democracy," Whitman concluded, had provided a salutary goad to his thinking, for "it is always important to have a definite, special, even oppositional, living man to start from, for sending out certain speculations and comparisons for home use" (*Prose Works* 262). Late in his life, Whitman, perhaps hyperbolically and for dramatic effect, was reported to have remarked that "Carlyle was after all expounding the essence of true democracy when he was preaching what many interpreted as the antithesis of it" (Whitman, *Daybooks* 421n).

Whitman's ambivalent response to Carlyle can perhaps best be understood as temperamental; Carlyle's ideas did not play a prominent role in the evolution of *Democratic Vistas*, but rather his pessimism about popular democracy echoed Whitman's own disillusionment with the sordid realities of post-Civil War American culture and politics. It appealed at once to the practical, down-to-earth and the moralizing, prophetic side of his nature (as conventionally understood, the harder, uncompromising, masculine side) as opposed to Hegel's appeal to his mystic-idealistic and tenderly affective (the softer, more forgiving, feminine) side. This reading of Carlyle's influence is borne out by Whitman's observation that thinkers like Carlyle were "precious" in forcing us to confront the realities that threatened the realization of our ideals. As Whitman put it, "his rude, rasping, taunting, contradictory tones — what ones are more wanted amid the supple, polish'd, money-worshipping, Jesus-and-Judas equalizing, suffrage-sovereignty echoes of current America?" (*Prose Works* 261).

It is apparent, however, that the main lines of argument and the broader philosophical concerns of neither "Democracy" nor *Democratic Vistas* were singularly indebted to the influence or provocation of Carlyle's dyspeptic essay. Many of Whitman's core ideas, the essential substance of his impassioned commitment, and his inspired revelatory faith in the prospective progress and expansion of democracy were already present in the evolving poetical corpus of *Leaves of Grass* and the exegetical commentaries that comprised the prefaces to the various editions. If we are to trace the origins and development of Whitman's ideas that found their fullest political, aesthetic, and moral expression in *Democratic Vistas*, and if we are to understand the intimate and necessary connections between Whitman's literary and political impulses, it is with his poetry that we must begin.

From the outset, Whitman's vision was simultaneously dynamic and universal; it was comprised of diametrically opposite tendencies for whose reconciliation there was no historical precedent and for whose future rapprochement only faith afforded any prospect. As he envisioned the destabilizing forces of the American character in *Inscriptions*, he wrote, "Still though the one I sing,/ (One, yet of contradictions made,) I dedicate to Nationality." More explicitly, he noted the contest between individualism (he called it "Personalism" in the second of the preliminary essays that formed the basis of *Democratic Vistas*) and the collectivity: "One's Self I sing, a simple, separate person,/ Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse" (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 13, 1).

The essentially organicist thrust of Whitman's political theory suggested here is more readily apparent in the prototypical version of the poem later entitled "Starting From Paumanok" (originally, the initiatory piece of *Leaves of Grass*, entitled "Proto Leaf"). In the margin of the text in his *Blue Book* (1860-61), Whitman had written – "And a song of the One of many made, & overall ['mistress, glittering mistress over all' lined out] / The fang'd glittering ['mistress' lined out] one that is overall Resolute warlike one ['weapon'd mistress' lined out] over all" (*Blue Book* 11). This passage indicates the effect of secession and civil war on his sense of the relative balance of individualism and nationalism. His uncompromising commitment to the Union was evident in another handwritten passage to the same poem – "And I will make a song of the Great Nation one & indivisible what ever happens" (*Blue Book* 10).

Perhaps the best poetic statement of Whitman's embrace of the organic theory of the state may be found in *Chants Democratic*. In "By Blue Ontario's Shore" he enshrines the Declaration of Independence as "the organic compact of the first day of the first year of Independence," and suggests that the poet's vocation is to fuse the disparate states "into the compact organism of a Nation;" for "that only holds men together which aggregates all in a living/ principle, as the hold of the limbs of a body or the fibres/ of plants" (*Leaves of Grass* 349, 346, 347). Typically, organic theories are associated with statism and are embraced by conservative thinkers like Carlyle, who fear the political influence of the common man, the instinctual and unthinking stolidity of the "low-minded *pecus*" (Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara" 23). But for Whitman liberty is countered not so much by the power of the state as by a popular collectivity associated with equality and fraternity.

In Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, then, we find imaginative and figurative representation of his central ideas on democracy in diverse and mutually reinforcing texts that pre-dated his reading of Carlyle's *Shooting Niagara*. We can only conclude that the substratum of the more elaborated expression of his ideas on that subject was already present in inchoate form in the evolving corpus of his preeminent literary opus.

In his movement from the metaphorical catalexis of his poetic embodiment of America to the more comprehensive prosaism of his extended essay on an ideal polity, *Democratic Vistas*, we can recognize two distinct if often parallel lines of development of the proemial ideas expressed in his poems. The first of these may be traced in the prefaces to the successive editions of *Leaves of Grass* which, intended in part as exegesis of the central concerns of the poems, partly as personal apologia, and in part a further development and clarification of their core ideas, provide a conceptual transition from, a translation, as it were, of Whitman's ideas from poetry to prose. The other antecedent line of development is embodied in the two preliminary statements of his ideas in more extended prose form that comprised *The Galaxy* essays, "Democracy" (December 1867) and "Personalism" (May 1868).

The preface to the first edition (1855) opens with an implicitly Darwinian understanding of the historical circumstances of the United States, where the New World is the destined recipient of a "life which [. . .] has passed into the new life of the new Forms," and is "fittest" for futurity (*Leaves of Grass* 709). The "common people," the "race of races," have become the evolutionary vanguard whose everyday activities are considered by Whitman to be "unrhymed poetry." "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (*Leaves of Grass* 709, 710, 711). By extension, then, *Leaves of Grass* becomes the record of the destiny of the states and people and their progress towards the democratic ideal. To live for and evolve towards that ideal is the national telos, but the elaboration of that ideal and its explication require a visionary, an oracle — the democratic poet.

Superior to mere Presidents,

The greatest poet . . . Breathes into any thing that was before thought small [and] it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer. . . . he is individual . . . he is complete in himself . . . the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not. He is not one of the chorus . . . he does not stop for regulation . . . he is the president of regulation. (*Leaves of Grass* 713-14)

In his hierophantic role, Whitman, like the Calvinist divines of an earlier era, opened the text of a predetermined American democracy for the general parishioners. He chanted the "great psalm of the republic," and opened the "VISTA" on the "solid and beautiful forms of the future" (*Leaves of Grass* 712). But while it is the poet's role to call to the American soul, his spiritual function lies outside the bounds of constricting theology.

The 1872 preface that appeared in *Specimen Days and Collect* as "PREFACE, 1872" to "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free" presented *Leaves of Grass* as "an epic of Democracy," that envisioned "the great Ideal Nationality of the future, the Nation of the Body and the Soul" (*Notebooks VI* 746n). In a footnote Whitman linked the poetic expression of his democratic vision to the proposals he made in *Democratic Vistas* for the transformation of American culture through the creation of an "imaginative New World" that would provide a moral and spiritual foundation for the redemption of the "Scientific and Political New Worlds" that would usher in an ideal Democracy (*Notebooks VI* 747). The 1876 Preface, published in *Two Rivulets*, a volume of combined poetry and prose, like the 1872 preface, emphasized the "Spiritual Law" "as the keystone to my Democracy's enduring arch" (*Notebooks VI* 747). Whitman proposed that the time seemed propitious for politics to be purified and to assume a rank equal to that of science, philosophy, and art. The achievement of the transubstantiation and transvaluation of American politics would be brought about, he believed, by the progressive unfolding of "three points" or core ideas that had made up the recurrent thematic concerns of all of his work from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. The first principle maintained

that the true growth-characteristics of the Democracy of the New World are henceforth to radiate in superior Literary, Artistic and Religious Expressions, far more than its Republican forms, universal suffrage, and frequent elections (though these are unspeakably important). (747)

The second point was the conviction

that the vital political mission of the United States is to practically solve and settle the problem of two sets of rights – the fusion through compatibility and junction of individual State prerogatives, with the indispensable necessity of centrality and Oneness – the National Identity power. (747)

