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UNUM ET PLURIBUS:
WALT WHITMAN’S PHILOSOPHY OF DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of the American experience is a twin ideology—strong nationalism and strong individualism. Walt Whitman, an ardent devotee of both, may be taken as a representative American ideologue. From that position, he is susceptible to, but also levels his own ideology critique. In so doing, Whitman illustrates a new sort of critique, not by hegemonic wrangling or deconstruction of the One on behalf of the many, but by an ongoing effort to reconstruct our ideal nation more in keeping with the national motto, “from many, One.” Close readers will discern in Democratic Vistas and other of his works a Whitman who is capable of both assimilating differences toward his ideal One, and accommodating differences on behalf of every individual in celebration of the many. As a matter of language, he anticipates Kenneth Burke’s terminological politics of inclusion (merger) as an alternative to the politics of exclusion (division). Conceiving of the term “the People” in such varied modalities means that as Whitman reconstructs the relationships which make up the American experience—he reconstructs, as part of his larger philosophical project, its dynamic social ontology.

Characterizing in detail the body politic (not to mention his own body and his body of work), Whitman offers a terminology that recommends new relationships for the People. Whitman argues—contra many sociological thinkers—on behalf of, and in so doing He recommends an organic (part-whole) view toward people of each and every conceivable class (species-genus). To borrow a contemporary term from biology, each entity is a “microbiome,” a hybrid of organicism and atomism that avoids the potential dangers of both worldviews taken singly. Whitman then applies his “microbiomic”
treatment to the individual, thereby developing in full an original axiology, Personalism. Not a single, overarching morality, in this ethic each individual is a synecdochic representation for the nation (if not the universe), and the way he or she should approach any other is as the same. If “each and all” were taken as divine in their own right, our critical disagreements would surely defer to “comradeship,” “adhesiveness,” or love. Democratic Vistas teaches us that when Whitman thinks of himself as “universal,” as a “Kosmos,” “enfolding” all, he intends that each American eclectically do the same. He thus brings an entirely new meaning to the national motto: to paraphrase the framers of the nation, “from many diverse identities, One complete person.” From a sustained engagement with Whitman’s “corpus,” one emerges with:

- An affirmative answer to the question, “Is there a philosophy of an idea as dynamic as democracy?”
- An illustration of rhetoric—“an art of emphasis embodying an order of desire”—at the intersection of politics and literature, where conception implies creation.
- A nuanced understanding of the pivotal term “the People”—as essentially synecdochic, capable of being intended and interpreted both atomistically (as a genus collective of species) and organically (as a whole composed of parts). The People, that is, can be assimilated and accommodated, embodying the Whitmanian ideals of romantic organicism and cultural pluralism.
- A sustained treatment of the rhetorical work of synecdoche, heretofore overlooked in studies of metaphor and irony.
• A strengthening of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, insofar as Whitman’s social reconstruction implies a new ontology and axiology and occurs in language (forms and terms).

• The fundamental suggestion that one should know a structure (ontologically) to change that structure (axiologically).

• A renewed understanding of democracy and democratic “citizenship,” where both are taken to be as much dispositional as institutional.

• An alternative to “ideology critique”—namely, a circumferential critique in the spirit of “both-and” toward the inclusive end of the reconstruction of the many, not a polar critique in the spirit of “either-or” toward the exclusive end of the deconstruction of the (hegemonic) One.

• A potential answer to the problem of the One and Many in an increasingly globalized world, particularly in the context of growing migration and increasing demands for minority rights. Fomenting the sense of belonging and social cohesion in diverse, sometimes fragmented societies remains an existential project of integration, inclusion, interrelation, and understanding, each of which Whitman takes to be communicative work.
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Chapter 1

Democracy and Deconstruction: One vs. Many

In this chapter, it is argued that at the heart of the American experience is a twin ideology—namely, strong nationalism and strong individualism. Whitman, as an ardent devotee of both, is taken as a representative American ideologue. The chapter reconstructs his treatment of both ideals, before characterizing some of the more strident critiques that have been leveled at his contradictory devotion. Whitman was full of fault—ignorant of some, dominant toward others, his head forever in the clouds. His is a joy unpalatable and unrealistic to many, for by his own admission, “I stand for the sunny point of view.” Nonetheless he was also well aware of the dangers of modernization facing Reconstruction-era America, and in his 1871 Democratic Vistas he levels his own ideological critique, most sharply towards nineteenth century “political and material America.” In so doing, he illustrates a new sort of critique, not by antagonism but agonism, not by ideological wrangling or deconstruction of the one on behalf of the many, but by an ongoing effort to reconstruct our ideal nation, more in keeping with the national motto.

§ Democracy Material and Ideal

If democracy is taken as “a system of reasonably free and fair multiparty electoral competition,” then the world has been in a “mild but protracted” democratic recession since about 2006.1 According to the annual survey of freedom around the world by Freedom House, 2013 marked the eighth straight year that “more countries experienced declines in political rights or civil liberties than improvements.”2 Democracy as a system of governance has reached a threshold of around 60 percent of all independent states, with about twenty percent of all democracies failing.3 Political sociologist Larry

1 Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” Journal of Democracy 26, no. 1 (January 2015), 144.
Diamond, a specialist in democratic development and once consultant in those efforts in Iraq, annually tracks these data and finds that since 2000, 25 democracies around the world have broken down. In each case, checks have become unbalanced and the democratic process has devolved into “competitive authoritarianism.” There are detractors from Diamond’s pessimism, but few would disagree that perhaps “the most worrisome dimension of the democratic recession has been the decline of democratic efficacy, energy, and self-confidence in the West, including the United States. There is a growing sense, both domestically and internationally, that democracy in the United States has not been functioning effectively enough to address the major challenges of governance.” While America’s private economic interests are moving in a positive trajectory in 2015, by at least one measure America’s public democratic interests are receding.


5 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “The Myth of Democratic Recession,” Journal of Democracy 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 45-46. According to Levitsky and Way, “This is a gloomy picture indeed. It is not, however, an accurate one. There is little evidence that the democratic sky is falling or (depending on your choice of fable) that the wolf of authoritarian resurgence has arrived. The state of global democracy has remained stable over the last decade, and it has improved markedly relative to the 1990s. Perceptions of a democratic recession, we argue, are rooted in a flawed understanding of the events of the early 1990s. The excessive optimism and voluntarism that pervaded analyses of early post–Cold War transitions generated unrealistic expectations that, when not realized, gave rise to exaggerated pessimism and gloom. In fact, despite increasingly unfavorable global conditions in recent years, new democracies remain strikingly robust.”

To Diamond, Walt Whitman would reply, “Did you, too, O friend, suppose Democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say Democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and, come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs—in Religion, Literature, colleges, and schools—Democracy in all public and private life, and in the Army and Navy. . . .”7 As he conceived it, “[t]he purport essence of Democracy though the U.S. is subtle and pervading, and is to surcharge society through all its tissues, in friendship & comradeship & social especially in all the relations between employers and employees—between capital and labor—is to be religious the moral conscience its highest ideal—is to appear in Literature, manners and Art [and]—the standards of worship, dignity, and beauty.”8

Along the same lines, the contemporary National Endowment for Democracy in the United States, a governmental agency tasked with spreading democracy around the world by strengthening democratic groups and institutions in other countries, argue that, “Democratic political institutions will not long endure unless they are buttressed by a strong civic culture and supported by a populace that is committed to such ideals as the rule of law, individual liberty, freedom of religion, free and open debate, majority rule,

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7 Walt Whitman, “Far-Stretch, in Distance, Our Vistas,” Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 33. Section headings in all references from Democratic Vistas are those proposed by Whitman but deleted before printing in 1871 in favor of a single heading-less 84-page essay. They shed some insight into the structure of Whitman’s thought.

and protection of the rights of minorities." To evaluate the health of democracy by the material standards of realpolitik alone is to limit its scope and possibility.

Whitman agrees with Diamond that the state of democracy in its American context is symptomatic of the overall health of democracy as an idea. He announces early on in his Democratic Vistas, “I shall use the words America and Democracy as convertible terms.” But in 1871 America, democracy remained a work in progress, still too evanescent an experiment to assess. For Whitman,

My America is still all in the making: it's a promise, a possible something: it's to come: it's by no means here. Besides, what do I care about the material America? America is to me an idea, a forecast, a prophecy: it may evolve to noble fruition or end as an incommensurable disaster. I don't want to be tied to the little conclusions of a petty nationalism. America will extend itself as an idea, never I hope in conquest. I'd rather anything should happen to us than that we should add one inch of territory to our domain by conquest.

In the middle of Reconstruction, the idea of American democracy, political and material, was being put to the test for the second time in a decade, the war itself being the first. For Whitman, Reconstruction-era politics had become so adversarial, that the idea of “Union” appeared no more secure than it had during the war: still, “the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me.” Anticipating never-ending factions, Whitman recommends

a fusion of The States into the only reliable identity, the moral and artistic one. For, I say, the true nationality of The States, the genuine union, when we come to a mortal crisis, is, and is to be, after all, neither the written law, nor, (as is generally supposed,) either self-interest, or common pecuniary or material

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objects—but the fervid and tremendous IDEA, melting everything else with resistless heat, and solving all lesser and definite distinctions in vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power.\textsuperscript{13}

In fact, Whitman gives his whole project ideological intentions. “My utmost pretension,” he says,

is probably but to offset that old claim of the exclusively curative power of first-class individual men, as leaders and rulers, by the claims, and general movement and result, of ideas. Something of the latter kind seems to me the distinctive theory of America, of democracy, and of the modern—or rather I should say it is democracy, and it is the modern.\textsuperscript{14}

As the nation reconstructed itself politically and materially, Whitman would, by his art, have us give equal weight to our ideas of these things.

There is more than a hint of philosophical idealism here. In Whitman’s dialectical “movement of ideas,”

There are two distinct principles—aye, paradoxes—at the life-fountain and life-continuation of the States; one, the sacred principle of the Union, the right of ensemble, at whatever sacrifice—and yet another, an equally sacred principle, the right of each State, consider’d as a separate sovereign individual, in its own sphere. Some go zealously for one set of these rights, and some as zealously for the other set. We must have both; or rather, bred out of them, as out of mother and father, a third set, the perennial result and combination of both, and neither jeopardized. I say the loss or abdication of one set, in the future, will be ruin to democracy just as much as the loss of the other set. The problem is, to harmoniously adjust the two, and the play of the two. Observe the lesson of the divinity of Nature, ever checking the excess of one law, by an opposite, or seemingly opposite law—generally the other side of the same law. For the theory of this Republic is, not that the General government is the fountain of all life and power, dispensing it forth, around, and to the remotest portions of our territory, but that THE PEOPLE are, represented in both, underlying both the General and State governments, and consider’d just as well in their individualities and in their separate aggregates, or States, as consider’d in one vast aggregate, the Union. This was the original dual theory and foundation of the United States, as distinguish’d from the feudal and ecclesiastical single idea of monarchies and

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. Emphasis added.
papacies, and the divine right of kings. (Kings have been of use, hitherto, as representing the idea of the identity of nations. But, to American democracy, both ideas must be fulfill’d, and in my opinion the loss of vitality of either one will indeed be the loss of vitality of the other.)

The idea of “America” is for Whitman two ideas—nationalism and individualism. As he conceives them, these ideas are not so much contradictory as mutually implicated. Both are existentially necessary, the two together forming Whitman’s reconfigured “ideology,” where it will be the “idea of perfect individualism . . . that deepest tinges and gives character to the idea of the Aggregate,” As we will see in Chapter 2, The People, “represented in both,” will serve as a crucial middle term between nationalism and individualism where Whitman’s ideal democracy happens.

**E Pluribus Unum: American Ideology/American Paradox**

The original framers of the United States recognized the same pair of ideas as the ideological basis for the nation. On the same day the nation formally declared its independence, the Continental Congress felt it equally necessary to crystallize the idea of America. A resolution was adopted that “Resolved, That Dr. Franklin, Mr. J. Adams, and Mr. Jefferson, be a committee, to bring in a device for a seal for the United States of America.” By August 20th, only six weeks after independence, the committee’s first report indicated the selection “Motto: E Pluribus Unum.” It is frequently suggested that the motto had been a contribution from Franklin, taken from a poem by Virgil called

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“Moretum,” wherein a rustic farmer muddles together with a mortar and pestle a mixture of garlic, parsley, rue, coriander, salt, cheese, olive oil, and vinegar. As the farmer grinds, “little by little the elements/lose their peculiar strength; the many colors blend into one,” *color est e pluribus unus*.\(^{18}\) This culinary image of “blending” is in keeping with the tradition of seeing America as a “Melting Pot.”

However, historical evidence regarding the motto suggests something more urbane—that the motto more likely came from the cover design of the contemporary London periodical *Gentleman's Magazine* (Figure 1-1). The design itself appeared regularly alongside the couplet “Alluring Profit with Delight we blend;/One, out of many, to the Public send,” and occasionally another, “To your motto most true, for our monthly inspection,/You mix various rich sweets in one fragrant collection.”\(^{19}\) This new understanding of the motto retains the same sensory stimulation made by mixing botanicals, but now that blend is to be constructed, sold, and bought before being consumed.

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Notwithstanding the profit motive that colors the selection, once the choice had been made, the Seal Committee tasked Philadelphia “drawer” Pierre Eugène Du Simitière with sketching the formal representation of this ideology, “out of many, one.” Du Simitière’s original sketch (Figure 1-2), refined by Jefferson, resulted in the August 20th design (Figure 1-3).

Figure 1-2. Du Simitière’s original sketch for the National Seal.

Figure 1-3. Jefferson’s final design for the National Seal.
In at least two ways we find the national motto depicted here. In the center appears a shield made whole—simultaneously—by six equal parts. As Jefferson himself described the center of the design,

The Shield has six Quarters, parti one, coupé two. The 1st Or, a Rose enamelled gules & argent, for England: the 2d Argent, a Thistle proper, for Scotland: the 3d Verd, a Harp Or, for Ireland the 4th Azure, a Flower de Luce Or, for France the 5th Or the Imperial Eagle Sable, for Germany: and the 6th Or the Belgic Lion Gules for Holland pointing out the Countries from which these States have been peopled.²⁰

If any of these six parts were removed, the shield would be left broken and ineffective.

The single eye near the top, incidentally, is also a part—in this case of the body. In the first sense, then, the framers bring a certain part-whole understanding to the seal. At the same time, while many countries serve as the origin for this one nation, these nations have now been reorganized in a new kind of state configuration. Encircling the shield one finds, again per Jefferson,

a Border Gules entoire of thirteen Scutcheons Argent linked together by a Chain Or, each charged with initial Letters Sable, as follows 1st NH. 2d M.B. 3d RI. 4th C. 5th NY. 6th NJ. 7th P. 8th DC. 9. M. 10th V. 11th NC. 12th SC. 13 G. for each of the thirteen independent States of America.²¹

Here, these newly made states are brought together, not as parts of a whole, but as links in a chain. To this chain, presumably, one can add or subtract links without altering the shape and function of the whole chain. As the framers depict them, both of these configurations—of part to whole and species to genus—can be brought together: something about the seal’s concentric circles shows us how.

²¹ Ibid.
Though he did not explicitly, Whitman might approve the National Seal the way he did his patchwork nation:

I like well our polyglot construction-stamp, and the retention thereof, in the broad, the tolerating, the many-sided, the collective. All nations here—a home for every race on earth. British, German, Scandinavian, Spanish, French, Italian . . . on our shores the crowning resultant of those distillations, decantations, compactions of humanity, that have been going on, on trial, over the earth so long.22

Crucially, Whitman’s terminology here—broad, tolerating, many-sided, collective, distillation, decantation, compaction—suggests not a single understanding of the original framers’ intention, but a range of interpretations that might be brought to the nation.

In that sense, the seal’s design also captures the motto’s inherent contradiction, that between the idea of Oneness and the idea of manyness. The nation’s founders—and the documents they are credited with—exemplified this tension, too. While Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, emphasized individual rights against State tyranny, federal Constitutionalists like Madison urged a central State to protect against the potential dangers of divided individual interests. Both sides took a cautionary tone to the other, as did Alexis de Toqueville, who later reasoned that in its very formation,

The thirteen colonies which simultaneously threw off the yoke of England towards the end of the last century professed, as I have already observed, the same religion, the same language, the same customs, and almost the same laws; they were struggling against a common enemy; and these reasons were sufficiently strong to unite them one to another, and to consolidate them into one nation. But as each of them had enjoyed a separate existence and a government within its own control, the peculiar interests and customs which resulted from this system were opposed to a compact and intimate union which would have absorbed the individual importance of each in the general importance of all. Hence arose two opposite tendencies, the one prompting the Anglo-Americans to unite, the other to divide their strength. As long as the war with the mother-country lasted the principle of union was kept alive by necessity; and although the laws which

constituted it were defective, the common tie subsisted in spite of their imperfections. But no sooner was peace concluded than the faults of the legislation became manifest, and the State seemed to be suddenly dissolved. Each colony became an independent republic, and assumed an absolute sovereignty.\textsuperscript{23}

As the nation grew, and interests and opinions multiplied, the question for the founders was how to balance these opposing tendencies in a “united state.” Since its inception, politics in the United States has perennially turned on the tension between individual or state rights and federal policies, between the many and the one.

