

# Whitman's 1855 Leaves of Grass : the incarnational and "Hard Work and Blood"

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## Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*: The Incarnational and "Hard Work and Blood"

William Dow

Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) elaborates some of the material underpinnings informing what might be called the "semantic complex" of class (i.e., the combined histories of narrative and socioeconomic change that converge in its emergence) on which the poem relies for its effect. Whitman's class representations depend on an anti-narrative, incarnational discourse through which he formulated, within the context of the turbulent 1850-67 culture, an essentially discursive concept of class as part of his cultural program of social inclusion, co-existence, and relations other than those of hierarchy, literariness, elitism, and classification. At the same time, I argue, Whitman's incarnational view, much of it derived from Emerson, highlights the contradictory class and psychological tensions in his conception of self. Whitman, is, after all, "one of the roughs," the basic identity in *Leaves of Grass* that he attributes to his working-class persona. As a worker among many other workers, Whitman's poet, a mixture of buoyant self-exposure and anxious assertion, follows his obsession with social, sexual, and racial exchanges, and asserts his commitment to lower-middle class respectability and independence.

No poet matters more to the literary history of class in America than Walt Whitman. Whitman's registration of lived experience is a juncture of class and his poetry: a picture of an individual subject's relation to the totality of class structures. As an artisan in the 1840s, the young Whitman was part of the Jacksonian lower-middle class, a class experiencing the nationwide change from an agrarian, artisan existence to an urban market culture.<sup>1</sup> Participant in this shifting order, Whitman saw the dissolution of the old master and apprentice paradigm replaced by a seemingly unbridgeable gap between capital and labor, the older ideolo-

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<sup>1</sup> See Shklar; Lawson; and Stacy.

gies of genteel patriarchy and individual artisanship giving way to a new middle-class ideology of competitive individualism. As a response to these changes, the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, while championing the cause of individual potential and freedom, shows that labor as opposed to property should be the dominant feature of the social order in which all work, both manual or mental, should be recognized and rewarded equally, while fraternal association and apprenticeship should serve as the structuring principles of society.

What is most fascinating about Whitman's response to this new order is how he establishes the notion of the incarnational to deal with the movements in class structure. The incarnational, for the poet of *Leaves of Grass*, means freely circulating among members of all classes, embodying various class identities, and disrupting and crossing class boundaries. At the same time, I argue, Whitman's incarnational view highlights the contradictory class and psychological tensions at work in his conception of self. Whitman, is, after all, "one of the roughs," the basic identity in *Leaves of Grass* that he attributes to his working-class persona.<sup>2</sup> As a worker among many other workers, Whitman's poet, a mixture of buoyant self-exposure and anxious assertion, follows his obsession with social, sexual, and racial exchanges, and asserts a commitment to lower-middle class respectability and independence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, 48. Subsequent references will be cited in the text as *Leaves*.

<sup>3</sup> For the meaning of class consciousness in this period, see Sewall. Sewall notes, "During the nineteenth century, class was increasingly used to designate groups in relations of superiority and inferiority, as in 'dominant class,' 'bourgeois class,' or 'working class.' But it also continued to be used for social categories of any kind, and workers frequently employed it as a synonym for 'trade' or 'profession.'" (281). Whitman's ontological and ethical vision in the 1855 *Leaves* reflects these designations but Whitman also held that all classes in the production process equally contribute to the nation's economic and social health. This non-hierarchical, egalitarian vision positions the poet in *Leaves* as a figure of liminality that fluidly crosses class boundaries and incarnates various class identities and statuses.

## Secular Faith: Incarnational Premises

Whitman's idea of the incarnational stems from Emerson's conception of the mind in which a radical freedom will necessarily produce universal value, and the intensely private will result in a universal sense. For Emerson, diversity is not so much difference as it is an expression of "the forms and tendencies" of nature expressing its "own design" (Emerson, *Nature* 3). Like Whitman, it is generally agreed that Emerson internalized such diversity so as to be able to make it a part of himself and to use it to imagine *anything*. Emerson's *Nature* (1836) is based on his conviction that the study of nature can reveal an intrinsic unity, or more precisely, "the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul" (33). In the course of representing this picture, Emerson's poet, as a lover of nature, incarnates, among much else, the "spirit of infancy" (Emerson, *Nature* 6), the unarticulated aspirations of children, women, and slaves while pointing a way for them, and others, to build their "own world" so that "a correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit" (Emerson, *Nature* 42). The spiritualization of Emerson's transcendental man, and his ability to guide others, is achieved by a divine current that circulates through him:

Standing on the bare ground – a head bathed in the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate through me. (Emerson, *Nature* 6).