Finally, assuming the reified form of two “Pillars of Promise,” the presumption,

One, that the morbid facts of American politics and society everywhere are but passing incidents and flanges of our unbounded impetus for growth – weeds, annuals . . . not central, enduring, perennial things. – The Other, that all the hitherto experience of The States, their first century, has been but preparation, adolescence – and that The Union is only now and henceforth (i.e. since the Secession war) to enter on its full Democratic career. (748)

The two preliminary essays that were largely incorporated into *Democratic Vistas*, “Democracy” and “Personalism,” broadly embodied these “three points,” and can be read as a summation of the concerns presented in Whitman’s poetry and the ideas more fully elaborated in the prefaces. “Democracy” posits as the primary function of government not legislation and the maintenance of the rule of law, but the education of the general citizen in self-government. The essay assigns precedence to “the doctrine of the sovereignty and sacredness of the individual,” and maintains that “the average man of a land at last only is important. He, in These States, remains immortal owner and boss,” who, when “properly trained may and must become a law, and a series of laws unto himself” (919, 930). The democratic ideal and his emphasis on its individualist essence, Whitman argued, would also issue in female equality in a new society where women would be “raised to become the robust equals, workers, and even practical and political deciders with the men [. . .] great, at any rate as man, in all departments” (931).

In the second of the two preliminary essays, Whitman proposed the rudiments of a new philosophy of individualism that he called “Personalism” – “the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself – Identity” (540). Whitman had provided a more extensive definition of “Personalism” near the opening of “Democracy,” where he identified the irreducible core of democracy as

that Something a man is, standing apart from all else, divine in his own right, and a woman in hers, sole and untouchable by any canons of religion, politics, or what is called modesty or art. . . . [And] we see steadily pressing ahead, and strengthening itself, even in the midst of immense tendencies toward aggregation, this image of completeness in separation, of individual personal dignity, of a single person, either male or female, characterized in the main, not from extrinsic acquirements or position, but in the pride of himself or herself alone; and, as an eventual conclusion and summing-up, the simple but tremendous and revolutionary, idea that the last, best dependence is to be upon Humanity itself, and its own inherent, full-grown qualities, without any superstitious support whatever. (919)

Whitman asserts that viewed from the perspective of "Personalism," the purpose of democracy

. . . is . . . to illustrate, at all hazards this doctrine or theory that man, properly train'd in sanest, highest freedom, may and must become a law, and series of laws unto himself, surrounding and providing for, not only his own personal control, but all his relations to other individuals and to the State . . . [and] *this*, as matters now stand in our civilized world, is the only scheme worth working from, as warranting results like those of Nature's laws, reliable, when once establish'd, to carry on themselves. ("Personalism" 540)

In a stirring peroration, Whitman reveals Personalism as the instrumentality of that "new esthetics," a moral and political force that effectively unites ideal democracy and essential spiritual force. "As we have shown," he concludes,

the New World, including in itself, indeed founded upon, the all-leveling aggregate of Democracy, we show it also including the all-varied, all-permitting, all-free theorem of Individuality, and erecting therefore a lofty and hitherto unoccupied framework or platform of Personalism, broad enough for all, eligible to every farmer and mechanic – to the female equally with the male – towering Selfhood, not physically perfect only . . . But Religious possessing the idea of the Infinite. (542)

That "towering Selfhood," the "doctrine of the sovereignty and sacredness of the individual" that Whitman had developed as the essence of ideal democracy in "Democracy" and "Personalism," was carried forward textually and philosophically and became an even more prominent element of his vision in *Democratic Vistas*. This work was made up of an introductory section followed by a somewhat emended version of the

two preliminary essays and concluded by a third essay in the form of a literary declaration of independence, titled "Orbic Literature" in manuscript. Virtually the entire texts of "Democracy" and "Personalism" were carried forward into *Democratic Vistas*, and comprised, respectively, 26% and 19% of the total text of 24,000 words. "Orbic Literature" represented over one-third of the final essay.

As an antidote to what he considered a flood of literary pap, as essential to the salvation of democracy, Whitman proposed a redeemed New World literature that was at once rooted in the immediate particularities of Nature and encompassed the vast expanses of cosmic space – a literature to match American achievements and to invigorate the future perfection and expansion of Ideal Democracy. This New World literature Whitman called "Orbic Literature," and its discussion constituted the longest section of *Vistas*.