A century after independence, Whitman felt the question still unresolved. It remained in 1876,

\begin{quote}
[t]hat the vital political mission of the United States is, to practically solve and settle the problem of two sets of rights—the fusion, thorough compatibility and junction of individual State prerogatives, with the indispensable necessity of centrality and Oneness—the national identity power—the sovereign Union, relentless, permanently comprising all, and over all, and in that never yielding an inch.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Whitman’s own contribution to this project, we saw above, would promote the “movement of ideas.” His would be an attempt to solve the “American” problem of the One and many, a variation of the ageless paradox, which Whitman describes elsewhere from the perspective of the individual:

One of the problems presented in America these times is, how to combine one's duty and policy as a member of associations, societies, brotherhoods or what not, and one's obligations to the State and Nation, with essential freedom as an individual personality, without which freedom a man cannot grow or expand, or be full, modern, heroic, democratic, American. With all the necessities and benefits of association, (and the world cannot get along without it,) the true


nobility and satisfaction of a man consist in his thinking and acting for himself. The problem, I say, is to combine the two, so as not to ignore either.\textsuperscript{25}

As a species of the larger paradox of the One and many, the American problem is essentially unsolvable, but that has not stopped centuries of thinkers from the attempt.

That is to say, the twin ideology and its essential contradiction persist in America today. For Michael Walzer, the “adjective ‘American’ named, and still names, a politics that is relatively unqualified by religion or nationality \textit{or, alternatively}, that is qualified by so many religions and nationalities as to be free from any one of them. It is this freedom that makes it possible for America's oneness to encompass and protect its manyness.”\textsuperscript{26} Walzer’s ambivalent definition—“or, alternatively”—posits at least two distinct arrangements, demonstrating that the idea of America, and membership therein, is constantly and essentially open to interpretations, even within one mind. What Kenneth Burke calls “the Unity-diversity pair (the U.S. design)”\textsuperscript{27} is at heart the perpetual paradox definitive of America, and for Whitman, of Democracy.

Still today, global debate on the viability of democracy turns mainly on two central issues:

1) does not the current dispersion and fragmentation of political actors conspire against the emergence of strong social identities which could operate as nodal points for the consolidation and expansion of democratic practices?; and 2) is not this very multiplicity the source of a particularism of social aims which could result in the dissolution of the wider emancipatory discourses considered as constitutive of the democratic imaginary?\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} Michael Walzer, “What Does It Mean to be an ‘American’?,” \textit{Social Research} 57, no. 3 (1990), 598. Emphasis added.
For Laclau, horizontal pluralism (the preferred mode of Negri & Hardt and Virno) as seen, for example, in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, “extended equivalential logics in a variety of new directions and made possible the incorporation of previously excluded underdogs to the public sphere.” Laclau’s two central questions anticipate the fact that as more and more groups are admitted into the democratic process, the “horizontal expansion” of their particular demands “conspires against their vertical aggregation in a popular will capable of challenging the existing status quo.”

Because “the unilateralization of either of these tendencies leads to a perversion of democracy as a political regime,” both extreme individualism and extreme nationalism run counter to the aims of a democratic nation, and yet some measure of both is necessary. This paradox Laclau describes as the “essential ambiguity” of democracy:

the attempt to organize the political space around the universality of the community, without hierarchies and distinctions vs. the expansion of the logic of equality to increasingly wider spheres of social relations—social and economic equality, racial quality, gender equality, etc.

Like all paradoxes, this one cannot be “solved,” but “its insolubility is the very precondition of democracy.”

As such, it is a species of a more general paradox—what since Parmenides and Heraclitus has been called the problem of the One and the Many. As Heraclitus put it, “Men do not understand how that which is torn in different directions comes into accord

29 Laclau, “Why Constructing,” 676. For Bernstein (pp. 1-2), and others, the 1960s was a unique time “when reinterpreted democratic principles pried open the acceptable definition of the demos”—or the People (Inozemtsev, “The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy”).


32 Ibid.

33 Ernesto Laclau, “Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity,” October 61 (Summer 1992), 90.
with itself—harmony in contrariety, as in the case of the bow and the lyre.”

The problem of the One and the Many problematizes the relationship of unity to diversity, both universally and in local instances. In the American context, for example, we ask, can we enjoy a genuine unity in our pluralistic society? What allegiance is owed by each individual American to the nation? Which is more real? What, if any, constitutes the “ideal” in the category “American”? What the “essential”? Even in the political context, the answers given to these questions generally follow either Parmenides, proponent of the One over many, or Heraclitus, advocate of the many over One. The sheer polarity of answers to the problem of the One and many prompted William James to deem it

the most central of all philosophic problems, central because so pregnant. I mean by this that if you know whether a man is a decided monist or a decided pluralist, you perhaps know more about the rest of his opinions than if you give him any other name ending in ist. To believe in the one or in the many, that is the classification with the maximum number of consequences.

Whitman on the One/Whitman as Nationalist

By the James test, Walt Whitman is hard to figure. On the one hand, perhaps no one is more nationalistic. His estimation of America is that

In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. Here at last is something in the doings of man that corresponds with the broadcast doings of the day and night. Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses.

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Whitman is known for being well-attuned to the many particulars he encounters, but here and often his perspective is transcendent. For him democracy is transcendent, and as a national idea comparable to

[wh]at the idea of Messiah was to the ancient race of Israel, through storm and calm, through public glory and their name's humiliation, tenacious, refusing to be argued with, shedding all shafts of ridicule and disbelief, undestroyed by captivities, battles, deaths . . . a great Idea, bedded in Judah's heart.37

As for the “race of Israel” and for an Israelite like Judah, “So runs this thought, this fact, amid our own land's race and history. It is the thought of Oneness, averaging, including all; of Identity—the indissoluble sacred Union of These States.”38

Whitman’s is an ultimate Oneness. In his most perfect union,

Though These States are to have their own Individuality, and show it forth with courage in all their expressions, it is to be a large, tolerant, and all-inclusive Individuality. Ours is to be the Nation of the Kosmos: we want nothing small—nothing unfriendly or crabbed here—But rather to become the friend and well-wisher of all—as we derive our sources from all, and are in continual communication with all.39

As poet of the Kosmos, Whitman eagerly admits, “I have judged and felt every thing from an American point of view which is no local standard, for America to me, includes humanity and is the universal.”40 His perhaps grandiose view of the “New World” was that it stood “consistently with the entirety of civilization and humanity, and in main sort the representative of them, leading the van, leading the fleet of the modern and

38 Ibid.
39 Walt Whitman, Two Rivulets (Camden, NJ: New Republic Print, 1876), 22.
democratic, on the seas and voyages of the future.” Whitman’s nation was truly exceptional.

This transcendent positionality—captured well in Whitman’s names for the nation as the Kosmos, the One, the All, etc.—exemplifies what Robert Bellah calls the “American civil religion,” an “understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality.” Whitman’s was in fact a new religion, a confession of faith that found divinity in the People more so than God. However, civil religion, like all religions, runs the risk of drifting into dogma and becoming a “fundamental” way to distinguish this nation from all others as exceptional. Whitman is no less guilty of this presumption. In his mind,

Judging from history, it is some such moral and spiritual ideas appropriate to them, (and such ideas only,) that have made the profoundest glory and endurance of nations in the past. The races of Judea, the classic clusters of Greece and Rome, and the feudal and ecclesiastical clusters of the Middle Ages, were each and all vitalized by their separate distinctive ideas, ingrain’d in them, redeeming many sins, and indeed, in a sense, the principal reason-why for their whole career.

In keeping with that tradition,

Sole among nationalities, These States have assumed the task to put in forms of lasting power and practicality, on areas of amplitude rivaling the operations of the physical kosmos, the moral and political speculations of ages, long, long deferred, the Democratic Republican principle, and the theory of development and perfection by voluntary standards, and self-suppliance. Who else, indeed, except the United States, in history, so far, have accepted in unwitting faith, and, as we now see, stand, act upon, and go security for, these things?

That the principle of progress be generalized more broadly is that for “which this

Republic, as to its individualities, and as a compacted Nation, is to specially stand forth,

and culminate modern humanity.”\textsuperscript{45} This idea would be the basis for American nationalism, and the cultivation of the idea the preordained mission given unto all devotees, Whitman included. And yet, as a guiding principle, says Whitman, “these are the very things it least morally and mentally knows.”\textsuperscript{46}

**Whitman on the Many/Whitman as Individualist**

On the other hand, Whitman is also preeminently individualistic. He estimates of his entire body of work, “Probably, indeed, the whole of these varied songs, and all my writings, both volumes, only ring changes in some sort, on the ejaculation, How vast, how eligible, how joyful, how real, is a human being, himself or herself.”\textsuperscript{47} Promotion of the individual has been his plan all along: as he admitted late in life,

I have allow'd the stress of my poems from beginning to end to bear upon American individuality, and assist it—not only because there is a great lesson in Nature, amid all her generalizing laws, but as counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy—and for other reasons. Defiant of ostensible literary and other conventions, I avowedly chant ‘the great pride of man in himself,’ and permit it to be more or less a motif of nearly all my verse. I think this pride indispensable to an American.\textsuperscript{48}

Now, it seems, Whitman’s democracy has a double face—one of majority rule and general representation, as well as one proclaiming “one man-one vote.” Respectful of both, Whitman here and often defers to “you,” the “one man.” In his revised sense of the term, “[t]he meaning of Democracy is to press on through all failures, ridicules and

\textsuperscript{45} Whitman, “Preface, 1876.” 285.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{47} Whitman, “Preface, 1876.” 284. Emphasis added.
arguments to put in practice, the idea of the sovereignty, license, sacredness of the individual.” For Whitman, the principle of individualism will also distinguish the American ideology from others: whereas “[t]he foreign theory is that a man or woman receives rights by grant, demise, or inheritance[, t]he theory of These States is that humanity's rights belong to every man, every woman in the inherent nature of things, and cannot be alienated, or if alienated must be brought back and resumed.”

In speaking of inherent, unalienable rights, Whitman takes his cue from Jefferson, who held not only that “man was a rational animal, endowed by nature with rights, and with an innate sense of justice” but that “men, enjoying in ease and security the full fruits of their own industry, enlisted by all their interests on the side of law and order, habituated to think for themselves, [can] follow reason as their guide.” With Jefferson, Whitman finds a warrant for his faith in individual human reason in nature, where “[t]he quality of BEING, in the object's self, according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom and thereto—not criticism by other standards, and adjustments thereto—is the lesson.” Just as nature consists of and depends upon the variety and flourishing of its individual species, so must a nation built on independence recognize its life and longevity in individuality.

For Whitman, “independence” is thus less a national phenomenon than an individual one, namely “[f]reedom from all laws or bonds except those of one's own

52 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 38. Emphasis added.
"being, controlled by the universal ones."⁵³ “To lands, to man, to woman,” he asks of each, “what is there at last to each, but the inherent soul, nativity, idiocrasy, free, highest-poised, soaring its own flight, following out itself?” If one looked closely enough, they would find in every individual “[t]hat primal and interior something in man, in his soul's abysms, coloring all, and, by exceptional fruitions, giving the last majesty to him.”⁵⁴

Whitman clearly endows the individual with the same transcendence he does the nation, going so far as to posit, “The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one single individual—namely to You.”⁵⁵ In keeping with that metaphysics, Whitman’s more perfect union would now be built from the individual up as much as from the nation down. His own contribution to that project, he clarified later in life, was such that “[w]hile the ambitious thought of my song is to help the forming of a great aggregate Nation, it is, perhaps, altogether through the forming of myriads of fully develop’d and enclosing individuals.”⁵⁶

**Whitman as American Ideologue**

Clearly, then, Whitman is a devotee of and advocate for both the One nation and its many individuals. For the nationalist and the individualist alike, Whitman thus holds a representative, for some heroic, place in the canon of American democracy. For fellow poet Ezra Pound, “He is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is

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For legal scholar Benjamin Barber, he is “an American emblematic. He seems to be incarnating and acting out as he writes and as he lives what it means to be American in some deep sense,” enough so that Whitman’s Democratic Vistas “belongs in every political science curriculum short list alongside The Federalist Papers and Toqueville’s Democracy in America and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural and King’s I Have A Dream speech.”

Conservative commentator David Brooks agrees. For him, Democratic Vistas “survives as our nation’s most brilliant political sermon because it embodies the exuberant energy of American society—the energy that can make other peoples so nervous—and it captures in its hodgepodge nature both the high aspirations and the sordid realities of everyday life.” The sermonic quality of Whitman was not lost on Will Hayes, who reported in the 1920s, “Leaves of Grass is slowly but surely taking its place as the Bible of Democracy. Suppression by the forces of aristocracy as in Ireland during the War or on the Continent recently by the Hungarian Commissioner of Education will only hasten the process.”

Henry David Thoreau said of the same volume, “On the whole, it sounds to me very brave and American, after whatever deductions. I do not believe that all the sermons, so called, that have been preached in

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http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/05/what-whitman-knew/376796/. Whitman’s vision of America is bipartisan, or at least is taken so. As Folsom points out, “while a liberal voice like Cornel West—arguing that for Whitman ‘democracy had deep ontological, existential and social implications’—. . . [holding up Democratic Vistas] as ‘a classic in the defense of individuality and social justice,’ a conservative voice like David Brooks can argue just as strenuously that ‘Whitman got America right’ in Democratic Vistas because ‘in the end, he accepted his country’s ‘extreme business energy,’ its ‘almost maniacal appetite for wealth.’ He knew that the country’s dreams were all built upon that energy and drive, and eventually the spirit of commercial optimism would always prevail’” (Edward Folsom, introduction to Walt Whitman, Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), lxii).  
this land put together are equal to it for preaching.”61 In fact, by Thoreau’s estimation, “He is apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen. Kings and aristocracy go by the board at once, as they have long deserved to.”62

Closer to our time, Kenneth Burke calls Whitman’s constant evangelizing on behalf of the nation and the individual as “a kind of secularized sermonizing,” a “celebration of the logos, pathos, and ethos of American brotherhood was to be a way of transcending all such vexations underlying our upbuilding.”63 For Burke, this is especially apparent in Whitman’s Civil War poems, “which reached their height in his funeral dirge for Lincoln (surely among the grandest pieces of political oratory in all the world,” a set of lyrics which in and of themselves, “solidified the equating of freedom, democracy, and American Union.”64 The irony, says Robert Penn Warren, is that “[t]he dream of Jefferson, the aristocrat, the scion of the Enlightenment, was to assume, some eighty years after he had penned his Declaration, a new formulation at the hands of a plebian son of Romanticism, who was a homosexual mystic.”65

Whitman’s apparent ability to organize his nation and his self from many disparate strands into one new democratic form may explain his supposed representative “Americanness.” But if Whitman is America, “Motto: E Pluribus Unum,” it had been part of his art all along. As he put it in 1872, “‘Leaves of Grass,’ already publish’d, is, in its intentions, the song of a great composite democratic individual, male or female. And following on and amplifying the same purpose, I suppose I have in my mind to run

64 Kenneth Burke, On Human Nature, 263.
through the chants of this volume, [Two Rivulets] (if ever completed,) the thread-voice, more or less audible, of an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric democratic nationality.”66 If both ideas constitute what can be called the American ideology, it seems reasonable to hold up Whitman as its chief ideologue.

§ Ideology Critique: One vs. Many

As we will see, Whitman himself will argue on behalf of a unified arrangement, where “the oneness and the manyness are absolutely co-ordinate” and “[n]either is primordial or more essential or excellent than the other.” In the meantime, however, he remains susceptible to two common tendencies—absolute monism and absolute pluralism. Some monists, for example, may become overly confident in their adoration of America. The most committed may be led to conclude there is “no civilizational alternative to democracy, its current ailments notwithstanding.”67 The problem with strong exceptionalism is that “the absence of a civilizational alternative means . . . that democracies aren’t pressed to renew themselves as a result of external competition.”68 Overly confident of their surety, the nationalist’s emotional investment moves from unquestionable faith to unquestioned ideology, as James’ colleague John Dewey explains:

Faith in these ideas, or at least in the catch-words which express them, becomes obligatory, necessary for social salvation; disbelief or indifference is heresy. Thus

68 Ibid.
Nationalism starting as an unquestioned emotional loyalty, so supreme as to be religious in quality, has invaded the whole of life. It denotes organized ways of behavior and a whole system of justificatory beliefs and notions appealed to in order to defend every act labelled “national” from criticism or inquiry. By constant reiteration, by shaming heretics and intimidating dissidents, by glowing admiration if not adoration of the faithful, by all agencies of education and propaganda (now, alas, so hard to distinguish) the phrases in which these defenses and appeals are couched become substitutes for thought. They are axiomatic; only a traitor or an evilly disposed man doubts them. In the end, these rationalizations signify a complete abdication of reason. Bias, prejudice, blind and routine habit reigns supreme. But they reign under the guise of idealistic standards and noble sentiments.  

Although “nationalism” is itself only an idea, as Yehosua Arieli showed, “American nationalism is particularly ideological, insofar as absent a ‘natural’ commonality among its individuals (geographical or ancestral, for example), its cohesion had to be the product of a community of values, beliefs, and ideas.” America nationalism, then as now, qualifies as an ideology and Whitman, an ideologue for the One.