The single self, for Emerson, is the apotheosis of an all encompassing universal self. As a Platonist and spiritualist, he saw that a true self meant an abandonment of what is traditionally designated as the self. Thus, for him, "Man is man as far as he is triple, that is, a man-woman-child" (*Journals* 16: 146). With his divine acuteness, the poet incarnates the spirit that "within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form" (*Collected Works* 3:12). In witnessing the "flowing or metamorphosis" (*Collected Works* 3:12) of nature, the poet incarnates scientific as well as literary knowledge. He knows not only the workings of "astronomy, chemistry, vegetation, and animation." But he "does not stop at these facts," for he possesses the "why" and therefore

the “true science” (*Collected Works* 3:12-13). The poet experiences vividly what history and all the external world can teach only second hand.

Whitman’s sense of incarnation follows that of Emerson by, most literally, reconciling mind and body, seeing that the individual’s spirit is incarnate everywhere in nature. As Emerson argues in *Nature*:

[ . . . ] man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither man can be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life. (15-16)

The beauty and the interrelatedness of physical, outward nature leads the individual to inquire into the inner laws of nature which are a part of the mind: “[E]ach phenomenon has its roots in the faculties and affections of the mind. Whilst the abstract question occupies your intellect, nature burns in the concrete to be solved by your hands” (Emerson, *Nature* 42). Emerson’s life-long project was to demonstrate how external nature and the human mind are related. He saw the imagination as the faculty driving, in his words, the “endless passing of one element into new forms, the incessant metamorphosis” (*Complete Works* 8:15). Both Emerson and Whitman represented the spiritual life as one process of perpetual change and energy, in which the only givens are life, transition, and the energizing spirit. A restless condition of the soul and its necessity to resist complacency and to push forward perpetually guide both writers. For Whitman, a major outcome of this restlessness is that the poet “incarnates [his country’s] geography” (Whitman, *Leaves* 7), an echo of Emerson’s claim that “[America’s] ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters” (Emerson, “Poet” 322). For both writers, poetry must come from embracing the American landscape and “living” its physical identity.

Emerson, pushing the idea of landscape and imagination even further, believed that a study of nature could reveal a comprehensive unity whereby the poet could lose the sense of separation between his own identity and that of the natural world. Whitman posited that a study of other human beings and their interactions would result in a similar understanding. Whereas Emerson’s eye is drawn upward to the “stars” and “heavenly bodies” and in distances to “the expression of nature” (Emerson, *Nature* 5, 13) Whitman’s gaze goes downward to “turbid pools,”

"dirt," "grass," and the effluvia of Manhattan streets (Whitman, *Leaves* 84-86). Whitman grounds the transparent, transcendent, Emersonian soul, suspicious of human contact and craving "infinite relations," in the solidity and fragility of the human body, and into a classed world. Whitman sees himself not only as incarnate in American nature – "the ally of Religion" (Emerson, *Nature* 23) – but also, most forcefully, as incarnate in the lower and working classes (e.g., "the roughs"). Instead of Emerson's fulfillment of an unlimited individualism, Whitman constantly tests the power of transcendence and its mortal limits by taking total possession of this actual classed world. According to Whitman, this possession takes as its principle a poetic vision of articulation. The "great poets," as Whitman argues in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, are those who possess "a perfect sense of the oneness of nature and the propriety of the same spirit applied to human affairs" (18).