The word "orbic" functioned analogically to link the short history of the New World, the imperiled, incipient, puerile stage of development attained by the democratic principle, with the ageless history of the universe. Whitman made a sharp distinction between the vast and timeless expanse of space – "that long continued nebular state and vagueness of the astronomical worlds," the pre-creation state, as opposed to "definitely-form'd worlds . . . clustering in systems,"

a new creation, with needed orbic works launch'd forth, to revolve in free and lawful circuits – to move self-poised, through the ether . . . with such, and nothing less, we suggest that New World literature, fit to rise upon, cohere, and signalize in time, these States. (*Democratic Vistas* 404-405)

For Whitman, to indicate and promote the virtues of a democratic America demanded poetic heroism. With invocatory fervor, he cried, "I demand races of orbic bards, with unconditional, uncompromising sway. Come forth, sweet democratic despots of the West!" (407). This American literary elite, he believed, would absorb the best of the "feudal" tradition and transmute its baser elements into the transcendent spiritual currency of the democratic future. Citing Christ, the ancient Greek intellectual tradition, Dante, Shakespeare, and the German philosophers, Kant and Hegel, Whitman indicated that he "view[ed] them as orbs and systems of orbs, moving in free paths in the spaces of that other heaven, the kosmic intellect, the soul" (407). In a letter to Rudolf Schmidt, dated 16 January 1872, he singled out Hegel as his primary influence:

The central purpose of "Democratic Vistas" is to project & outline a fresh & brawny race of original American Imaginative authors, with *moral purpose*, Hegelianism, underlying their works, poems – and with Science & Democracy – also thoroughly *religious*. (*Correspondence II* 151)

I see that the only foundations & *sine qua non* of poplar Improvement & Democracy are *worldly & materialistic success established first*, spreading & intertwining everywhere – then *only*, but then surely for the masses, will come spiritual cultivation & art. (*Correspondence II* 288)

This passage indicates that Whitman's faith in the ultimate and inevitable triumph of the democratic ideal was finally grounded in the specifics of the historical and spiritualized dialectic that Hegel had propounded in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, specifically the section entitled "History as a Manifestation of Spirit." Thus, the three central ideas of Whitman's vision of Democracy – the moral force of the historical process, the oppositional struggle of antithetical forces that provided the means of historical progression, and his faith in history as the story of human self-realization and socio-political amelioration, were rooted in the philosophy of Hegel. As Whitman testified, "I rate [Hegel] as Humanity's chiefest teacher and the choicest loved physician of my mind and soul" (*Notebooks VI* 2012).

In "Song of Myself" Whitman had intimated his grounding of a transcendental, Emersonian universal acceptance in a Hegelian historical dialectic :

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also. . . .

Did you guess the celestial laws are yet to be worked over and rectified?

I find one side a balance and the antipodal side a balance. . . .

Every condition promulges not only itself, it promulges what grows after and out of itself,

And the dark hush promulges as much as any. (*Leaves of Grass* 50, 80)

Democratic Vistas stands as the culmination and most integrated promulgation of Whitman's ideas on American Identity, and its very structure echoes and reechoes the Hegelian dialectic. The skeletal structure of the text itself embodies a binary opposition (the "contradictions" Whitman's work abounds in) that is progressively reconciled in a third entity that preserves elements of both while transforming and ultimately tran-

scending them. Thus "Democracy" (equality, national unity, the predominance of the collectivity, what Whitman called the "En-Masse" principle) is set against "Personalism" (individuality, states' rights, Whitman's notion of the "divinity" of the human condition).

Orbic Literature, mediated by the heroic poet is the engine of historical progress that transforms the thesis and its antithesis into the synthetic Democracy that carries the progressive historical tide forward. And it is that dialectical principle that provides the central continuity throughout Whitman's work, and that especially energizes *Democratic Vistas*, where a series of binary opposites animates the text – Nature and Society, Conscience and Instinctual Emotion, Soul and Body, Materialism and Religion (Spiritualism), Personalism and Oneness (Collective Union), Individual and Society, Democracy and Feudalism, Liberty and Equality, and Science and Religion. As Whitman understood the historical principle that would over time accomplish ideal democracy, that he identified as the central dynamic of *Vistas*, the two stages of "preparation-strata" had been accomplished – first, the establishment of the documentary basis of the democratic political order (chiefly the Federal Constitution and the guarantee of individual rights), and secondly, industrialization and material prosperity. "The Third Stage," he saw

rising out of the previous ones, to make them and all illustrious . . . and by a sublime and Religious Democracy sternly taking command, dissolving the old, sloughing off surfaces, and from its own interior and vital principles, reconstructing, democratizing society. (*Democratic Vistas* 410)