Within the same nation, some pluralists put so much emphasis on individuals that they, in the same measure as the monists, want to minimize the center, in favor of what they take to be the natural right of freedom. Like nationalism, though, this natural right has devolved over time into mutations of self-interest and competition—the Randian “virtue of selfishness.” As with Dewey, we hear Toqueville warn us that “Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves

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society at large to itself.” By the turn of the century, extreme individualism manifested itself in the business philosophy of Andrew Carnegie or Henry Clews, who in *The Wall Street Point of View* (1900), praised “that system of Individualism which guards, protects and encourages competition,” the spirit of which these men identified as “the American Spirit—the love of freedom,—of free industry,—free and unfettered opportunity.” There may be an innate sense of justice, as Jefferson held, but as the ideological critic argues, there is no guarantee of who’s justice will serve as the nation’s ethical standard. Because individualism identifies the individual as the locus of moral choice, it also sanctions whatever morality or system of morals an individual might adopt, including capitalism, competition, and vice. Strong individualism smacks of romantic detachment. It therefore operates “ideologically,” and as its self-declared spokesman, so does Whitman. Insofar as Whitman is proclaims himself a nationalist and an individualist, he could be charged, from both directions, of absolutism. For this reason, not everyone is fond of Whitman as pick for representative American.

**Whitman as Racist**

For some, his views on race are too unsettling. He invokes the term “race” frequently, a word used differently in his time, but hard for the contemporary reader not to read with all the connotations we bring to that it today. For sure, he held moral

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71 Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 104.
72 Henry Clewes, “Individualism versus Socialism” (New York: s.n., 1907), 1, 3.
positions: “Man cannot hold property in man.”\textsuperscript{73} But on the matter of anti-slavery policy, Whitman was a self-declared antiextensionist. He doubted direct efforts to bring about its eradication in favor of an evolutionary phase-out. As a gradualist, he believed “As soon as there are clear-brained original American judges, this saying [above] will be simplified by their judgments, and no State out of the whole confederacy but will confirm and approve those judgments.”\textsuperscript{74} It is equally true that in the vast majority of his writings, African-Americans are simply absent. During Reconstruction, he fails to mention African Americans, the efforts to “amalgamate” them into a multiracial society, or the unwritten Black Codes still restricting their civil rights in the South. Even in 1871, as he called for general suffrage, it was not perfectly clear he intended free blacks to be part of this electorate.

It is jarring to encounter the Whitman who once wrote, regarding general suffrage,

As if we had not strained the voting and digestive calibre of American Democracy to the utmost for the last fifty years with the millions of ignorant foreigners, we have now infused a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and calibre (in the mass) as so many baboons. But we stood the former trial—solved it—and, though this is much harder, will, I doubt not, triumphantly solve this.\textsuperscript{75}

Again, over time, things will work out. But by 1888, Whitman’s optimism about race is gone and his manner more acerbic: “I don't believe in it—it is not possible. The nigger, like the Injun, will be eliminated: It is the law of history, races, what-not: always so far


\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. See Whitman’s \textit{unpublished} “Anti-Slavery Notes” for his more nuanced, Lincolnesque thoughts on the peculiar institution.

inexorable—always to be. Someone proves that a superior grade of rats comes and then all the minor rats are cleared out.”

Of those who try to account for such brashly racist comments, some suggest that passages like those may be at times satiric, Whitman’s attempt to “neutralize” the racism of other prominent essayists like Thomas Carlyle. Others point out that these views were only privately held and never made public in his lifetime, “as if he knew that his own personal racial biases had no place in work that was looking toward a transformed democratic future, when such biases would presumably be a thing of the past.” It is true that Whitman fails to ever identify more than two specific African-Americans in his poetry, and those who would try to account for his public disregard suggest for many at that time, the practical business of reconstructing the nation had simply sucked up the time and energy earlier dedicated to emancipation of slaves. Otherwise, he might argue that the “natural” fact was that he could only understand experiences like his own:

To-night I would say one word for that South—the whites. I do not wish to say one word and will not say one word against the blacks—but the blacks can never be to me what the whites are. Below all political relations, even the deepest, are still deeper, personal, physiological and emotional ones, the whites are my brothers & I love them.

Whatever the motivation, or lack thereof, Whitman appears, on terms of race, to be an ill-chosen representative of the ideal American or of ideal American democracy.

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78 Folsom, introduction, xlii.
Whitman as Sexist

The dubiousness of Whitman’s distinction also extends to his treatment and representation of women. For sure, Whitman does espouse gender equality. As early as 1871, he anticipated “something more revolutionary. The day is coming when the deep questions of woman’s entrance amid the arenas of practical life, politics, trades, &c., will not only be argued all around us, but may be put to decision, and real experiment.”\(^{81}\) But in the meantime, he fails to mention at all the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 or any other ongoing reform movements. As with the category of race, his approach to women’s rights is gradualist, because “Democracy, in silence, biding its time, ponders its own ideals,” including “[t]he idea of the women of America, (extricated from this daze, this fossil and unhealthy air which hangs about the word Lady,) developed, raised to become the robust equals, workers, and, it may be, even practical and political deciders with the men-greater than man.”\(^{82}\) A truly egalitarian society is possible, and a woman can be “great, at any rate, as man, in all departments; or, rather, [is] capable of being so, soon as they realize it, and can bring themselves to give up toys and fictions, and launch forth, as men do, amid real, independent, stormy life.”\(^{83}\)

Notwithstanding the callousness of his charges against women of immaturity and ignorance, Whitman goes on to essentialize “their divine maternity-always their towering, emblematical attribute.”\(^{84}\) His reference to “divine maternity” calls up the traditional idea of Republican motherhood, to which he weds the nineteenth century “new science” of

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\(^{82}\) Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “A Thought in My Musings,” 32.
\(^{83}\) Ibid.
\(^{84}\) Ibid.
eugenics. He anticipates a time when “fatherhood and motherhood shall become a
science-and the noblest science.”\textsuperscript{85} However, as he looks around, he finds an “appalling
degradation of women in their powers of sane athletic maternity, their crowning attribute,
and ever making the woman, in loftiest spheres, superior to the man.”\textsuperscript{86} And so he spills
much ink in Democratic Vistas calling for “the entire redemption of woman out of these
incredible holds and webs of silliness, millinery, and every kind of dyspeptic depletion”
in order to “insur[e] to The States a strong and sweet Female Race, a race of perfect
Mothers.”\textsuperscript{87}

For ideals of this “Female Race,” he turns to his memories of at least four
particular women he has in some sense experienced, offering up characterizations, or
“portraits.” One, “an expert seamstress,” “finding the employment too confining for her
health and comfort, . . . went boldly to work, for others, to house-keep, cook, clean, &c.”
She now

finds nothing degrading in her position; it is not inconsistent with personal
dignity, self-respect, and the respect of others. She confers benefits and receives
them . . . her character is unstained; she has made herself understood, and
preserves her independence, and has been able to help her parents and educate and
get places for her sisters.\textsuperscript{88}

There is another, who

Requires on a mechanical business, partly works at it herself . . . is not abashed by
the coarseness of the contact, knows how to be firm and silent at the same time,

\textsuperscript{85} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “A Crayon’d, Democratic Personality,” 41.
\textsuperscript{86} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Gravest Question of All,” 14. He continues, “I have sometimes
thought, indeed, that the sole avenue and means of a reconstructed sociology depended, primarily, on a new
birth, elevation, expansion, invigoration of woman, affording, for races to come, (as the conditions that
antedate birth are indispensable,) a perfect motherhood. Great, great, indeed far greater than they know, is
the sphere of women. But doubtless the question of such new sociology all goes together, includes many
varied and complex influences and premises, and the man as well as the woman, and the woman as well as the
man” (p. 14).
\textsuperscript{87} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Gravest Question of All,” 15.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
holds her own with unvarying coolness and decorum, and will compare, any day, with superior carpenters, farmers, and even boatmen and drivers. 89

But his favorite, perhaps, “is the wife of a mechanic, mother of two children . . . who exhibits, indeed, such a noble female Personality, that I am fain to record it here.” In her he admires her “[n]ever abnegating her own proper independence, but always genially preserving it, and what belongs to it—cooking, washing, child-nursing, house-tending, she beams sunshine out of all these duties, and makes them illustrious. Physiologically sweet and sound, loving work, practical, she yet knows that there are intervals, however few, devoted to recreation, music, leisure, hospitality-and affords such intervals.” 90

But even his faint praise of these women is minimized when Whitman announces that, nonetheless, “[t]he best culture will always be that of the manly and courageous instincts, and loving perceptions, and of self-respect.” 91 If someone would see the true America, witness a soldier. In two major wars,

We have seen this race proved wholesale by drearier, yet more fearful tests—the wound, the amputation, the shattered face or limb, the slow, hot fever, long, impatient anchorage in bed, and all the forms of maiming, operation and disease. . . There have we watched these soldiers, many of them only boys in years—marked their decorum, their religious nature and fortitude, and their sweet affection. Wholesale, truly. 92

In the calm fortitude of one dying Pennsylvania soldier recollected from his voluntary nursing at the Patent Office Hospital in Washington City, Whitman found not only “perfect beauty, tenderness and pluck, that never Feudal lord, nor Greek, nor Roman breed, yet rivaled,” but also “towering above all talk and argument, the plentifully-

89 Ibid.
90 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Nature as Much Ideal as Real,” 64-65.
91 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “This ‘Culture’ So Much Wanted,” 40.
supplied, last-needed proof of Democracy, in its personalities. . . exclusively in the
unnamed, unknown rank and file."\textsuperscript{93}

For ideals of the male gender, he turns again to his own experience. “We have
seen them,” he recalls,

in trench, or crouching behind breastwork, or tramping in deep mud, or amid
pouring rain or thick-falling snow, or under forced marches in hottest summer (as
on the road to get to Gettysburg)-vast suffocating swarms, divisions, corps, with
every single man so grimed and black with sweat and dust, his own mother would
not have known him.\textsuperscript{94}

From images like these, he distills an ideal American man. That man will have a “clear-
blooded, strong-fibred physique” to ensure “of the bodily figure, the movements easy, the
complexion showing the best blood, somewhat flushed, breast expanded,” and so
indispensable are “questions of food, drink, air, exercise, assimilation,” even “digestion.”
To these he will add “an erect attitude, a voice whose sound outvies music, eyes of calm
and steady gaze, yet capable also of flashing-and a general presence that holds its own in
the company of the highest.” This “well-begotten” man will in youth be “fresh, ardent,
emotional, aspiring, full of adventure,” and “at maturity, brave, perceptive, under control,
neither too talkative nor too reticent, neither flippant nor sombre.”\textsuperscript{95} So though Whitman
specifies ideals of American manhood and womanhood, his unequal treatment of each
warrants the belief that his is a chauvinistic ideology, where gender roles are defined,
essential differences accentuated, women are silent mothers, and men are dominant.

\textsuperscript{94} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The War Proved Democracy,” 20.
\textsuperscript{95} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “A Crayon’d Democratic Personality,” 41.
Ideology Critique: Hegemony and Crises of Representation

Whitman’s apparent obliviousness to the realities of women and African Americans—not to mention immigration and urban poverty—is for many too unrealistic to let stand as truly representative of the nineteenth-century American context. His undisclosed racism and essentializing of gender makes it hard to take Whitman seriously when he claims to speak for the nation or for the individual. He cannot speak for the One, because he cannot truly speak for the many, and vice versa. And because “ours are suspicious times,” Charles Altieri finds that “any attempt now to celebrate Whitmanian views of the subject and his dreams of exemplifying a national mode of consciousness” is bound to fail because he—or any other any single figure—“necessarily excludes the range of differences and agonistic tensions constituting the political fabric.”96 Because Whitman cannot imagine their American experience, he cannot represent “the” American experience. Wittingly or not, Whitman’s thought consistently reflects the privileged position of his own social group, white men, over and above the social positions of women and African-Americans. Throughout his rhetoric, “he projects as collective what is in fact a single white male perspective, and the projection relies on abstract impersonality insensitive to the temporal and spatial aspects of those contingent loyalties that are in fact fundamental to full subjectivity.”97

Nor did Whitman necessarily share the understanding we have today, since de Beauvoir, Appiah, and countless others, that there is nothing inherently biological that corresponds to racial and gender categories: like all categories, we realize them by our

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96 Charles Altieri, Spectacular Anti-Spectacle: Ecstasy and Nationality in Whitman and his Heirs (Berlin: Freie University, 1998), 36-37.
97 Ibid.
usage. As Whitman uses these categories, he too constructs a particular (generally hierarchical) social order. Explicitly and implicitly, his words and meanings “establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical,”\(^98\) relations that reinforce an ongoing “social control, a means of symbolic coercion or form of domination by more powerful groups over the ideologies of those with less power.”\(^99\)

Whatever group determines the hegemony of a time, theirs is a power that limits the possibilities for individuals who do not fit into that group’s preferred racial and gender categories. Even though today the categories of race and gender, along with class, have been called the “holy trinity of literary criticism,” and to some extent have become “the regnant clichés of our critical discourse,”\(^100\) because American “ideology and hegemony has been and still is the management of that conflict in the service of the dominant order”\(^101\) of white men, the project of ideological critique is ongoing. To the extent that Whitman is taken as representative of a dominant white male hegemony, his 19\(^{th}\) century “American” rhetoric remains apt for ideological scrutiny today.

From a rhetorical perspective, the hegemony secured by the dominant order is a matter of symbolic saturation, whereby one group’s terms come after some struggle to be

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\(^101\) Dana L. Cloud, “The Materiality of Discourse as Oxymoron: A Challenge to Critical Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Communication* 58, no. 3 (Summer 1994), 141-163. Nearly a decade later, “both class polarization . . . and the ideological and management strategies that contain class antagonism . . . still resemble their pre-postmodern counterpart, . . . [including] inequality between rich and poor in the U.S. (as well as around the world)” (Dana L. Cloud, “The Affirmative Masquerade,” *American Communication Journal* 4, no. 3 (Spring 2001). A decade after that, Cloud reiterates, “whether they are explicitly discussed or not, the concept of ideology and the gestures of ideology critique are still with us in various forms and guises” (Dana L. Cloud and Joshua Gunn, “Introduction: W(h)ither Ideology?,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 4 (Jul-Sep 2011), 409).
seen as best representing the fuller national experience. In the antagonistic view of politics, there have always been, says Kenneth Burke,

quarrels as to the precise vessel of authority that is to be considered ‘representative’ of the society as a whole (chief, nobles, monarch, church-men, parliamentary delegates, poet, leader, the majority, the average, the propertied, or the propertyless, etc.) but all agree in assuming that there is some part representative of the whole, hence fit to stand for it. 102

Actually, the hegemonic struggle is definitive of politics, both when deciding who should represent the whole, but also when evaluating the performance of that representative. It resurfaces when “an authoritative class, whose purpose and ideals had been generally considered as representative of the total society’s purposes and ideals, becomes considered as antagonistic. Their class character, once felt to be a culminating part of the whole, is now felt to be a divisive part of the whole.” 103 In this evaluative stage, politics becomes a matter of determining which part has become problematic to the whole. In all cases, thought, the lifetime of representatives runs from culminating to divisive. At the end, political civility breaks down, particularly when “two opponents [that] have been arguing, though the initial difference in their position may have been slight, . . . tend under the ‘dialectical pressure’ of their drama to become eventually at odds in everything . . . so that a mere graded series, comprising a more-than and a less-than, changes instead into a blunt battle.” 104

As Whitman will illustrate (in the remainder of this dissertation), Burke the rhetorician proposes an alternative to the antagonistic view of politics, one that starts with the recognition that political representation, like “any act of representation”—good or

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103 Ibid.
104 Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, 139.
bad, culminating or divisive—“automatically implies a synecdochic relationship (insofar as the act is, or is held to be, “truly representative”).” In Burke’s now tropical terms, the struggle for hegemony is not so much bipolar as “part-whole-ar,” arising when a particular part of a whole no longer qualifies as representative,

Or, otherwise put, the synecdochic relationship whereby a part can be taken as consistent with the whole . . . is no longer felt to apply; and instead we encounter the divisive relationship, the genitive transformation of something which is “a part of” a larger context into something which is “apart from” this context. We can see the same conversion in the relation between the terms “genus” and “species.” For in the consistent relationship, “species” is a subdivision of “genus”; yet one can see the concepts becoming antithetical when a speaker says: “Don’t be so general, be specific.”

For Burke, “Only by a kind of “synecdochical fallacy,” mistaking a part for the whole, can this opposition appear to exist.”

Politics deploys this sort of “synecdochically miscoded information” when, for example, “entire populations, allegorized as individuals and frozen in the formulas of racist ideologies, are held up as collectively responsible for misdeeds in which only a small fraction was engaged and which a large or at least significant fraction opposed”—for example, “the Russians” or “the Americans.” Or, from another perspective, a construction like “‘We, the Japanese’ often negates the presence of minority groups . . . and yet it has been seen as “naturally” representing all Japanese.” Of ostensibly

106 Burke, A Grammar, 107. In the language of One and many, “an appositional relationship between the general and the particular, or the collective and the individual, or the “one” and the “many,” can become an oppositional relationship” (p. 107). Emphasis added.
107 Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, 139.
representations like “Jonesville-is-America writ small (or America-is-Jonesville writ large),” anthropologist Clifford Geertz warns that

The notion that one can find the essence of national societies, civilizations, great religions, or whatever summed up and simplified in so-called ‘typical’ small towns and villages is palpable nonsense, . . . [and] the notion that this gives you the thing entire (and elevates you to some moral vantage ground from which you can look down upon the ethically less privileged) is an idea which only someone too long in the bush could possibly entertain.\(^{10}\)

The temptation to hastily generalize—to define, support, or indict a dominant hegemony, for example—tends in Geertz’s eyes toward exclusive, “one vs. many” totalitarianism.