Their respective incarnational renderings reveal further differences. Emerson's writing centers on immediate physical experiences, but experiences dealing mostly with nature or natural phenomenon. "Crossing a barren common, in snow puddles at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration" (Emerson, *Nature* 6). Nature is something one may "do," a piece of divinity transferable to the poet, an ethical support as well. As Emerson writes in "Illusions" (1841), the eternal interest of the individual is "never to be in a false position, but to have the weight of nature to back him in all that he does" (Emerson, *Essay and Lectures* 1122). Whitman, on the other hand, though making his own claims for the poet's divinity and a new democratic ethic, dwells on human touch, intertwinings, contact: "To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand" (*Leaves* 53). Indeed, the compulsion for physical contact becomes most forceful in Whitman's language of "human labor" as a basis for his visionary incarnations. He blends his near worship of the human touch, "Is this then a touch? . . . quivering me to a new identity" (*Leaves* 53), with the daily work of the laborer, the blacksmith, the butcher, the factory girl. The poet in *Leaves of Grass* defines himself by the range of his identifications; he insists that he becomes whatever he encounters.

Unlike Whitman, Emerson consistently places the values of nature above those of materiality and labor, insisting instead on abstractness and beauty: "you cannot freely admire a noble landscape, if laborers are digging in the field hard by" (Emerson, *Nature* 36). In a May 1843 jour-

nal entry, he frames his disdain for the perils of the body and the daily tasks of the laboring masses, "The life of labor does not make men, but drudges" (Whicher, *Selections* 220). Emerson's "Fate" (1860) representatively evokes his tendency to divide society into a few "Self-reliant Men," the incarnation of an authentically revolutionary elite, and the masses. Even though "the strongest idea incarnates itself in majorities and nations, in the healthiest and strongest" (Emerson, "Fate" 677), it is the "Great men" who best fulfill this role, for they perceive "the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it" (672). Workers will forever be inert and ineffective: "The German and Irish millions, like the Negro, have a great deal of guano in their destiny" (Emerson, "Fate" 678-679). What might be interpreted as Emerson's fear of intimacy, his depersonalizing of laborers in favor of a private, natural nobility of genius, can be found in his insistence on the poet as the highest incarnation of the "All Powerful," the "same divinity transmuted and at two or three removes" (Emerson, "The Poet" 304). Emerson consistently subordinates the physicality of nature to its ideal and linguistic forms, mostly understandable to only the poet himself. "Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me" (Emerson, *Nature* 26). "Nature is an incarnation of a thought," Emerson says in *Nature*, "and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water and gas" (*Selected Writings* 405).

Emerson called for a new intellectual elite, capable of incarnating Nature's thoughts, although he also held hope for a wider conversion of the "sluggard intellect" (Emerson, "The American Scholar" 45) to an intellectual activity that would ostensibly transcend class conflicts. But Emerson's claims for the potential convertibility of every man to intellectual power ran into serious problems. Although he tried variously to adapt his idealism to the changing social circumstances, his non-materialist thinking would not permit it. As John Carlos Rowe argues in *Emerson's Tomb*,

When Emerson in the mid-1840s did turn seriously to political issues of his day – women's rights and the abolition of slavery, he was faced with the problem of adapting his transcendentalism to the pragmatics of political activism. (21)

Taken as a whole, Emerson's writings reveal an internal contradiction, for his endorsing of liberal political positions (e.g., regarding slavery and women's rights) is fundamentally at odds with his transcendentalism, the

anticommunal, ahistorical aspects of his philosophy, and that philosophy's potential to effect social reform. On the other hand, Whitman's poetic project, founded on a highly egalitarian ontological and ethical system, took substantially different class and social forms. Whitman, though, far from opposing Emerson's transcendentalism to his own credo of the body and the toil of honest labor, hoped to conjoin the two positions. Thus, not surprisingly, the primary purpose of the poet's incarnational powers in *Leaves* is to reconcile an Emersonian individualism with a Whitmanian mutualistic ethic. As my study below will try to show, class, the incarnational, and Whitman's call to engage with history form, for Whitman, a dialectical interrelationship, asserting, among other things, a radical program for the future and the need to broaden the semantic field of poetry to register such a future.

### Class, Religion and the Common People

Unique to New York in the 1850s, in Whitman's opinion, were the small masters, craft workers, and laborers on which he had based so many of his "democratic" hopes. He even retrospectively suggested (1881) that several of these workers provided the starting inspiration for *Leaves of Grass*: "I suppose the critics will laugh heartily, but the influence of those Broadway omnibus jaunts and drivers and declamations and escapades undoubtedly enter'd into the gestation of 'Leaves of Grass'" (Whitman, *Autobiographia* 31). As a poet, Whitman made himself one of the first chroniclers of such persons and the vernacular culture they came from. This is certainly not surprising since, up until he was in his forties, Whitman was a typical worker – carpenter, printer, and sometimes newspaper editor – who avidly participated in the party politics of his time. He was a firm advocate and voice of artisan republicanism.