But in the 1880s and 1890s, the realization of Spirit, the redemption of the Soul of America, seemed cruelly thwarted. As Whitman surveyed the political and economic landscape of his day, he could but conclude that "athwart and over the roads of our progress loom huge uncertainty, and dreadful, threatening gloom" (*Democratic Vistas* 422). But his spirits were buoyed by the faith that in the march of History, "SOUL has ever really gloriously led, or ever can lead," and that his work was the beacon of the soul of History (Nature), for this "Soul – its other name in these Vistas, is LITERATURE" (413).

Whitman had structured his vision of America around two antithetical, mutually exclusive realms, two sign-systems in conflict – one representative of the dead past, emptied of its traditional authority, and inconsistent with emerging evolutionary social values, and the other a dim vision of a perfected future, transcendent and seemingly unattainable. It

is the antagonistic dialogue of these two sign systems – the dreaded specter of ancient feudalism versus the piously anticipated democracy of the future – that provides the movement – a progression through contradiction that animates the dynamic tension of the work.

The third and last section of *Vistas*, from this perspective, provides Whitman's device for resolving that tension, for breaking the ideological log-jam that, as he understands it, has prevented the historical process from moving forward – the Literatus. As Whitman put it near the end of the work,

arrived now, definitely, at an apex for these Vistas, I confess that the promulgation and belief in such a class or institution – a new and greater literatus order – its possibility (nay certainty,) underlies these entire speculations – and that the rest, the other parts as super-structures, are all founded upon it. It really seems to me the condition, not only of our future national and democratic development, but of our perpetuation. (*Democratic Vistas* 423-34)

In the end, Whitman leaves us less with a sense of the reconciliation of the great oppositional forces of Democracy and Personalism than with a paradox. Whitman has not resolved the fundamental contradiction at the heart of *Vistas*, but merely restated it in a way that shifts the contest from the material to the aesthetic plane. Finally, he must look to the future for any resolution of antithetical opposites, and he must fall back on faith in spiritual and ethical progress to ultimately redeem democracy. For the present, trusting to the individual, he can only affirm the majoritarian principles of an admittedly flawed electoral democracy, the will of the “divine average.” “I think,” he concludes,

after all, the sublimest part of political history, and its culmination, is currently issuing from the American people. I know nothing grander, better exercise, better digestion, more positive proof of the past, the triumphant faith in human kind, than a well-contested American national election. (*Democratic Vistas* 387-88)

Yet, sadly, despite Whitman's messianic faith in electoral politics and the potential redemptive role of the inspired poetic Literatus, after two centuries as self-appointed (and by Whitman anointed) “Sole Among Nationalities,” America still lacks the soul Whitman so desperately hoped it would attain.

References

- Carlyle, Thomas. *Shooting Niagara: And After?* London: Chapman and Hall, 1867.
- Whitman, Walt. *Blue Book: The 1860-61 Leaves of Grass Containing His Manuscript Additions and Revisions*. New York: New York Public Library, 1968.
- . *Collected Writings: Correspondence, I: 1842-67*, ed. Edwin H. Miller. New York: New York University Press, 1961.
- . *Collected Writings: Correspondence, II: 1868-75*, ed. Edwin H. Miller. New York: New York University Press, 1961.
- . *Collected Writings: Daybooks and Notebooks, I: Daybooks 1876-1881*, ed. William White. New York: New York University Press, 1978.
- . *Collected Writings: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts, II*, ed. Edward F. Grier. New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- . *Collected Writings: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts, VI: Notes and Index*, ed. Edward F. Grier. New York: New York University Press, 1984.
- . *Collected Writings: Prose Works, I*, ed. Floyd Stovall. New York: New York University Press, 1963.
- . "Democracy." *The Galaxy* 4, # 8 (December 1867): 919-33.
- . *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley. New York: New York University Press, 1965.
- . "Personalism." *The Galaxy* 5, # 5 (May 1868): 540-47.