§ Whitman as Ideological Critic

On the other hand, Whitman makes the same moves, and his *Democratic Vistas* stands as his own sharpest critique of America and democracy. In it he forecasts,

the problem of the future of America is in certain respects as dark as it is vast. Pride, competition, segregation, vicious wilfulness, and license beyond example, brood already upon us. Unwieldy and immense, who shall hold in behemoth? who bridle leviathan? Flaunt it as we choose, athwart and over the roads of our progress loom huge uncertainty, and dreadful, threatening gloom. It is useless to deny it: Democracy grows rankly up the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all—brings worse and worse invaders—needs newer, larger, stronger, keener compensations and compellers.\(^11\)

The outlook for both America and democracy is grim. “What prospect have we?,”

Whitman asks. “We sail a dangerous sea of seething currents, cross and under-currents, vortices—all so dark, untried—and whither shall we turn?”\(^{12}\) His own diagnosis turns inward. The Civil War had shown the Union that “the only foes it need ever fear, [are]

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\(^{11}\) Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 70.

\(^{12}\) Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 71.
(namely, those within itself, the interior ones),” that “Our lands, embracing so much, (embracing indeed the whole, rejecting none,) hold in their breast that flame also, capable of consuming themselves, consuming us all.”

Now during Reconstruction, things are not as sunny as Whitman had assumed the nature of things to be. Taking a break from his broad, open-armed optimism, and “sternly discarding, shutting our eyes to the glow and grandeur of the general effect, coming down to what is of the only real importance, Personalities, and examining minutely,” he admits

Confess that rather to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics. Confess that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, bar-room, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity—everywhere, the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe—everywhere an abnormal libidinoseness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignoned, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceased, shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or rather lack of manners, (considering the advantages enjoyed,) probably the meanest to be seen in the world.

Adopting the same terms of the ideological critic, he asks, “What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask? The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men.”

His concern is less with material conditions, than with their implications on belief in America’s true ideals.

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114 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 70-71. Whitman makes this point several times in *Democratic Vistas*. In 2015, though, it seems quaint to say “America, if eligible at all to downfall and ruin, is eligible within herself, not without; for I see clearly that the combined foreign world could not beat her down” (Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “The Element, First, Last, Indispensable,” 44).
In particular, he fingers the business class, but even that is a measured conviction. After all, there is much Whitman admires about America’s ongoing material success. He feels confident that “[t]he triumphant future of their business, geographic, and productive departments, on larger scales and in more varieties than ever, is certain. In those respects the Republic must soon (if she does not already) outstrip all examples hitherto afforded, and dominate the world.”\footnote{Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “I Admit Democracy’s Dangers,” 4.} These vital “departments” are definitive of the larger nation, so

For fear of mistake, I may as well distinctly announce, as cheerfully included in the model and standard of These Vistas, a practical, stirring, worldly, money-making, even materialistic character. It is undeniable that our farms, stores, offices, dry-goods, coal and groceries, enginery, cash-accounts, trades, earnings, markets, &c., should be attended to in earnest, and actively pursued, just as if they had a real and permanent existence. I perceive clearly that the extreme business energy, and this almost maniacal appetite for wealth prevalent in the United States, are vital parts of amelioration and progress, and perhaps indispensably needed to prepare the very results I demand. My theory includes riches, and the getting of riches, and the amplest products, power, activity, inventions, movements, &c. Upon these, as upon substrata, I raise the edifice designed in These Vistas.\footnote{Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Reformers, Money-Makers, &c.,” 27.}

Lest there be any mistaking, “I too hail those achievements with pride and joy: then answer that the soul of man will not with such only—nay, not with such at all—be finally satisfied; but needs what, (standing on those and on all things, as the feet stand on the ground,) is addressed to the loftiest, to itself alone.”\footnote{Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “New World Ideas—Representers,” 10.} However, while American industry indicated the material success of democracy, it could not represent the health of democracy \textit{in full}. A major task for Whitman in Democratic Vistas is to

alarm and caution even the political and business reader, and to the utmost extent, against the prevailing delusion that the establishment of free political institutions,
and plentiful intellectual smartness, with general good order, physical plenty, industry, &c., (desirable and precious advantages as they all are,) do, of themselves, determine and yield to our experiment of Democracy the fruitage of success.\footnote{Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “The Gravest Question of All,” 11.}

As he saw it in 1870s America, the nation’s industrial “departments” had hegemonically established more than their share of America’s ideals. Though a vital part of the national spirit, materialism took itself as the national spirit entire. Then as now, in “business, (this all-devouring modern word, business,) the one sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. The magician’s serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician's serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field.”\footnote{Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “The Gravest Question of All,” 12.}

Materialism, that is, seemed to have become the prevailing motivating idea for all American individuals. “We stand, live, move,” Whitman noticed, “in the huge flow of our age's materialism—in its spirituality. We have had founded for us the most positive of lands.”\footnote{Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “Facts Beyond Dreams,” 54-55.} The problem for him is that with the steady progress of these institutions comes the dulling of the individual critical mind:

\begin{quote}
In the highly artificial and materialistic bases of modern civilization, with the corresponding arrangements and methods of living, the force-infusion of intellect alone, the depraving influences of riches just as much as poverty, the absence of all high ideals in character—with the long series of tendencies, shapings, which few are strong enough to resist, and which now seem, with steam-engine speed, to be everywhere turning out the generations of humanity like uniform iron castings.\footnote{Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 73.}
\end{quote}

Industry and productivity had become a substitute for the larger American culture, and therefore, Whitman asks, “As now taught, accepted and carried out, are not the processes
of Culture rapidly creating a class of supercilious infidels, who believe in nothing.”

Throughout America, one only sees “Here and there with dimes on the eyes walking,/To feed the greed of the belly the brains liberally spooning/. . . A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming” in sharp contrast to the “Many sweating, ploughing, thrashing, and then the chaff for payment receiving.” Whitman here is not so much moved, as he is so often wont to do, to celebrate the energy of work, as much as to indict the people’s unthinking, unconditional acceptance of it as a sign of its progress. Later in life, he confessed to Horace Traubel,

> It makes me sick to hear our orators and read our writers telling us how miraculously we’ve grown beyond recognition. We’re a vast body without a soul—we’ve accomplished incontrovertible ends by our mechanical genius, our materialistic concentrations, our mad haste: but after all that may tell rather for death than life.

And so while “[t]he depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater,” a consequence of this is that “[t]he best class we show is but a mob of fashionably-dressed speculators and vulgarians.” The overall ideological effect of materialism for Whitman is that all of American Society, in These States, is cankered, crude, superstitious, and rotten. Political, or law-made society is, and private, or voluntary society, is also. In any vigor, the element of the moral conscience, the most important, the vertebrae, to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking or seriously enfeebled or ungrown.

In Whitman’s mind, the motives impelling late nineteenth century Americans—wealth and status—had come to define their ethical and aesthetic principles, too.

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126 Whitman, quoted in Traubel, “Walt Whitman’s America,” 135.
His solution—not unlike Dewey’s a half century later, was to balance material advancement with a like improvement of personal ideals. For Whitman,

this tremendous and dominant play of solely materialistic bearings upon current life in the United States, with the results as already seen, accumulating, and reaching far into the future, . . . must either be confronted and met by at least an equally subtle and tremendous force-infusion for purposes of Spiritualization, for the pure conscience, for genuine esthetics, and for absolute and primal Manliness and Womanliness.129

As Whitman looked for the People, however, he remained disappointed at the specimens of manliness and womanliness he finds. In the nation’s capital, for example, one notices, to the humorous observer of American attempts at fashion, according to the models of foreign courts and saloons, quite a comic side . . . a sort of high life below stairs business. As if any farce could be funnier, for instance, than the scenes of the crowds, winter nights, meandering around our Presidents and their wives, Cabinet officers, western or other Senators, Representatives, &c.; born of good laboring, mechanic, or farmer stock and antecedents, attempting those full dress receptions, finesse of parlors, foreign ceremonies, etiquettes, &c.130

For different reasons, he also indicts

Boston, with its circles of social mummies, swathed in cerements harder than brass—its bloodless religion, (Unitarianism,) its complacent vanity of scientism and literature, lots of grammatical correctness, mere knowledge, (always wearisome, in itself—its zealous abstractions, ghosts of reforms—I should say, (ever admitting its business powers, its sharp, almost demoniac, intellect, and no lack, in its own way, of courage and generosity)—there is, at present, little of cheering, satisfying sign.131

In the “West, California, &c.” too, Whitman finds a people “yet unformed, puerile, seemingly unconscious of anything above a driving business, or to liberally spend the money made by it in the usual rounds and shows.”132 It is hardly the celebratory Whitman

129 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 73.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ibid. Only from these does Whitman distinguish “New York, of which place I have spoken so sharply, still promises something, in time, out of its tremendous and varied materials, with a certain superiority of intuitions, and the advantage of constant agitation, and ever new and rapid dealings of the cards.”
who resigns to himself, “I have myself little or no hope from what is technically called ‘Society’ in our American cities.” Clearly, as strongly as his work invites ideology critique and as optimistic as he professes to be, in Democratic Vistas he brings his own ideology critique to bear on his material context.

Notwithstanding Whitman’s expressed lack of concern with “material America,” he makes the moves of a materialist ideological critic. He too makes it his aim to “uncover the concealed operations of power and the socio-economic relations connecting the myriad details and representations of our lives. . . . [to] show that apparently disconnected zones of culture are in fact materially linked through the highly differentiated, mediated, and dispersed operation of a systematic logic of exploitation.”

We have seen his sharpest critiques directed at the industrial class, and in so doing shows how in nineteenth century America, just as in Marx’s characterization, that

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\text{[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.} \]

In Whitman’s America, the business class had staked its claim as the hegemonic ideology in society. The “ideas, theories, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and social practices” characteristic of that material class “not only serve[d] principally the interests” of that class; it also put “itself forward as answering to the interests of the whole of the society,” such that those who have been socialized within that arrangement “see their own position

\[133\text{Ibid.}\]
\[135\text{Marx and Engels, German Ideology, 64.}\]
within their social environment in terms of this system (cluster) of ideas, beliefs, and values” until “they explain, evaluate, and justify the way they live their lives in terms of this system.”\textsuperscript{136} In Whitman’s materialized America, the sectional interests of the business class had already come to appear as universally American. For these, we will see, he would substitute an equally penetrating hegemony of the arts.

\textbf{Whitman as Agonist}

Whitman himself was (like Emerson) famously anti-antagonistic. Even in the pre-Civil War period, his newspaper editorials sharply critiqued Northern abolitionists and Southern secessionists, as both fanatical and confrontational. He acknowledges that democracy, “as a paramount scheme, it has yet few or no full realizers and believers.”\textsuperscript{137} But he does “not see, either, that it owes any serious thanks to noted propagandists or champions, or has been essentially helped, though often harmed, by them.”\textsuperscript{138} For one, their work is ineffective. In Whitman’s view, despite their best efforts, “[t]he underlying principles of The States are not honestly believed in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melodramatic screamings,) nor is Humanity itself believed in.”\textsuperscript{139} We have already seen that Whitman’s own approach to reform is a measured, gradualistic one. Of his own quiet advocacy, he explains, “Well, I am holding myself under restraint: as they say out West, I

\textsuperscript{137} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “Far-Stretch, in Distance, Our Vistas,” 33.
'hold my horses': perhaps that best expresses me—radicalism plus philosophy.”\textsuperscript{140} For sure, he admits, “My leanings are all towards the radicals: but I am not in any proper sense of the word a révolutionnaire: I am an evolutionist—not in the first place a révolutionnaire.”\textsuperscript{141} Even as he recalls, “I was in early life very bigoted in my anti-slavery, anti-capital-punishment and so on, so on, [and] I have always had a latent toleration for the people who choose the reactionary course,” he announces that today, “I do not feel as if I belonged to any one party.”\textsuperscript{142} His faith, we remember from above, is in the One.

Still, there is a place for activists and activism in Whitman’s democracy. In particular,

\[\text{[t]he eager and often inconsiderate appeals of reformers and revolutionists are indispensable to counter balance the inertness and fossilism making so large a part of human institutions. The latter will always take care of themselves—the danger being that they rapidly tend to ossify us. The former is to be treated with indulgence, and even respect. As circulation to air, so is agitation and a plentiful degree of speculative license to political and moral sanity. ... These, to Democracy, are what the keel is to the ship, or saltiness to the ocean.}\textsuperscript{143}

These are a necessary part of democracy. Unlike in a totalitarian state, in the democratic state activism of the antagonistic sort serves an essential function—to progressively correct previous judgments. Whitman too believes that “Nations or individuals, we surely learn deepest from unlikeness, from a sincere opponent, from the light thrown even scornfully on dangerous spots and liabilities.”\textsuperscript{144} This practice is especially important in “a Nation like ours, in a sort of geological formation state, trying continually new...”\textsuperscript{144}
experiments, choosing new delegations, is not served by the best men only, but sometimes more by those that provoke it—by the combats they arouse. Thus national rage, fury, discussion, &c., better than content.”

In his overall judgment of American democracy, Whitman decides that, “I think things are as good as they can be—all right as they are . . . including the agitation, including the agitation! especially the agitation! Indeed, I might think agitation the most important factor of all—the most deeply important: to stir, to question, to suspect, to examine, to denounce!” So he favors the agon—just not any particular agonist’s position.

**Whitman as Idealist**

In fact, unlike antagonism, the agon is taken by Whitman as a natural manifestation of good vs. evil in the world. His view, where things are as good as they can be but destined to get better is idealistic in the Hegelian sense. In his judgment,

Not for nothing does evil play its part among men. Judging from the main portions of the history of the world, so far, justice is always in jeopardy, peace walks amid hourly pitfalls, and of slavery, misery, meanness, the craft of tyrants and the credulity of the populace, in some of their protean forms, no voice can at any time say, They are not. The clouds break a little, and the sun shines out—but soon and certain the lowering darkness falls again, as if to last forever. Yet is there an immortal courage and prophecy in every sane soul that cannot, must not, under any circumstances, capitulate. *Vive*, the attack—the perennial assault! *Vive*,

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145 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Evil Also Serves,” 31. Whitman’s view of electoral politics is as a sport. He refers to the “Presidential” and asks, “What is more dramatic than the spectacle we have seen repeated, and doubtless long shall see—the popular judgment taking the successful candidates on trial in the offices—standing off, as it were, and observing them and their doings for a while, and always giving, finally, the fit, exactly due reward?”

the unpopular cause—the spirit that audaciously aims—the never-abandoned
efforts, pursued the same amid opposing proofs and precedents.147

Assuming that evil is here to stay, ostensibly high-functioning democracies have robust
mechanisms for challenging its hegemony. The inevitable presence in any democracy of
“the struggle, the traitor, the wily person in office, scrofulous wealth, the surfeit of
prosperity, the demonism of greed, the hell of passion, the decay of faith, the long
postponement, the fossil-like lethargy” ideally entails in just proportion “ceaseless . . .
revolutions, prophets, thunderstorms, deaths, births, new projections and invigorations of
ideas and men.”148 For that reason, Whitman says of “the corruption,” “I will confess to
you I do not so much alarm myself—though very painful and full of dismay—at the
corruption in all public life—It is but an outlet and expression on the surface of
something far deeper—namely in the blood.”149 In addition to being ineffective, it is also
useless for the most extreme antagonists to
talk in a still sharper tone, and widely extend our faultfinding, but that we plainly
see, even in directions where our scourge might fall the heaviest, only, after all,
faults and evils inevitable to the free growth of some of the most precious law-
characteristics of our land and age—even those we are here attempting to
enforce.)150

Taking Hegel’s own terminology, Whitman’s idealism promises that despite the
recurrence of evil, “Indirectly, but surely, goodness, virtue, law, (of the very best,) follow
Freedom.”151 In one of his less humanistic moments, Whitman justifies democracy by
reasoning that the justification of democracy is not “either on the ground that the People,

147 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Indefiniteness in 1868,” 29.
150 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “A Crayon’d, Democratic Personality,” 42.
151 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Reformers, Money-Makers, &c.,” 26-27.
the masses, even the best of them, are, in their latent or exhibited qualities, essentially sensible and good—nor on the ground of their rights; but that, good or bad, rights or no rights,” the universal ideal of Freedom is “sufficient in its scientific aspects, cold as ice, reasoning, deductive, clear and passionless as crystal.”\footnote{Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Consideration—Customs—Law—the Esthetic—Cohesion,” 23.} A people given absolute Freedom would one day realize absolute Justice. This universal ideal of justice is the teleology of the democratic program—in Whitman’s terms, the “development, from the eternal bases, and the fit expression, of absolute Conscience, moral, Justice.”\footnote{Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “When the Present Century Closes,” 62.} For Whitman,

there is nothing else higher, for Nation, Individual, or for Literature”—incidentally, the three divisions of Democratic Vistas—“than the idea, and practical realization and expression of the idea, of Conscience, kept at topmost mark, absolute in itself, well cultivated, uncontaminated by the manifold weeds, the cheats, changes, and vulgarities of the fashions of the world.\footnote{Ibid.}

Though this sense of universal justice will be “tried by subtlest comparisons, analyses,” these efforts would “somewhere fail, somehow become vain. Then noiseless, with flowing steps, the lord, the sun, the last Ideal comes. By the names Right, Justice, Truth, we suggest, but do not describe it.”\footnote{Ibid.}

As with any ideal, justice is easier to speak of than to implement. Notwithstanding that Freedom and Justice are usually taken to be counterproductive to each other’s realization, when they are found in real life, both are taken, Marx might say, in material (or, “practical”) terms. Whitman’s vision of “Conscience” is different: “To the world of men it remains a dream, an idea as they call it. But no dream is it to the wise—but the
proudest, almost only solid lasting thing of all.” The wise to which he refers (other than himself) is Hegel. He mentions Hegel a couple of times in Democratic Vistas, but treats his thoughts in greater detail in a couple of unpublished pieces. There he specifically identifies his own metaphysical preferences with “the doctrine of Hegel,” namely “that which considers the whole concrete show of things, the world, man himself, either individually or aggregated in History, as resting on a spiritual, invisible basis, continually shifting, yet the real substance, and the only immutable one.” Clearly, Whitman had been absorbing Hegel’s Philosophy of History, wherein the German posits

Universal history—as already demonstrated—shows the development of the consciousness of Freedom on the part of Spirit, and of the consequent realisation of that Freedom. This development implies a gradation—a series of increasingly adequate expressions or manifestations of Freedom, which result from its Idea. The logical, and—as still more prominent—the dialectical nature of the Idea in general, viz. that it is self-determined—that it assumes successive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages, gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape;—this [is the] necessity of its nature, and the necessary series of pure abstract forms which the Idea successively assumes.