Whitman's most intense statements about class are, however, those which he makes about himself, which quite easily elide into a "religious" imparting of his opinions and sensations – what in *Leaves of Grass* (1855) he claims as his "clear and sweet soul" (27). Or, more pointedly, his "en-masse" proclamations notwithstanding, his working-class soul dwells in each of his poems – as, for example, he retrospectively proclaims in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" (1889): "without yielding an inch the working-man and working-woman were in my pages from the first to the last." (*Poetry and Prose* 668). Whitman the poet cannot be



separated or purified from class and political designs nor can he be firmly attached to such designs in a strict political sense. Rather, in his constant dwelling (or movement) between politics and poetry, and poetry and class, he confounds the traditional distinctions between them.

It is not a coincidence, of course, that as Betsy Erkkila has argued in *Whitman: The Political Poet*, the title page of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) contains no author's name, but only a frontispiece of Whitman himself dressed in a day laborer's trousers and shirt with a hat perched jauntily on his head (3). This startling visual prop becomes Whitman's first discourse of the poem. He makes visual his "soul," signified by his workingman's dress, placing himself firmly outside contemporary conventions. In so doing, he suggests a working-class, "disorderly, fleshy, sensual," democratic presence. The daguerreotype figure is not a literal representation, but an alternative to, as Whitman said, the "cultivated classes as they are called," for he situated himself firmly on "the platform of these same New York Roughs, firemen, the ouvrier class, masons and carpenters, stagedrivers, the Dry Dock boys, and so forth" (*CW* 9: 35-36). The poet constantly constructs the foundation of his incarnational self vis-a-vis the working class, as in "A Song for Occupations":

Grown, half-grown, and babe – of this country and every country,  
Indoors and outdoors I see . . . and all else is behind or  
Through them. (*Leaves* 89)

The poet's most lasting meanings – meanings amplified by his involvement in a complex, energizing discourse – come through the common working-class men and women:

A song for occupations!  
In the labor of engines and trades and the labor of fields I find the  
Developments,  
And find the eternal meanings.  
Workmen and Workwomen! (*PP* 355)

Whitman's song underlines one of his fundamental themes in his poems: politicians and government institutions have failed America, and therefore one must look to common humanity – particularly to the joys and sufferings of the laboring masses – for the qualities ("Developments," "eternal meanings") that bind people together.

Indeed, "A Song for Occupations" not only ennoble virtually every kind of worker and job, it emblemizes Whitman's sense of the inner lives of the lower and working class underscored by his incarnational categories. The poet constitutes an embodiment, double, or type of those he describes:

If you stand at work in a shop I stand as nigh as the nighest  
 In the same shop,  
 If you bestow gifts on your brother or dearest friend I  
 Demand as good as your brother or dearest friend,  
 If your lover, husband, wife, is welcome by day or night, I  
 Must be personally as welcome,  
 If you become degraded, criminal, ill, then I become so for  
 Your sake [ . . . ] (*Poetry and Prose* 355-356)

This "dialogue" that Whitman enacts identifies the diverse nationalities, ethnicities, professions he documents, with the intention of categorizing his various incarnational possibilities. He does so, however, conditionally ("If you [ . . . ]") to suggest that not only is he capable of mediating American social culture but, in Whitman's sense, he is a "physical medium" for and of this culture. Whitman establishes here a dynamic that directly relates to a social sense of the physical body. Massively taking in the identity of the laboring bodies of others, improvising his life out of the lives he sees around him, he inverts the customary treatment of class which assumes a language of difference.

### The Incarnational and the Classed Body

And yet what does incarnational really mean for this poet obsessed with the body as much as the spirit? Most analyses of Whitman's "poetry of the body" are celebratory, focusing their conceptions of the body on the sexual body while rarely considering the body's other qualities – its class characteristics, for example.<sup>4</sup> The 1855 *Leaves of Grass* makes a strong case for representing Whitman's versions of class through the incarnational body of which "I Sing the Body Electric" is perhaps the most comprehensive and emphatic example. In the poem, the poet begins with this striking assertion:

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Killingsworth; Moon; Mulcaire; Fone; Nathansen; and Schmidgall.

The bodies of men and women engirth me, and I engirth  
 Them,  
 They will not let me offer nor I them till I go with them and  
 Respond to them and love them. (*Leaves* 116)

This statement about human bodies (and their implied fluidity vis-a-vis that of the poet's) and the poet's relation to them quickly takes on a class specificity. That is, in "I Sing the Body Electric," the bodies the poet represents, and incarnationally embodies, doubles or becomes are clearly indicated as working class, underclass, or slave. From the opening proclamation in section two – "The expression of the body of man or woman balks account,/ The male is perfect and that of the female is perfect" – the poet begins to detail class makeup and origin: "The group of laborers seated at noontime with their open dinner-/ kettles, and their wives waiting"; "the woodman rapidly swinging his axe in the woods" (*Leaves*. 117). The poetic persona's rhetorical flow parallels his incarnational entering and leaving of the scenes that comprise the procession he describes:

Such like I love. . . . I loosen myself and pass freely . . . and am at  
 The mother's breast with the little child,  
 And swim with the swimmer, and wrestle with wrestlers, and march  
 In line with the firemen, and pause and listen and count. (*Leaves* 117)

As a kind of waiting, witnessing incarnational figure, the poet "passes among" "those he likes" who almost invariably conform to his metonymic equations of class: the working class is associated with the outdoors, nature, nakedness and "the contact and odor [. . .] that pleases the soul well" (*Leaves* 119) while the leisured and upper class are given the attributes of dress and are most often located in "parlors and lecture rooms" (*Leaves* 122).

The poet associates primarily with the former and the suffering and downtrodden. This equation, however, not only corroborates the proclivities of the incarnational poet; it also underlines Whitman's deeper argument in "I Sing the Body Electric" and "Song of Myself," that of challenging social inferiority:

Is it a slave? Is it one of the dullfaced immigrants just landed on  
the wharf?

Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well off . . . just  
As much as you,  
Each has his or her place in the procession. (*Leaves* 120)

In 1847, in a written prelude to "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman already attempted to contravene such authority incarnationally by *entering*, as a kind of mediator and restorer, the bodies of masters *and* slaves:

I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters  
And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,  
Entering into both, so that both will understand me alike (*Uncollected Poetry*  
2:69)

As evidenced in sections seven and eight of "I Sing the Body Electric," the discourses of slavery (anti-slavery, anti-racist) entwine and the poet places himself in the position of the auctioneer, "the sloven who does not know half his business" (*Leaves* 121). This time, though, in "helping" the auctioneer, the persona adapts an incarnational voice that rebels against the act of bidding for and selling the slave: "Gentlemen look on this curious creature, / Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for him" (121). In section seven, his abolitionist discourse in tow, Whitman wishes to make persons of other colors ("red, black, or white") imagine that they have been placed, through the poet's figurative transferences, in the position of a slave. The poetic persona thus takes it upon himself to sell the slave's body to the reader – a body, like all human bodies, that must not be degraded, defiled, or enslaved: "if life and the soul are sacred the human body is sacred" (122). When the poet enters into the body of the slave, however, he subverts conventional slave discourses (the body is not to sell, but to understand and appreciate aesthetically and sensuously) and creates psychic and visual discourses that beseech the reader to understand the male slave in terms of evolutionary (and incarnational) "embodiments":

This is not only one man . . . he is the father of those who shall be  
Fathers in their turns,  
In him the start of populous states and rich republics,  
Of him countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and  
enjoyments. (*Leaves* 122)

The poet suggests that race is not an absolute category, that the union of the races indeed could have existed in some untraceable moment in history, and that the future progeny of race is ungovernable and unknowable:<sup>5</sup>

How do you know who shall come from the offspring of his offspring  
 Through the centuries?  
 Who might you find you have come from yourself if you could trace  
 Back through the centuries? (122)