That Freedom has a life of its own, and assumes different, better forms must have had some appeal to Whitman, who sees America itself as Freedom’s last best manifestation. For him, American history and world history seemed to coincide when Hegel defined “History in general is therefore the development of Spirit in Time, as Nature is the development of the Idea in Space.”

\[156\] Ibid.  
\[157\] Whitman, Notebooks, VI, 2010.  
\[159\] Hegel, Philosophy of History, 75. Charles Peirce’s view can be considered Hegelian when he argues, “The one intelligible theory of the universe is that of objective idealism, that matter is effete mind, inveterate habits becoming physical laws” (Charles Peirce, “The Architecture of Theories,” Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vol. 6, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University
Whitman would have known what many today see as Hegel’s most distinctive and most dangerous contribution to the history of ideas. Although the necessary development of the Spirit over time is positive, it necessarily leaves victims in its dialectical wake. In Hegel’s voice,

Spirit—consuming the envelope of its existence—does not merely pass into another envelope, nor rise rejuvenescent from the ashes of its previous form; it comes forth exalted, glorified, a purer spirit. It certainly makes war upon itself—consumes its own existence; but in this very destruction it works up with existence into a new form, and each successive phase becomes in its turn a material, working on which it exalts itself to a new grade.\(^{160}\)

This blind faith, come what may to whomever it may, is what most ideological critics, from Marx onwards, find a disturbing rationalization of individual, social, and national freedom to justify a certain order and commit atrocities against nonbelievers.

Whitman nonetheless is a believer in what for him is actually “an old nucleus-thought, as in the Vedas, and no doubt before, but never hitherto brought so absolutely to the front, fully surcharged with modern scientism and facts and made the sole entrance to each and all.”\(^{161}\) He accepts the moral implications of the steady, progressive march of the Spirit in time, that

the whole earth, . . . with its infinite variety, the past, the surroundings of to-day, or what may happen in the future, the contrarieties of material with spiritual, and of natural with artificial, are all, to the eye of the ensemblist, but necessary sides and unfoldings, different steps or links in the endless process of Creative thought, which, amid numberless apparent failures and contradictions is held together by central and never-broken unity—not contradictions or failures at all, but radiations of one consistent and eternal purpose; the whole mass of everything

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\(^{160}\) Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 76.

\(^{161}\) Whitman, “Carlyle,” 175-176.
steadily, unerringly tending and flowing toward the permanent *utile* and *morale*, as rivers to oceans. As life is the whole law and incessant effort of the visible universe, and death only the other or invisible side of the same, so the *utile*, so truth, so health, are the unseen but immutable laws of the moral universe, and vice and disease, with all their perturbations, are but transient, even if ever so prevalent expressions.\(^{162}\)

The overall design of history for the idealist is natural and therefore always “creative.”

That which is taken socially as tragic, immoral, or unfortunate—slavery or civil war, for example—are to be seen as somehow “for the best”—for the greater good of the nation or of humankind. With Hegel, Whitman justifies this lesson in the dynamics of Nature (“the development of the Idea in *Space*” for Hegel), advising that

> Of a grand and universal Nation, when one appears, perhaps it ought to have morally what Nature has physically, the power to take in and assimilate all the human strata, all kinds of experience, and all theories and whatever happens or occurs, or offers itself, or fortune, or what call’d misfortune. \(^{163}\)

No nation is better positioned in time and space to fulfil this prophesied role. If the Civil War marked its most perturbed most diseased state, its ending had proven that like Nature, this nation is supremely resilient.

From the point of view of Reconstruction, a progressive-minded Whitman felt proudly validated in his earlier characterization of “These ever-equal States, . . . that history entire is theirs—all the past, all the round globe is theirs that sole product of antecedents, we accept for the roots of this nation no less than all the breeds, all the materials of the past.”\(^{164}\) Given his equation of America and democracy, he sees the same optimistic progression for democracy, too. Though, says Whitman, “We have frequently printed the word Democracy,” he “cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of

\(^{162}\) Whitman, “Carlyle,” 176.
\(^{163}\) Walt Whitman, *Two Rivulets* (Camden, NJ: New Republic Print, 1876), 22.
which still sleeps, quite unawakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry
tempests, out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue. It is a great word,
whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted. It
is, in some sort, younger brother of another great and often-used word, Nature, whose
history also waits unwritten.”

But in accordance with Whitman’s Hegelian idealism, its
unfulfilled progression around the world is all but assured.

**Whitman as Optimist**

With the confidence of Whitman, the National Endowment for Democracy today
advertises the American political system as still the best “means whereby society can
resolve social conflicts without debilitating violence and adjust peacefully to ever
changing conditions.”

In a self-sustaining “system of representative government in
which leaders are chosen in freely contested fair and periodic elections, . . . the rights of
individuals and groups are assured through the just and equitable rule of law.”

However, conceiving of democracy in this way, Larry Diamond shows us, actually leads
to complacency on the part of citizens. After a citizen’s basic rights have been codified in
laws and norms, the need for active participation is reduced to vote-casting, and “Once
they have acquitted themselves of this duty, their elected representatives take over. In the

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165 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 37.
daily functioning of democracy, the public is marginal.” Insofar as democracy is a matter of technical policies, things just seem to work themselves out in the long run.

Whitman reassured the nation during Reconstruction that “we stood the former trial—solved it—and, though this is much harder, will, I doubt not, triumphantly solve this.” This is our birthright: “Blessed are the people where, (the nation's Unity and Identity preserved at all hazards,) strong emergencies, throes, occur. Strong emergencies will continually occur in America, and will be provided for.” The inevitability of progress that both the Endowment and Whitman assume leads to what English political theorist David Runciman calls the “confidence trap.” Because “Democrats throughout the ages have believed democracy to be in crisis, and yet, time and again, democracies have recovered,” then “if we overestimate the ability of democracies to overcome any crisis, we grow too complacent to activate the system’s inherent strengths.”

To counteract that inertia, Whitman proposes that

That which really balances and conserves the social and political world is not so much legislation, police, treaties, and dread of punishment, as the latent eternal intuitional sense, in humanity, of fairness, manliness, decorum, &c. Indeed, the perennial regulation, control and oversight, by self-suppliance, is sine qua non to Democracy; . . . a great passionate Body, in and along with which goes a great masterful Spirit.

While reformers sought a more perfect body, his advocacy would be on behalf of a perennial, self-correcting Spirit. For his vision of democracy, “We want no reforms, no

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170 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “What these Pages are For, To Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 75.
171 Meaney and Mounk, “What Was Democracy?”
172 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “A Moral Purpose behind Everything,” 69-70
institutions, no parties—We want a living principle as nature has, under which nothing can go wrong.”^173

That Whitman believes it possible that, by some ideal means, “nothing can go wrong signifies for many all that is wrong with the American ideology. Whitman does appear to bury the particular conflicts that surround him. Critics have found “scarcely a mention of the enemy,” (though it is not clear who the enemy is), as well as a disquieting tendency to “celebrate heterogeneity while sidestepping disagreement,”^174 for example, over the rights of free African-Americans. Defenders will say, “Whitman's feelings about the South were so mixed and so complicated that he found it much easier to construct a positive rhetoric (in favor of union, democracy, liberty, etc.) rather than a negative rhetoric.”^175 We have already heard him confess an affinity with the South—at least the white South—so perhaps this is true.

Regardless of motive, his optimism about race and similar topics is notoriously efflorescent and characteristically so. Kenneth Burke entitles Whitman “Poeta Americanissimus,” commending him as “‘Celebrant,’ . . . the poet who seems to have done best by the job of giving us a truly ‘American’ song, even in the strictly political

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^173 Whitman, *Notebooks*, I, 145. Grandiloquently, Whitman announces, “Above the doors of teaching the inscription is to appear. Though little or nothing may be absolutely known, perceived, except from a point of view which is evanescent, yet we know at least one permanency, that Time and Space, in the will of God, furnish successive chains, completions of material births and beginnings, solve all discrepancies, fears and doubts, and eventually fulfil happiness—and that the prophecy of those births, namely Spiritual results, throws the true arch over all teaching, all science. The local considerations of sin, disease, deformity, ignorance., death, &c., and their measurement by superficial mind, and ordinary legislation and theology, are to be met by Science, boldly accepting, promulgating this faith, and planting the seeds of superber laws—of the explication of the physical universe through the spiritual—and clearing the way for a Religion, sweet and unimpugnable alike to little child or great savan” (Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Nature as Much Ideal as Real,” 64-65).


sense. In its way it was remotely analogous to what Virgil’s Aeneid was in celebrating the Roman hegemony made possible by the destruction of Carthage.”176 Whitman’s opening words to the world—“I celebrate myself”—announce his disposition, and he gladly confesses “I believe in all that—in baseball, in picnics, in freedom: I believe in the jolly all-round time—with the parsons and the police eliminated.”177

In his optimism, Whitman takes his cues from Nature, which, “largely considered, involves the questions of the esthetic, the emotional, and the religious—and involves happiness.”178 In fact, happiness is Whitman’s (not to mention Aristotle’s) term for the universal human ideal. Most of us, given a chance to simply live in Nature, would “from and in those conditions, find it enough merely to live—and would, in their relations to the sky, air, water, trees, &c., and to the countless common shows, and in the fact of Life itself, discover and achieve happiness.”179 Similarly, if “[m]en and women, and the earth and all upon it, are . . . taken as they are,” we would discover the same “eternal tendencies of all toward happiness.”180 For Whitman, “the only point of sane philosophy”—as opposed to critique—is that the former is “ever regarding the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness, never inconsistent with what is clear to the senses and to the soul.”181

Therefore, for better or worse, everything tended in Whitman’s world to

Joyful Conclusions: Whether it is constitutional or what not with me, I stand for the sunny point of view—stand for the joyful conclusions. This is not because I

178 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Nature as Much Ideal as Real,” 63-64. Emphasis added.
179 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
merely guess: it’s because my faith seems to belong to the nature of things—is imposed, cannot be escaped: can better account for life and what goes with life than the opposite theory.\footnote{182}{Walt Whitman, “Joyful Conclusions,” in \textit{Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel}, ed. Gary Schmidgall (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001/1888), 60.}

His poetic vision was ever trained on an America-to-be, rather than, as some have argued, the very different America-that-was in his time.

\section*{§ Ideology Critique: Deconstruction and Exclusion}

The idea that by some principle, nothing can go wrong, that evil is necessary for the inevitable triumph of the Good, in Body and Spirit, for both One and many, makes it seem that Whitman has adopted Hegel’s dualism, too. As we have seen, the central paradox Whitman wants to solve is reflected in the question, “Must not \textit{the virtue of modern Individualism}, continually enlarging, usurping all, seriously affect, perhaps keep down entirely, in America, the like of the ancient virtue of Patriotism, \textit{the fervid and absorbing love of general country}?” In his Hegelian mind, he feels confident enough to answer, “I have no doubt myself that the two will merge, and will mutually profit and brace each other, and that from them a greater product, a third, will arise. But I feel that at present they and their oppositions form a serious problem and paradox in the United States.”\footnote{183}{Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “Individualism Versus the Aggregate,” 15.}

Against this, Jacques Derrida argues that Hegelian idealism “consists precisely of a \textit{reléve} of the binary oppositions of classical idealism, a resolution of contradiction into a third term that comes in order to \textit{aufheben}, to deny while raising up, while idealizing,
while sublimating into an anamnesic interiority (Errinnerung), while interning difference in a self-presence.”¹⁸⁴ This is the sort of convenient dialectic Derrida targets. For him, full-blown critique “cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization” like Whitman’s. Instead, it must, “by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of nondiscursive forces”¹⁸⁵—that is, the material world. The truly active antagonist that seeks an “overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated,”¹⁸⁶ must go further than simply unmask dominant and muted ideologies. “[S]imply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics,” says Derrida, amounts to “simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it.”¹⁸⁷ The idea is to change the ideological and material system entire.

As a result, a survey of “ideology critique” reveals a typical cynicism. As Sacvan Bercovitch characterizes this work, “its diagnoses feed on social disease . . . We come to feel, reading these works, that the American ideology is a system of ideas the service of evil rather than (like any ideology) a system of ideas wedded for good and evil to a certain social order.”¹⁸⁸ We get the impression from these studies that ideology is “a

¹⁸⁵ Derrida, Margins, 329.
¹⁸⁷ Derrida, Positions, 41-42.
systematic form of collective pseudologia”¹¹⁸⁹ and the study of it as “an inquiry into the ways in which people may come to invest in their own unhappiness.”¹⁹⁰ The “strange marriage of pathology and ideology so characteristic of our moment”¹⁹¹ that Robert Penn Warren finds, however, is anathema to Whitman’s project. Whitman positions Democratic Vistas, we remember, “in offset to Carlyle's ever-lurking pessimism and world-decadence,” delivered by one who “by the spell of himself and his circumstance, sees darkness and despair in the sum of the workings of God's providence, and who, in that, denies or prevaricates, is, no matter how much piety plays on his lips, the most radical sinner and infidel.”¹⁹²

Responding to this attitude of cynicism, in a recent essay in the Quarterly Journal of Speech, Robert Ivie calls for a more civil critique on the part of students of rhetoric.¹⁹³ Specifically, he positions dissent as a more democratic alternative to simple antagonism or “protest” that characterizes struggles for hegemony. Protest, highlighted in studies of social movements on behalf of labor, civil rights, gay rights, feminism, or environmentalism, operate on terms of opposition, strain, and strife. Says Ivie, protest “signals a schism—the estrangement of a house divided against itself. The vocabulary of war is readily applied to dissent of this kind, . . . to express a clash that produces a serious break in the political order.”¹⁹⁴ Though the end of most movements is basic structural change, the means of changing the status quo inevitably tends to “agitation, denunciation,

¹⁹⁰ Eagleton, “Ideology,” xiii.
¹⁹¹ Warren, Democracy and Poetry, 87.
¹⁹² Ibid.
¹⁹⁴ Ivie, “Enabling,” 47.
rejection and alienation.” Demands, based as they are on a particular moral code, are nonnegotiable, and the goal is victory over defeat. Robust debate is vital, of course, to a healthy democracy—without it, the people don’t rule. The problem with the interpretations of ideology critique is that their characterizations are necessarily exclusive—most obviously of “the enemy,” but also of any alternative moral positions.

However one defines democracy, at the heart of the arrangement is the idea of inclusion—not exclusion. Kenneth Burke had this in mind when he redefined persuasion as identification. So too, this dissertation argues, did Walt Whitman, when in his 1871 *Democratic Vistas*, he drew up a new constitution for Reconstruction-era America. In that book, he articulates a new philosophy of democracy, one that recognizes dignity in both the (macroscopic) nation and the (microscopic) individual, more so than in dominant groups. As such, Whitman’s project represents a uniquely American answer to the more traditional problem of the One and many—the subject of this dissertation in general.

Still, as Ivie acknowledges, “a synergic relationship of working together for mutual enhancement and empowerment cannot be extended too far without encountering its own contradictions.” For defenders, Whitman’s own democratic system could be considered pragmatic, “rel[y]ing upon a certain measure of conflict, not on perpetual social harmony.” This, then, may be the reason he “built his writing on maintaining the contradictions (and setting up a dynamic) between strength and hope, the individual and the en masse, pride and sympathy, the United States (the historically contingent nation)…

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196 Ibid.
and America (the idealized democratic nation).”

From this perspective, the purpose of *Democratic Vistas*, not to mention its dual structure, is to illustrate and dignify these dialectical tensions between the American One and the many. However, as the ideological critic might judge it, “Whitman's rhetorical strategy often involves not resolving contradictions, so much as evading them,” and in so doing, “the most extreme differences of social class, profession, origin, and gender level out through the steady and ardent incantation that melts differences into mere variation.”

Or maybe it is the case, as David Brooks puts it, “Whitman was teaching an important lesson here: It is misleading to think one can arrive at a single, consistent judgment about the United States (or perhaps about any society),” that “[w]hen it comes to the health of the country and its culture, the highest highs and the lowest lows are simultaneous and adjacent. Extremes must be accepted without regard for consistency.”

Whitman boasts

\[ \text{I am the poet of slaves and of masters of slaves} \\
\text{I am the poet of the body} \\
\text{And I am} \\
\text{I am the poet of the body} \\
\text{And I am the poet of the soul.} \\
\text{I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters.} \\
\text{And I will stand between the master and the slaves,} \\
\text{Entering into both so that both will understand} \]

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me alike.\textsuperscript{202}

As an open-armed philosophy, this sounds inviting.

As a practical matter, however, it seems morally bankrupt to believe of the question, “Must Runaway Slaves Be Delivered Back?,” a gradualistic answer like “They must. Many things may have the go-by, but good faith shall never have the go-by,” and \textit{at the same time} exhort, “You young men! American mechanics, farmers, boatmen, manufacturers, and all work-people of the South, the same as the North! you are either to abolish slavery, or it will abolish you.”\textsuperscript{203} As readers of Whitman, we can either dismiss his ambiguity as a product of the turbulent nineteenth century, and therefore irrelevant today. This would be easy for ideological critiques to show. The argument of this dissertation is that the structure of his thought is illustrative. Specifically, he offers a democratic alternative to the antagonistic model of ideology critique—one that is not deconstruction—one vs, many—but reconstruction—one and many. His represents an early manifestation of what Ivie recommends: “[n]judging dissent out of the category of rejection and into the category of revision.”\textsuperscript{204} Ivie’s alternative understanding of critique “puts differences into play, short of treating adversaries as enemies,” and “stretches a society’s ways of thinking and feeling short of reaching the breaking point of an ordered world.”\textsuperscript{205}

In other words, where the hegemonic struggle typically involves \textit{antagonism} to the point of disintegration and victory, Whitman, with both Laclau and Burke, argues for sustained \textit{agonism} to the point of a fuller integration. The only reason “difference may

\textsuperscript{202} Whitman, \textit{Notebooks}, I, 67.  
\textsuperscript{203} Whitman, \textit{Notebooks}, VI, 2132.  
\textsuperscript{204} Ivie, “Enabling,” 50.  
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid.
come to be felt as an antithesis,” says Burke, is that we can conceive of difference in at least two ways. One the one hand, “[w]e have the polar kind of otherness, as a certain kind of villainy is implicit in a certain kind of heroism, and vice versa,” and on the other, there is “synecdochic otherness.”\(^{206}\) Whereas “[p]olar otherness unites things that are opposite to one another; synecdochic otherness unites things that are simply different from one another.”\(^{207}\) Given “man’s original biological divisiveness (the ‘centrality of the nervous system’)\(^{208}\) . . . “(whereby my bellyache is my private property and not yours),”\(^{209}\) for Burke, it should be seen as more natural that individuals are more different from one another than opposite one another, and therefore identification is not a matter of overcoming opposition, but of integrating differences.\(^{210}\)

Burke’s very Platonic interpretation of dialectic is helpful here. Unlike the polar view of dialectic, Plato’s is a dialectic “concerned with different levels of grounding.”\(^{211}\)

Between them, we find “two movements . . . the ‘Upward Way’ . . . [and the] ‘Downward

\(^{206}\) Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 77-78.

\(^{207}\) Ibid.


\(^{210}\) In a couple of key passages from *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke explains how even ostensibly real differences are nevertheless also constructed: “Distinctions, we might say, arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is merged. They have been thrown from a liquid center to the surface, where they have congealed. Let one of these crusted distinctions return to its source, and in this alchemic center it may be remade, again becoming molten liquid, and may enter into new combinations, whereat it may be again thrown forth as a new crust, a different distinction. So that A may become non-A. But not merely by a leap from one state to the other. Rather, we must take A back into the ground of its existence, the logical substance that is its causal ancestor, and on to a point where it is consubstantial with non-A; then we may return, this time emerging with non-A instead. . . . And so with our five terms: certain formal interrelationships prevail among these terms, by reason of their role as attributes of a common ground or substance. Their participation in a common ground makes for transformability. At every point where the field covered by any one of these terms overlaps upon the field covered by any other, there is an alchemic opportunity, whereby we can put one philosophy or doctrine of motivation into the alembic, make the appropriate passes, and take out another. From the central moltenness, where all the elements are fused into one togetherness, there are thrown forth, in separate crusts, such distinctions as those between freedom and necessity, activity and passiveness, cooperation and competition, cause and effect, mechanism and teleology” (*A Grammar*, xix).

Way’.”212 As so often happens in rhetorical disagreements over terminology, “[e]ncountering some division, we retreat to a level of terms that allow for some kind of merger (as “near” and “far” are merged in the concept of “distance”); then we “return” to the division, now seeing it as pervaded by the spirit of the “One” we had found in our retreat.”213

The same can be said, this dissertation argues, of any particular term: the cognitive process of interpreting even a word operates in part by determining the level of specificity an author intended before evaluating its fitness as a claim. At least this is so in an open-minded attempt. The reconstructive, rhetorical power of this attitude is that “the merger-division shift draws upon the fact that [just as] any distinction is liable to sharpening into a contrast,” perhaps more importantly, “any contrast may be attenuated [back] into the form of a distinction.”214 Less a matter of conflict resolution, then, Burke’s theory of identification turns on finding common ground more than defeating an opponent:

We need never deny the presence of strife, enmity, faction as a characteristic motive of rhetorical expression. We need not close our eyes to their almost tyrannous ubiquity in human relations; we can be on the alert always to see how such temptations to strife are implicit in the institutions that condition human relationships; yet we can at the same time always look beyond this order, to the principle of identification in general, a terministic choice justified by the fact that the identifications in the order of love are also characteristic of rhetorical expression.215

A properly inclusive hearing, that is, would attend to all possible meanings, but more importantly, it is always a matter of choice. “In any event,” says Burke, “the

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213 Burke *A Grammar*, 440.
transformation from the merger of the representative role to the division of the antithetic role represents a change of principle.”

Critically speaking, “the Marxist analysis would apparently begin with a principle of division,” as when the ideological critic “admonishes us to look for ‘mystification’ at any point where the social divisiveness caused by property and the division of labor is obscured by unitary terms” or ideographs.

Idealism proper, on the other hand, “begins with a principle of merger.”

As Whitman and this dissertation show, to begin with the principle of merger represents a new democratic principle. If the aim of community-building in a democracy is “to discern how to begin bridging the conditions of estrangement and countering conditions of hierarchic psychosis,” critics should, as Robert Ivie charges, “write books (and articles) ‘for tolerance and contemplation’ and against ‘the torrents of ill will,’ to write in the spirit of both/and rather than either/or and thus toward the end of operating under the sign of error (which can be corrected) instead of evil (which must be purged).” Citizens, in turn, should adopt this same inclusive mentality. Whitman’s proposed attitude is best captured by his own defense:

> Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes).

Here Whitman (the container) proclaims himself representative of the nation (the container). From this vantage, he proclaims, “I speak the password primeval, I give the

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221 Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 82.
sign of democracy. By God, I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.”

What he teaches his readers is that each of us has the same representative capacity. In the most perfect union, we would all uphold the imperative “Whoever degrades another degrades me.”

Whitman’s larger ethical system (elaborated more fully in Chapter 5) thus turns on what could be called the synecdochic imperative: “When the whole combined force of the nation is champion for one human being, outraged in his rights of life or liberty, no matter what color, birth or degree of ignorance or education he or she may be, then the law is grand.”

As the remainder of this dissertation will show, this axiology of One and many is built on the framework of Whitman’s ideal social order, his ontology of One and many.

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222 Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 32.
224 Whitman, Notebooks, VI, 2146.
Chapter 2

Democracy and Reconstruction: One and Many

In this chapter, Whitman takes Reconstruction-era politics—party politics, in particular—as symptomatic of what is wrong with American democracy. Parties, by their very nature, are partial, ill-equipped to stand for the whole. Whitman’s preferred platform is, not unlike Washington and Paine before him, general—and “idiocrasy of universalism,” as he calls it. Close readers will discern in *Democratic Vistas* a Whitman who is capable of both assimilating differences toward his ideal One, and accommodating differences on behalf of every individual in celebration of the many. In his example, we find—contra contemporary political theory—a mode whereby one can conceive of “the People” as constituted by both processes at once. As a matter of language, he anticipates Kenneth Burke’s terminological politics of inclusion (merger) as an alternative to the politics of exclusion (division). Conceiving of term “the People” in such varied modalities means that as Whitman literally (verbally) reconstructs the relationships which make up the American experience—he reconstructs, as part of his larger philosophical project, its very ontology, the subject of this and the next chapter.

§ Reconstructing “The People”

**Whitman on Party Politics**

As we saw in Chapter 1, Whitman sings full-throated of the nation (the One) and the individual (the many), this despite the misgivings of those who find both songs to be ideologically extreme, not to mention diametrically opposed in nature and consequence. Whitman’s contradictory values amount for some to no values at all. By what ideal could one be both the poet of slaves and of masters of slaves? It would have to be an agonistic, built on inclusivity, where distinctions tend toward merger, in order to replace the divisive, exclusionary tactics of adversarial party politics. Against this “partial” brand of
politics, Whitman positions himself as “impartial,” declaring “I do not feel as if I belonged to any one party.”

Training his critical eye on Reconstruction-era politics in Washington, D.C., Whitman reports, “(November, 1868,) the din of disputation rages around me. Acrd the temper of the parties, vital the pending questions. . . . with loudest threat and bustle” Politicking then (as today) had become so antagonistic as to make it difficult to accomplish any meaningful policy goals. “Reconstruction,” as Whitman saw it, was thus “still in abeyance,” enough for him to diagnose of American governance overall that “[t]he whole of the official services of America, National, State, and Municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the Judiciary, are steeped, saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, maladministration.”

In particular, he faults party-based democracy and parties, specifically rejecting their hegemonic practices. He says of “Party Platforms, Sections, [and] Creeds,”

What impudence! For any one platform, section creed, no matter which, to expect to subordinate all the rest, and rule the immense diversity of These free and equal States! Platforms are of no account. The right man is every thing. [sic] With the downfall of parties go the platforms they are forever putting up, lowering, turning, repainting, and changing.

Ever a fight for the hegemony, in the nineteenth-century game of American politics, the winner took all, both while in office —“the alarming spectacle of parties usurping the

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227 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “The Gravest Question of All,” 12; “Evil Also Serves,” 30. Elsewhere in *Democratic Vistas* Whitman characterizes the political context by quoting a reportedly anonymous outsider, who says, “I have found your vaunted America honey-combed from top to toe with infidelism, even to itself and its own programme. I have marked the brazen hell-faces of secession and slavery gazing defiantly from all the windows and doorways. I have everywhere found, primarily, thieves and scalliwags arranging the nominations to offices, and sometimes filling the offices themselves. I have found the North just as full of bad stuff as the South” (“Evil Also Serves,” 30).
228 Whitman, *Notebooks*, VI, 2130.
Government, and openly and shamelessly wielding it for party purposes,”—and before that, during the electioneering process, when those offices are “arranged, won, by caucusing, money, the favoritism or pecuniary interest of rings, the superior manipulation of the ins over the outs, or the outs over the ins.” For Whitman, ostensibly representative politics had devolved into one of two parties assuming and asserting that their partial platform nonetheless best serves the interests of all. In keeping with the ideological understanding of hegemony, Whitman notices, once the ballots are cast, “the millions of sturdy farmers and mechanics are thus [made] the helpless supple-jacks of comparatively few politicians.”

However, because in Whitman’s world progress generally wins out, so too would these shifting, superficial politics eventually yield honestly democratic results. Despite “these whirls, incredible flippancy, the blind fury of parties, infidelity, entire lack of first-class captains and leaders,” he remains reassured, because “well I know that behind them, and whatever their eventuations, the really vital things remain safe and certain, and all the needed work goes on.” So, “[t]hough it is no doubt important who is elected President or Governor, Mayor or Legislator,” for Whitman, “there are other, quieter

231 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Evil Also Serves,” 30. Here in *Democratic Vistas* Whitman characterizes these politicians in the words of an reportedly anonymous outsider, who finds, “I have found your vaunted America honey-combed from top to toe with infidelism, even to itself and its own programme. I have marked the brazen hell-faces of secession and slavery gazing defiantly from all the windows and doorways. I have everywhere found, primarily, thieves and scalliwags arranging the nominations to offices, and sometimes filling the offices themselves. I have found the North just as full of bad stuff as the South.”
contingencies, infinitely more important,"\textsuperscript{234} namely that in a democracy, \textit{the people will always rule}.

Ever the idealist, Whitman believed that “Time, with soon or later superciliousness, disposes of Presidents, Congressmen, party platforms, and such. Anon, it clears the stage of each and any mortal shred that thinks itself so potent to its day; . . . But the People ever remains, tendencies continue, and all the idiocratic transfers in unbroken chain go on.”\textsuperscript{235} Thus, the “still deeper, amply confronting, dominating truth” about democracy is that

Over those politicians and great and little rings, and over all their insolence and wiles, and over the powerfulest parties, looms a Power, too sluggish may-be, but ever holding decisions and decrees in hand, ready, with stern process, to execute them as soon as plainly needed, and at times, indeed, summarily crushing to atoms the mightiest parties, even in the hour of their pride.\textsuperscript{236}

The power Whitman describes is the endurance of “The People,” never term-limited and never absent.

From a general, non-partisan point of view—from a vista, as Whitman sees it—“America, it may be, is doing very well, \textit{upon the whole}, notwithstanding these antics of the parties and their leaders, these half-brained nominees, and the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers.”\textsuperscript{237} Examined microscopically, the representatives for America may be corrupt, but on the whole—“to views of very largest scope”\textsuperscript{238}—the system and the People-power behind it remain healthy.

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{236} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “Evil Also Serves,” 30.
\textsuperscript{237} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “The Element First, Last, Indispensable,” 43. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid.
So even though “[i]t is the fashion among dilettantes [sic] and fops”—not to mention ideological critics—“to decry the whole formulation and personnel of the active politics of America, as beyond redemption, and to be carefully kept away from,” Whitman advises “See you that you do not fall into this error. . . . To practically enter into Politics is an important part of American personalism.”239 To “every young man, North and South, earnestly studying these things,” he recommends, “I advise you to enter more strongly yet into politics. Always inform yourself; always do the best you can; always vote,” provided that you “[d]isengage yourself from parties. They have been useful, and to some extent remain so; but the floating, uncommitted electors, farmers, clerks, mechanics, the masters of parties—watching aloof, inclining victory this side or that side—such are the ones most needed, present and future.”240 In Whitman’s most ideal democracy, the individual citizen—not a party—remains the better representative of the whole.

Whitman on Partiality and Wholeness

Represent the One, the all, or nothing, Whitman might say. In keeping with Hegel’s “catholic standard and faith,” Whitman reasons, “Not any one party, or any one form of government, is absolutely and exclusively true.”241 For Whitman, political parties were no different than so many denominations of religion, and in both fields, “[a]ll apparent contradictions in the statement . . . by different ages, nations, churches, points of

239 Ibid.
view, are but fractional and imperfect expressions of one essential unity, from which they all proceed—crude endeavors or distorted parts, to be regarded both as distinct and united.242 Where these institutions offer only partial, divisive programs, Whitman devotes his idealistic efforts toward a more perfect union.

In general, idealism dictated for Whitman that

[t]he specious, the unjust, the cruel, and what is called the unnatural, though not only permitted but in a certain sense, (like shade to light,) inevitable in the divine scheme, are by the whole constitution of that scheme, partial, inconsistent, temporary, and though having ever so great an ostensible majority, are certainly destin’d to failure after causing great suffering.243

The Civil War, for example, driven as it was by deep and partial convictions, was for Whitman not so much “a struggle of two distinct and separate peoples, but a conflict (often happening, and very fierce) between the passions and paradoxes of one and the same identity—perhaps the only terms on which that identity could really become fused, homogeneous and lasting.”244 The disagreement, that is, was between different parts of a whole—“parties”—not absolutely distinct species of the American genus. In Whitman’s mind, this was a whole that could be restored.

From the perspective of “merger”, it seems to Whitman as important that “the thought of universality—the conception of a divine purpose in the cosmolical world and in history, the realization that knowledge and sciences however important are branches, radiations only—each one relative” is a more appropriate “grand antedating background and appropriate entrance to . . . the fit understanding of the position of one’s self in Nature, to the performance of life’s duties, to the appreciation and application of sane

242 Ibid.
243 Ibid.
standards to politics“ than any particular denomination or party. Better to have universal ideals as personal ethical constructs, than to adopt any partial ethical system.

For the broadest perspective, one need look no further than Nature, (the only complete, actual poem,) existing calmly in the divine scheme, containing all, content, careless of the criticisms of a day, or these endless and wordy chatteringers. And lo! to the consciousness of the soul, the permanent Identity, the thought, the something, before which the magnitude even of Democracy, Art, Literature, &c., dwindle, becomes partial, measurable-something that fully satisfies, (which those do not.) That something is the All, and the idea of All, with the accompanying idea of Eternity, and of itself, the Soul, buoyant, indestructible, sailing space forever,—visiting every region, as a ship the sea. If citizens, parties, and nations consider their own identities as vital parts of some All, perhaps their democratic decisions will be based on truly communal values. As Whitman recommends, “One good of knowing the great politics of nature is to initiate their rectitude and impartiality in all the politics of the State.” Insofar as “Nature” is seen as a perfect union, perhaps it should be the model for a more inclusive politics of the whole.