Whitman's blurring of bodies – white, black, male, female, child, adult, alive, dead, free, slave – leads in sum not only to a breakdown of distinctions, but also entails the absorption of the class realms into the poet. *Leaves of Grass* enlists the image of a timeless union (and understanding of human relations) in order to imagine camaraderie and social intimacy in a way that eliminates the barriers of time. As Whitman states in the 1855 Preface:

Men and women and the earth and all upon it are simply to be taken as they are, and the investigation of their past and present and future shall be uninterrupted and shall be done with perfect candor. . . . For the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness make the only point of sane philosophy. (15)

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<sup>5</sup> Found throughout his non-poetic writing, Whitman's anti-slavery feelings were usually subordinated to his unqualified support of the (white) working class and its multiple manifestations – a support that developed into the keynote of the 1855 *Leaves*.

Let them utter forth, then, in tones as massive as become their stupendous cause, that their calling shall *not* be sunk to the miserable level of what is little above brutishness – sunk to be like owned goods, and driven cattle! We call upon every mechanic of the North, East, and West – upon the carpenter, in his rolled up sleeves, the mason with his trowel, the stonemason with his brawny chest, the blacksmith with his sooty face, the brown fisted ship-builder, whose clicking strokes rattle so merrily in our dock yards – upon shoemakers, and cartmen, and drivers, and paviors . . . upon the honest sawyer and mortar-mixer too, whose sinews are their own – and every hard-working man – to speak in a voice whose great reverberations shall tell to all quarters that the workingmen of the free United States, and their business, are not willing to be put on the level of negro slaves, in territory which, if got at all, must be got by taxes sifted eventually through upon them, and by their hard work and blood (*Gathering* 1:210-11).

It turns out for Whitman that a kind of unity, based on these "eternal tendencies" must be constructed, but it is a kind of whole that is, as Gilles Deleuze has argued in his essay on Whitman, "all the more paradoxical in that it only comes after the fragments and leaves them intact, making no attempt to totalize them" (58). The subjects in his poetry often act in reflective and deliberate ways but their actions and reflections usually take place in a space of possibilities. It is their condition of possibility that makes them as images incarnational. The closest that Whitman comes to any kind of merger or totality is an incarnational passing through in which the tree, or the river, or the person, receives a bit of the poet's consciousness. His book proposes itself as a confluence rather than precise portraits of figures or renderings of feelings. In turn, the poet must constantly acquire and (temporarily) create human relations – relations that have many of their origins in the stream of class attachments and detachments.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On the level of fragmentation and movement, denying totality and wholeness, *Leaves of Grass* appears to anticipate Alain Touraine's argument that class has lost its significance in the contemporary world. "The concept of class," Touraine writes, "[. . .] must be replaced, as a central category of analysis, by the concept of *social movement* . . . [Social movements] are more concerned with active intervention, rather than simply with breaking the links of dependence; and above all, the social actor who resists domination now appeals more and more directly to the values and creations of change, which in the past seemed to be monopolized by the ruling groups, whereas the dominated ones were more inclined to envisage a return to the past and to condemn historical evolution as a fall from a golden to an iron age" (89). The most crucial element that *Leaves* might ascribe to social movement is its self-constituting capacity and Whitman in the 1850s would certainly have favored, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, a "fluid, processual social setting with no clear cut distinctions between order and abnormality, consensus and conflict" (79). Each incarnational moment in *Leaves* is neither a necessary effect of the preceding moment nor a necessary indicator or adequate cause of the next one.

## Conclusion

It is impossible to state authoritatively what constitutes Whitman's culture or knowledge or gender or race without including his class epistemology. His use of class as a metaphor for the incarnational, his incarnational rhetoric, his cultural program, his inextricable conjoining of meaning with class – all are based on such an inclusion. Yet, as David Reynolds has pointed out, Whitman became, in his final years, “both financially and ideologically entangled with capitalists and social rulers” (546), including Andrew Carnegie (546), and his emphasis ultimately “shifted from workers to the workforce, from individuals to industrial armies” (504). The 1880s saw Whitman participating in a Whitman commodification, including his Lincoln lectures, the commercial appearance of a Whitman cigar, calendar, tree, anthologies, church, and the start of various Whitman clubs and organizations (Reynolds, 546).