**An American General Will**

This allegiance to the whole over particular groups, one could argue, is traditionally American. Throughout its history, some of the most famous national appeals were on behalf of its unity. In George Washington’s “Farewell Address,” for example, the nation’s first constitutional president had long before Whitman warned against the spirit of factionalism:

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245 Ibid.
The unity of government which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you. It is justly so, for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very liberty which you so highly prize. But as it is easy to foresee that, from different causes and from different quarters, much pains will be taken, many artifices employed to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth; as this is the point in your political fortress against which the batteries of internal and external enemies will be most constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously) directed, it is of infinite moment that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national union to your collective and individual happiness; that you should cherish a cordial, habitual, and immovable attachment to it; accustoming yourselves to think and speak of it as of the palladium of your political safety and prosperity; watching for its preservation with jealous anxiety; discountenancing whatever may suggest even a suspicion that it can in any event be abandoned; and indignantly frowning upon the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.248

Like Whitman, Washington calls for a general spiritual allegiance to the nation to serve as a counterpoise to the inevitable sectional parties that will claim to speak for it. Both see an attitude of national allegiance as the best safeguard for the nation’s longevity, its health and safety threatened only by internal faction, by “designing men [who] may endeavor to excite a belief that there is a real difference of local interests and views. . . . to misrepresent the opinions and aims of other districts. You cannot shield yourselves too much,” urges Washington, “against the jealousies and heartburnings which spring from these misrepresentations; they tend to render alien to each other those who ought to be bound together by fraternal affection.”249

Washington, like Whitman, recognized the political antagonist by his hegemonic ways:

249 Ibid.
They serve to organize faction, to give it an artificial and extraordinary force; to put, in the place of the delegated will of the nation the will of a party, often a small but artful and enterprising minority of the community; and, according to the alternate triumphs of different parties, to make the public administration the mirror of the ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction, rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common counsels and modified by mutual interests.  

Instead, Washington, with Whitman, recommends a different posture, that each individual American recognize their essential identity in

> [t]he name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, [and] must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together; the independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint counsels, and joint efforts of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.

Washington, of course, came of age in a time of unity, before the idea of state rights began to counter that hegemony. But a century later, Theodore Roosevelt’s “New Nationalism” reinforced Washington and Whitman’s ideal attitude once again, as a spirit of broad and far-reaching nationalism where we work for what concerns our people as a whole. We are all Americans. Our common interests are as broad as the continent. I speak to you here in Kansas exactly as I would speak in New York or Georgia, for the most vital problems are those which affect us all alike. . . . The New Nationalism puts the national need before sectional or personal advantage. It is impatient of the utter confusion that results from local legislatures attempting to treat national issues as local issues. It is still more impatient of the impotence which springs from over division of governmental powers, the impotence which makes it possible for local selfishness or for legal cunning, hired by wealthy special interests, to bring national activities to a deadlock. This New Nationalism regards the executive power as the steward of the public welfare. It demands of the judiciary that it shall be interested primarily in human welfare rather than in property, just as it demands that the representative body shall represent all the people rather than any one class or section of the people.

250 Ibid.
251 Ibid.
For both presidents, the future of the State apparatus depended on its ability to speak as one for all.

In some sense, then, this was America’s founding principle. The very idea of a “republic” is anathema to the hegemonic wrangling that has come today to define politics. The word itself indicates an implied preference for the *public good*, by which the health of the whole guarantees the health of the many. For Thomas Paine, “It is the good of all, because it is the good of everyone,” 253 and thus Washington’s, Whitman’s and Roosevelt’s ideal political arrangement would foster an appropriately ethics for the American context. Presaging one of Whitman’s favorite images, Paine envisioned an America whose ideological structure would be, not antagonistic or polar, but “like a body contained within a circle, having a common center, in which every radius meets.” 254

**Whitman on General Will**

With Paine, Washington, and Roosevelt, Whitman frequently warns that “of all dangers to a Nation, as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account.” 255 Whitman too realized that any kind of segregation—political or otherwise—runs counter to the original republican

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254 Thomas Paine, “The Rights of Man,” in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1984/1791), 568. Crucially, it is another of Paine’s descriptions of the ideal state that sounds most like Whitman, as we will see in Chapter 5. Paine’s ideal philosophy holds that “[a] Nation is only a great individual, and that which is good or bad character for an individual is good or had character for a Nation” (p. 568).
design, that “[i]solated advantages in any rank or grace or fortune . . . are in my opinion distasteful to the republican genius.”

Rather, in this nation, Whitman advises, “To work in, if we may so term it, and justify God, his divine aggregate, the People, (or, the veritable horned and sharp-tailed Devil, his aggregate, if there be who convulsively insist upon it,)—this, I say, is what Democracy is for; and this is what our America means, and is doing.” Even though hierarchy is a fact of life, and “[t]he common ambition strains for elevations, to become some privileged exclusive,” the “master” nevertheless “sees greatness and health in being part of the mass. Nothing will do as well as common ground. Would you have in yourself the divine, vast, general law? Then merge yourself in it.”

As we saw earlier, the divine, vast general law of democracy for Whitman is the endurance of the “People,” no one of its members slighted. His voluminous output attests to this republican conviction, and purposefully so. He confesses, “I have wish’d to put the complete Union of the States in my songs without any preference or partiality whatever. Henceforth, if they live and are read, it must be just as much South as North—just as much along the Pacific as Atlantic—in the valley of the Mississippi, in Canada, up in Maine, down in Texas, and on the shores of Puget Sound.”

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259 Whitman, “A Backward Glance,” 727. More than one Whitman scholar has pointed out that the interminable lists we find here and more generally, “[h]is famous ‘catalogue’ technique, or enumerative style, allows him to celebrate the thing itself, without a surrounding fabric of hierarchies of value” (Martin, Walt Whitman’s Different Lights,” 46).
After all, Whitman’s is “the American programme, not for classes, but for universal man.”\textsuperscript{260} His universalism is of a religious scope:

What Christ appeared for in the moral-spiritual field for Human-kind, namely, that in respect to the absolute Soul, there is in the possession of such by each single individual, something so transcendent, so incapable of gradations, (like life,) that, to that extent, it places all beings on a common level, utterly regardless of the distinctions of intellect, virtue, station, or any height or lowliness whatever-is tallied in like manner, in this other field, by Democracy's rule that men, the Nation, as a common aggregate of living identities, affording in each a separate and complete subject for freedom, worldly thrift and happiness, and for a fair chance for growth, and for protection in citizenship, &c., must, to the political extent of the suffrage or vote, if no further, be placed, in each and in the whole, on one broad, primary, universal, common platform.\textsuperscript{261}

“In each and in the whole” is something “divine, vast, general,” worthy of dignity and capable of self-reliance and moral judgment. This divine something would be the basis of Whitman’s American general will. He was most interested, says one defender, “Not upon the fortunes or the culture of selected persons. Not upon an exception but a rule. Not being made contingent upon what a minority may do but upon what the immense total may learn and assert.”\textsuperscript{262} General aptitude was his assumption, and general suffrage its most basic recognition.

\textbf{Whitman on General Suffrage}

Arguably, the idea of universal suffrage is the single biggest impetus for Whitman’s composing \textit{Democratic Vistas}. Specifically, Whitman describes the work as

\textsuperscript{260} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “America’s True Revolutions,” 55.
\textsuperscript{262} Traubel, “Walt Whitman’s America,” 136.
“some sort of counterblast or rejoinder to Carlyle's late piece,” by which he meant Thomas Carlyle’s *Shooting Niagara: And After?*, a scathing critique of enfranchisement legislation in England (specifically, Disraeli's Reform Bill of 1867), published in Horace Greeley's *Tribune* on August 16, 1867. Carlyle’s confidence in “the People” to make informed decisions was dubious, but correctable by stringent regulation. “One often wishes,” he said,

> the entire Population could be thoroughly drilled; into cooperative movement, into individual behavior, correct, precise, and at once habitual and orderly as mathematics; in all or in very many points. ... And would dismiss their beer and dull foolery, in the silent charm of rhythmic human companionship, in the practical feeling, probably new, that all of us are made on one pattern, and are, in an unfathomable way, brothers to one another.”

This was not his view alone. Ralph Waldo Emerson, equally acerbic and equally disciplinary, announced only years earlier that

> Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in the demands and influence. ... I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them. ... I do not wish any mass at all, but honest men only . . . and no shovel-handed, narrow-brained, gin-drinking million stockingers or lazzaroni at all . . . Away with this hurrah of masses, and let us

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264 Whitman published his essays “Democracy” in December, 1867, and then “Personalism” in May, 1868, in the then year-old *Galaxy*, “a lively alternative to magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Monthly* that had become predictable in content and regional in scope; the Churches wanted their new publication to be . . . ‘a truly national’ magazine, hospitable to the thought of every section’”—appropriately so for Whitman’s scope (Folsom, introduction, xlix). As a commercial venture, “when the book was originally published, it received only one cursory notice in the United States: *The New York Times* (November 11, 1870) dismissed it as “one of the curiosities of the book world which, like all of Whitman’s books, was “only fit for those who make researches in literature not suited to family reading” (Folsom, introduction, lix). For Dowden: “As to Democratic Vistas, it remains quite unread, uncalled for, here in America” (Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 320). To Schmidt, “It is at present in danger of falling still-born here” (Traubel, *With Walt Whitman*, 408). Ironically, “[w]hile the essay was being read in Britain and Denmark, there its projection of a reconstructed democratic future resonated more strongly than in the United States, it faded into obscurity, in America” (Folsom, introduction, lx). For these reasons, the third part of Whitman’s trilogy, “Orbic Literature,” was never published until compiled with the first two essays as *Democratic Vistas*.

have the considered vote of single men spoken on their honor and their 

conscience. Both these essayists are doubtful on whether the banal many should be entrusted with the 

health and fate of the One ideal state, but where Carlyle’s solution to an uninformed 
electorate leads to one common general will, Emerson’s would end with thoroughgoing 

individual choice. 

For sure, Whitman confesses that, with these thinkers, “I had more than once been 
in the like mood, during which his essay was evidently cast, and seen persons and things 
in the same light, (indeed some might say there are signs of the same feeling in this 
book)” And there is. In Democratic Vistas, Whitman variously characterizes “the 
plentiful meanness and vulgarity of the ostensible masses,” as “ungrammatical, untidy, 
and their sins gaunt and ill-bred.” As a fair-minded critic, he promises, “I will not gloss 
over the appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States. In fact, it is to admit 
and face these dangers I am writing. To him or her within whose thought rages the battle, 
advancing, retreating, between Democracy's convictions, aspirations, and the People's 
crudeness, vice, caprices, I mainly write this book.”

So, when Carlyle, the “eminent person just mentioned, sneeringly asks whether 
we expect to elevate and improve a Nation's politics by absorbing such morbid 
collections and qualities therein,” Whitman acknowledges that “[t]he point is a 
formidable one, and there will doubtless always be numbers of solid and reflective 

266 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Considerations by the Way,” in Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (London: 
Geroje Routledge and Sons, 1883/1860), 411. 
267 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Democracy Intro (Individualism vs. the Aggregate),” 18. 
269 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Democracy Intro (Individualism vs. the Aggregate),” 19. 
citizens who will never get over it. Our answer is general, and is involved in the scope and letter of this essay.”\textsuperscript{271} Whitman answer’s, one might expect, in the affirmative, arguing (synecdochically) that though “[w]e endow the masses with the suffrage for their own sake, no doubt,” we do it “perhaps still more, from another point of view, for community's sake.”\textsuperscript{272} Regardless of who votes, only the most “general suffrage” would ensure that One is fully represented by each and all of the many.

§ Whitman on The People

To allay Carlyle’s fears, an idealist like Whitman might offset the like of the foregoing, and all it infers, by the recognition of the fact that general Humanity, (for to that we return, as, for our purposes, what it really is, to bear in mind,) has always, in every department, been full of perverse maleficence, and is so yet. In downcast hours the Soul thinks it always will be—but soon recovers from such sickly moods. I, as Democrat, see clearly enough, (as already illustrated,) the crude, defective streaks in all the strata of the common people; the specimens and vast collections of the ignorant, the credulous, the unfit and uncouth, the incapable, and the very low and poor.\textsuperscript{273}

Just as “general Humanity” includes “crude, defective streaks,” so too will “The People! Like our huge earth itself, which, to ordinary scansion, is full of vulgar contradictions and offence.”\textsuperscript{274} Whether this matters to the health of democracy, says Whitman, is a matter of the perspective one takes.

From the broadest perspective, “Man, viewed in the lump, displeases, and is a constant puzzle and affront to the merely educated classes. The rare, cosmical, artist-

\textsuperscript{271} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Consideration—Customs—Law—the Esthetic—Cohesion,” 22.
\textsuperscript{272} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Consideration—Customs—Law—the Esthetic—Cohesion,” 23.
\textsuperscript{274} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Democracy Intro (Individualism vs. the Aggregate),” 18.
mind, lit with the Infinite, alone confronts his manifold and oceanic qualities, but taste, intelligence and culture, (so-called,) have been against the masses, and remain so.”

It may be true, says Whitman, that “the surfaces of current society here show so-much that is dismal, noisome and vapory.” But if one looks more closely, there appears, “beyond question, inexhaustible supplies, as of true gold ore, in the mines of America's general humanity.” So, despite his earlier critique of Society in general, Whitman advises that “whatever may be said of our fashionable society, and of any foul fractions and episodes—only here in America, out of the long history, and manifold presentations of the ages, has at last arisen, and now stands, what never before took positive form and sway, THE PEOPLE.”

However, Whitman’s “People” is not Emerson’s or Carlyle’s “masses.” The problem with their conception is that under their arrangement, some people are better than others. Just as in “[o]ther lands in quite all past ages,” Emerson and Carlyle identify greatness with “special, exceptional heroes and eminences and kings and martyrs, sages, warriors, bards, intellectualists, or what not, making a gem-like sufficient setting to the whole.” As for the rest, “If the mass, the slag, possess any brilliance or importance it is reflected from these gems and as a background for them.” On the other hand, says Whitman, “here in the United States, while we have curiously few ‘great men,’ in the

275 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
hitherto accepted sense, in any department, is a *People* in a sense never before seen or imagined.\(^\text{280}\) Different are their manners, speech, dress, friendship—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of their carriage … their deathless attachment to freedom—their aversion to anything indecorous or soft or mean—the practical acknowledgment of the citizens of one state by the citizens of all other states—the fieriness of their roused resentment—their curiosity and welcome of novelty—their self-esteem and wonderful sympathy—their susceptibility to a slight—the air they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors—the fluency of their speech—their delight in music, the sure symptom of manly tenderness and native elegance of soul … their good temper and open handedness.\(^\text{281}\)

For Whitman, all of these differences are distinctions. These specific variations on the then general understanding of the People—“their vast, artistic contrasts of lights and shades”—represent “their measureless wealth of latent power and capacity”\(^\text{282}\) and give to American democracy its fullest, most impartial sense. Therefore, contra Carlyle’s concerns, Whitman announces, “As to general suffrage, after all, since we have gone so far, the more general it is, the better. I favor the widest opening of the doors. Let the ventilation and area be wide enough, and all is safe.”\(^\text{283}\) Whitman’s electorate would include “The People” entire, as broadly as that can be construed. Of course, how one defines “The People”—the manner that these individuals and their differences are taken as “together”—matters practically and theoretically and is the specific subject of Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation. But a preliminary look at Whitman’s work indicates at least two modes by which he “incorporates” the People into his ideal body politic.

\(^\text{280}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{282}\) Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Individualism vs. the Aggregate,” 19.
\(^\text{283}\) Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “General Suffrage, Elections, &c.,” 83.
Whitman as Accommodator

On the one hand, a “fierce egalitarianism pervades Whitman’s utterance.” Differences are celebrated, each for the possibility it brings to the full American experience. In Whitman’s world, says George Santayana, each of the “various sights, moods, and emotions are given each one vote; they are declared to be all free and equal, and the innumerable commonplace moments of life are suffered to speak like the others.” In this sense, Whitman is seen to accommodate differences, to take them as they are and to constantly adjust his conception of what it means to be an American. His familiar catalogs throughout Leaves of Grass, for example, demonstrate a “conjunctive principle,” illustrated by means of an “unprecedented trope of inclusion.”

Characterized thus as a pluralist, Whitman and his catalogs really mean to teach his readers “an aesthetic receptivity to difference,” how to be “sensuously attracted to difference as an image of how their own lives potentially could become different” toward the larger goal of “overcoming their practice of treating difference as Otherness . . . [of] constructing, marginalizing, excluding, punishing, and exterminating an Other.” Even though the People are “stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine,” it seems perfectly reasonable for Whitman the pluralist to “[r]espect the wretch, for his wretchedness is in you too; stand up with the best, for their greatness is likewise

yours.” In commemoration of the People, this divine mass, he offers “the meal equally set, … the meat for natural hunger./It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments with all, I will not have a single person slighted or left away.”