Additionally, as Ezra Greenspan contends, Whitman's vision of the working class, in his last years, became increasingly disjointed from the social realities and economic conditions of an industrializing America:

The problem with this otherwise perfectly enchanting vision of a nation of individual workers, each one singing his or her song of contentment, is that, even as an ideal, it belongs to a bygone world of small, independent mechanics, craftsmen, and farmers. That world . . . was being bypassed by the age of mass production and modern technology. Rather than singing Whitman's song of self-contentment and self-help, American workingmen in the period following the Civil War would increasingly be given to chanting the slogans of emergent unions, a movement, significantly, with which Whitman had little sympathy. (216)

Undeniably, Whitman became more receptive to business and capitalistic enterprise after the Civil War and much less sympathetic to unions and socialistic programs. These new attitudes, including his rejection of radical labor reformers, echo his earlier rejection of abolitionist radicalism (Stacy 150). In general, Whitman became more amenable towards the social elite of the day, not hesitating to defend, for example, such monarchs as Frederick Wilhelm I and Queen Victoria. He appeared to accept as inevitable the exploitation of large corporations and trusts. *Democratic Vistas* (1871), for example, forcefully signals some of his later accommodating thoughts: “I perceive clearly that the extreme business energy, and the almost maniacal appetite for wealth prevalent in the

United States, are parts of amelioration and progress, indispensably needed to prepare the very results I demand" (*Prose Works* 2: 384-385). Concomitantly, Whitman had serious misgivings about the radical activists and anarchists of the day (e.g., Sylvester Baxter, Edward Bellamy) who possessed, he thought, no proprietary rights on social reform (Reynolds, 559).

And yet Whitman never dropped his critical position on American materialism and continued to criticize what he saw as the ill directions of American "culture": "[. . .] but taste, intelligence, and culture (so-called) have been against the masses, and remain so" (*Prose Works* 2: 390). *Democratic Vista's* intermittent conservative agenda also condemns the rampant corruption of the late 1860s: "The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except for the judiciary, are saturated in corruption [. . .] in business (this all-devouring modern world, business), the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain" (*Prose Works* 2: 369-370). The essay, in the canon of Whitman's postwar writings, perhaps best represents his inclinations toward radicalism and conservatism, a bifurcation evidenced throughout his non-poetic writings.

If Whitman was at times out of step with contemporary culture, if in his later years he found much reprehensible in the urban scenes of America and in working-class behavior in general, he also saw much promise and potential, most notably in a future America made up of an educated, dignified, and literary working-class.<sup>7</sup> Whitman's 1855 *Leaves* should not be stripped of its class discourse (making literary the idiomatic register of the masses as opposed to a reproduction of the literary discourse of the elite) that represents America itself. Issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation can be seen as usefully integrated into and *following* on the heels of class representations. Whitman wished to create a poetry of hope and restoration unassimilable to the party system, and, in so doing, he imagined gathering the disparate elements of American culture into a distinctively celebratory American art form. This philosophical and poetic vision tacitly presented "an inclusive reformist program which would embrace much of both the nation's conservative and radical elements" (Stacy, 146).

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<sup>7</sup> See Clark.



Class is, in my estimation, the greatest burden for writers in nineteenth-century America dealing with the new changes in the nation, and for me, Whitman's fashion of dealing with this burden transposes into a language of inclusion and co-existence, anonymous intimacies, and relations other than those of hierarchy, literariness, elitism, and classification. The multiplicity of class, for Whitman, elides into a cultural program:

I should demand a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the west, the working-men, the facts of farms and jack-planes and engineers, and of the broad range of women also of the middle and working strata, and with reference to the perfect equality of women, and of a grand and powerful motherhood. (*Prose Works* 2: 396)

As part of this program, class is an indispensable and subsuming category of Whitman's poetry and not just an object of contemplation for it has the potential of empowering others (e.g., women and nonwhite men) to assert their own respective differences and untranslatibilities. It has the power of Whitman's voice to ultimately assert that the language of class contains precisely the felt notions of the experience of class in which "hard work and blood" can never rest easy. *Leaves of Grass* not only comprises a linguistified system in which communicative action is foregrounded along with its accompanying discursive (ir)resolutions; but most importantly, it offers culture as a site of struggle – perhaps the only site of struggle – and class as a determinant act in any movement towards discursive and historical change.

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