On the other hand, what one Whitman scholar calls Whitman’s “poetics of equivalence” intentionally or not has the effect of “neutralizing conflict, transforming diversity into the aesthetic experience of the sublime while turning serious differences into ‘mere variation.’” Here Whitman is considered amoral for failing to recognize good and bad in these scenes. “Were some things repellent?,” asks Kenneth Burke— “He would make himself the universal maw nonetheless, the all-consuming appetite.”

Pluralism of the purest sort requires full accommodation. But for others, Whitman’s pluralism becomes nearly colonial, his endless references “like the contents of a storage cabinet in a museum of natural history that the magisterial savant can arrange and rearrange according to his understanding of the place of each being in the evolutionary scale.” By this assessment, Whitman goes beyond mere accommodation, and instead by his arrangement harbors an implicit preference for certain individuals.

Accommodation in this selective, deflective sense is an ideology to be critiqued.

Whitman’s own words, however, are not those of hierarchy or hegemony. In his vision of a pluralistic whole,

Every existence has its idiom, everything has an idiom
and tongue,
He resolves all tongues into his own and bestows it
upon men, and any man translates, and any man

288 Whitman, “Song of Myself.”
289 Ibid.
291 Burke, Attitudes, 14.
translates himself also,
One part does not counteract another part, he is the
joiner, he sees how they join. 293

Whitman as Assimilator

On the other hand, compare that passage’s treatment of the People with another,
where Whitman announces,

I will not make poems with reference to parts,
But I will make poems, songs, thoughts, with reference to
ensemble,
And I will not sing with reference to a day, but with reference
to all days,
And I will not make a poem nor the least part of a poem but
has reference to the soul,
Because having look’d at the objects of the universe, I find
there is no one nor any particle of one but has reference
to the soul. 294

Because of passages like these, Whitman’s holds a reputation for some as “the absorptive
and democratic embracer of American diversity—as the poet who looked for ways to
absorb difference rather than eliminate difference.” 295 By this characterization, Whitman
seems more interested in promoting an American general will, rather than celebrating the
plurality of differences among the People. By one Whitman commentator’s estimation,

The difference between the President and the Broadway mason or hodman is
inconsiderable—an accident of office; what is common to both is the
inexpressibly important thing, their inalienable humanity. Rich and poor, high and
low, powerful and feeble, healthy and diseased, deformed and beautiful, old and
young, man and woman, have this in common, and by possession of this are in the
one essential thing equal, and brethren one of another. . . . Men of every class then

293 Walt Whitman, “Song of the Answerer,” in Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum (1855), ???.
295 Folsom, introduction, xlix. Emphasis added.
are interesting to Whitman. But no individual is pre-eminently interesting to him.\footnote{Edward Dowden, “The Poetry of Democracy: Walt Whitman,” The Westminster Review 38 (1870), 45.}

This may be why in Whitman’s work we never encounter proper names—save Lincoln. One reason for the absence is that, in keeping with his pessimistic view of (representative) party politics, “Whitman will not have the people appear in his poems by representatives or delegates”—rather, “the people itself, in its undiminished totality, marches through his poems, making its greatness and variety felt.”\footnote{Ibid.}

His favorite specimen of this undifferentiated American totality is New York City. According to one Whitman scholar, New York’s “remarkable aesthetics of urban encounter,” and more specifically, the “erotic energies among and between nonintimates” there made for Whitman a kaleidoscopic “common and public world comprised of vital differences.”\footnote{Jason Frank, “Promiscuous Citizenship,” in A Political Companion to Walt Whitman, ed. John E. Seery (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 156. Emphasis added.}

In William James’s view, “Whitman felt the human crowd as rapturously as Wordsworth felt the mountains,” precisely \textit{because} it “abolishes the usual human distinctions, brings all conventionalisms into solution, and loves and celebrates hardly any human attributes save those elementary ones common to all.”\footnote{William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,” in Writings: 1878-1899, ed. Gerald E. Myers (New York: Library of America, 1992/1899), 851.}

Critics like Nancy Rosenblum may be on to something in arguing that for Whitman, the “attraction, then, is not to other men and women personally and individually . . . but to the extravagant spectacle in which unique individualists exhibit
themselves in a dazzling display.”

Even as he depicts New York City, notices Kenneth Burke, “his broad panoramic effects” come by “tiny hit-and-run suggestions of goings-on,” Whitman being “as promiscuous as Blake in universal love.” For the ideological critic, this macroscopic absorption of difference means that “at the very moment when he seeks to be most inclusive, universal, and democratic, his poetry becomes most powerful—and most powerfully dangerous—in silencing and denying the rights, liberties, and differences of others.”

By this reading, even Whitman’s voluminously detailed catalogs “functio[n] as a means of eliding differences.”

Whitman is sometimes ignorant of specifics in his pursuit of wholeness, and at these times, he would have individuals assimilated as, each and all, just “Americans.” And assimilation, as much as accommodation, is for some an ideology to be critiqued.

Organizing Differences: The People vs. The Multitude

Again, there are at least two ways to bring together a People, and Whitman appears to characterize both. Depending on one’s perspective, he either tends to eliminate differences in favor of the One (assimilation), or tends to celebrate differences equally in the pluralistic many (accommodation), or both. From the perspective of contemporary democratic political theory, only one of these attitudes is preferred. Michael Hardt and

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Antonio Negri align themselves with the pluralistic many, or “the multitude,” arguing that “[t]he multitude is the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone.” For them, truly

[h]orizontal, democratic assemblies do not expect or seek unanimity but instead are constituted by a plural process that is open to conflicts and contradictions. The decisions of the majority move forward through a process of differential inclusion or, rather, through the agglutination of differences. The work of the assembly, in other words, is to find ways to link different views and different desires such that they can fit together in contingent ways. The majority, then, becomes not a homogeneous unit or even a body of agreement but a concatenation of differences.

Here we find what might best be described as a democracy of the many, a direct democracy as opposed to a representative one. In “the multitude,” differences are singularities, “a difference that remains different,” resistant to “the undifferentiated unity of the people.” In order to “make differences our strength,” gender, racial, and sexual differences should be organized such that they “do not determine hierarchies of power” and can “express themselves freely.” “The multitude,” then, is taken as the hegemonic ideal for both pluralism and democracy. But it is not Whitman’s term.

By contrast, “the people”—the preferred term of Paine, Washington, and Rousseau, not to mention Burke and Whitman—is characterized by Hardt and Negri as “One.” In any given population, appeals to “the people synthesizes or reduces these social differences into one identity. . . . [who are] indifferent in their unity . . . by negating or setting aside their differences.” Taken this way, “the people” could be

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associated with the Hobbesian State, wherein the people are merely a reflection of that State, neither unique nor distinct. Though Whitman will use “The People” as his primary term, it is not clear he means it in the manner just described. His sense requires a new conception, if not new name, because whether one sees a People or a Multitude has profound practical implications for democracy, not just for who counts as voters, but more broadly, who counts, in this case, as “American.”

Immigration, for example: Cosmopolitanism vs. Pluralism

To illustrate the distinction, perhaps no political issue is as relevant today—both in America and Europe—as it was in 1776 or 1871 as immigration. At these moments, nations faced a choice between “assimilation or segregation”—shall we be One undifferentiated people, or a multitudinous many? No issue exemplifies the hegemonic wrangling that Whitman deplored as “the ins over the outs, the outs over the ins” than the question of whether and how new foreign populations will be incorporated into the people or seen as an ever-growing multitude. As Richard Bernstein points out, in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, when the United States admitted more than 27 million immigrants (such that by 1910, 40 per cent of New York City’s population were foreign-born), there was “widespread discrimination and fear of the ‘pernicious’ influence of foreigners.”

This xenophobia manifested itself in quotas, proposed eugenics programs, scholarly research that reinforced stereotypes of inferiority and justified racism, and severe immigration policies and laws. In 1912, Theodore Roosevelt’s response was clear. Campaigning on the “Americanization” of all immigrants, he argued: “We have room for but one language here . . . We intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, and not dwellers in a polyglot boardinghouse.”

Roosevelt’s “crucible” reference is from a popular play of his time, The Melting Pot, by Israel Zangwill, in which we find the line: “America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting-pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming . . . Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen, and Englishmen, Jews and Christians, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with all! God is making the American.”

Today, the metaphor still conveys for some the meaning that “foreigners should leave their strange customs, languages and cultures behind and melt into a homogeneous society.” Immigrants worldwide should expect their differences to be eliminated, that is, by assimilation.

In response to Roosevelt’s position, Horace Kallen, a student of William James and a close colleague of John Dewey, published the 1915 article “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” in the progressive journal The Nation, where he took to task the idea of an homogeneous America bereft of cultural differences. In contrast, Kallen argues that because, “At his core no human being, even in a ‘state of nature,’ is a mere mathematical

unit of action like ‘economic man,’” and because “[b]ehind him in time and tremendously in him in quality are his ancestors; around him in space are his relatives and kin looking back with him to a remoter common ancestry,” every single individual is something unique. Kallen thus “envisioned the United States as a nation in which cultural differences would be acknowledged and respected,” hoping “that different religious and ethnic groups would take pride in their cultural heritage [and thereby] enrich a vital democracy.” Taking a musical metaphor, the United States would be sung in harmony, rather than in unison. In this arrangement,

[a]s in an orchestra, every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization.

In his more mature statement, the 1956 book Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea, Kallen described how specifically democratic

Cultures live and grow in and through the individual, and their vitality is a function of individual diversities of interests and associations. Pluralism is the sine qua non of their persistence and prosperous growth. But not the absolute pluralism . . . [but] a fluid, relational pluralism, which the living individual encounters in the transactions wherewith he constructs his personal history moving out of groups and into groups, engaging in open or hidden communion with societies of his fellows, every one different from the others and all teamed together, and struggling to provide and maintain their common means which nourish, assure, enhance the different, and often competing values they differently cherish.

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318 Kallen, “Democracy versus,” 89.
This understanding of group pluralism is in line with the National Endowment for Democracy’s conception of pluralism (the title, incidentally, of one of their five “program areas”). In their Statement of Principles, they argue with Kallen that, “[e]xercise of the basic right of freedom of association, recognized both in our own First Amendment and in many international agreements, enables individuals with common interests to combine into strong and independent organizations that can represent the views and protect the rights of their members.”

321 The decision of the original Federalists had been that a strong republic would entail the presence of a multiplicity of independent interest groups operating on behalf of minorities. They, with both Kallen and the Endowment, defend a cosmopolitan arrangement. Whereas pluralism proper keeps intact the categorical divisions or ethno-racial groups, cosmopolitanism recommends the free movement between and intersections of these more traditional identities into newer combinations. Both are expressions of multiculturalism, and as such are respectful of the many, but where pluralism maintains a defensive, and thus antagonistic, stance, cosmopolitanism is reconstructive, taking no particular culture as final or even finished.

Today immigration remains an issue, not just in America, but in many European countries where the foreign-born population already tops 10 percent. 322 In these nations, where there is a less established sense of “the People,” increasingly “immigrants and their descendants have begun to claim not just equal rights but some kind of special collective dispensation,” or “claims of culture,” 323 specific demands rooted in their cultural

323 Ibid.
backgrounds and differences. This constitutes no problem for Whitman, or for that matter, the National Endowment for Democracy. The Western democracy the Endowment promotes is a system of majority rule where each may have their turn.

But as career diplomat Henry Kissinger points out, this only ideally “presupposes that the majority can fluctuate and the minority of the moment has a prospect of becoming a majority in due course. When the divisions are along tribal, ethnic, or religious lines, however, this equation does not hold.”324 By definition, a system built on hegemony necessarily excludes, and some groups will simply never exercise it. In these struggles for position, antagonism sometimes devolves into competitive violence.

§ A Hegemony of the People: One and Many

Fundamentally, in hegemonic politics, “different groups compete to give their particular aims a temporary function of universal representation.”325 For Laclau (and most rhetorical scholars), what is considered universal in a given society is constantly up for grabs, because in any case “the universal does not have any necessary body, any necessary content.”326 By “universal” Laclau means what rhetorical scholar Michael Calvin McGee calls “ideographs.” Over time, “[s]ociety generates a whole vocabulary of empty signifiers whose temporary signifieds are the result of political competition.”327 However, the rhetorical nature of each such term is that their specific “semantic role . . .

326 Ibid.
327 Ibid.
is not to express any positive content but . . . to function as the names of a fullness which is constitutively absent.”

So while “any kind of universality is nothing else than a particularity which has succeeded in contingently articulating around itself a large number of differences,” the tradeoff for the victorious hegemonic group is that any “won” universal necessarily “has to dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous.”

For this reason, the “assertion of pure particularism, independent of any content and of any appeal to a universality, is a self-defeating enterprise.” To establish and maintain a new hegemony requires that the once different, particular demands of some minority group “be made on the basis of some universal principles that the ethnic minority shares with the rest of the community: the right to have access to good schools, to live a decent life, to participate in the public space of citizenship, etc.” In other words, some attention must be given to the One, if the many would achieve its goals.

While ideological critique stresses categorical differences, for Laclau, a “true political intervention is never merely oppositional; it is rather one that displaces the terms of the debate, that rearticulates the situation in a new configuration,” on the basis of universal terms or ideographs. For both Laclau and Whitman, no term is better suited for that reconstructive purpose than “the People.”

By positioning himself as both an assimilator and an accommodator, Whitman represents a new principle of and for the People, one that is simultaneously generalizing

332 Laclau, “Universalism, Particularism,” 89.
and pluralistic. As his companion later in life Horace Traubel put it, “Walt wanted an America from the people up from the people down. He wanted the crowd superstructure as well as the crowd foundation.”³³⁴ Implied here is a new sort of social logic, whereby—contra dialectic proper—“The People” forever occupy the middle ground between the purely assimilated One and the purely accommodated many.

Taken as an unfilled category, “the People” is the more ambiguous term, and thus the better “contribution to this expansion of horizons, because it helps to present other categories—such as class—for what they are: contingent and particular forms of articulating demands, not an ultimate core from which the nature of the demands themselves could be explained.”³³⁵ With Laclau, Whitman endorses a kind of populism, which is not, like most movements, “identifiable with either a special social base or a particular ideological orientation,” but recognizes “the People” in full as the basis for a more equitable “political logic”³³⁶ to which any group may be party. Laclau’s colleague Chantal Mouffe refers to this alternative political logic to antagonism as agonism.

We can turn from political theory to rhetorical theory for a better understanding of what is new in this political logic. As Kenneth Burke characterizes it,

To confront an issue in democratic terms is not merely to consider it in universalistic terms. It is, at the same time, to think of it in the narrower terms: terms of private gain, of family, of locality or region, of occupational class, of nation. In the totalitarian scheme, patriotism is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all terms. In the democratic scheme, patriotism is but part of a dialectic series—an integral and necessary part, but not the one source of reference, or even the major source of reference, for all moral values and commands.³³⁷

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³³⁴ Traubel, “Walt Whitman’s America,” 136.
³³⁵ Laclau, On Populist Reason, 250.
³³⁶ Laclau, On Populist Reason, 117.
Whereas “[t]he ‘total’ or ‘totalitarian’ patriot would make nationalism the very center of his thinking, with all else deduced from it[, t]he ‘democratic’ patriot would consider his national identity as one in a hierarchy or graded series of many identities, all of them requiring their full consideration when he is confronting issues and making decisions.”

Where totalitarianism is deterministic—“the patriot [is] to be created in the image of the nation,”—the “great temptation in the democratic approach is for the patriot to create the nation in his image.”

Unfortunately, Burke acknowledges, this democratic temptation is that which invites hegemonic means and methods, that “whatever group can afford to hire enough vocalizers will be able to fill the air with vocables proclaiming its interests and the nation’s interests as one.”

In his time, as today, the business class, both directly by reason of its financial power and indirectly by reason of the influence that such power exerts, has been able both directly to hire and indirectly to enlist the services of a priesthood (mainly journalists and publicists) that does its best to persuade us all, including the businessmen, that “America” and “business” are synonymous, that our country “means” nothing more or less than business, and that we cannot properly consider ourselves “Americans” if we question the desires of businessmen, even though we might, in questioning them, have thoughts of national welfare prominently in mind.

To distinguish this latter attitude from the hegemony of the business class, Burke distinguishes “patriotism in general” from “Americanism in particular.” The latter, he says with Whitman, “should be the possession of no one occupational class. It should be the possession of all occupational classes.” In Burke’s ideal democracy the hegemonic relationship should not persist at all, or should persist as universally available to all.

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338 Burke, “Americanism,” 2.
340 Ibid.
341 Ibid.
the meantime, he “feel[s] that it devolves, as never before upon those who are earnestly concerned with the arts of education and expression, in contrast with the mere mercenary bands that make up too much of the publicity priesthood, to equate patriotism and Americanism with an artistic and critical idiom much more penetrating than that which the business leader seems content with . . . [thereby] widening and broadening the national consciousness far beyond the dictates of one class.” Insofar as hegemony does persist, we need as many new entrants to the competition as possible.

As Laclau showed, any attempt to change a hegemonic structure involves appealing to some new universal. Burke agrees, saying, “in either conservative or revolutionary movements of the past, we find that there is always some unifying principle about which their attachments as a group are polarized,” and a “revolutionary period” is thus “one in which the people drop their allegiance to one myth, or symbol, and shift to another in its place.”

In this broader sense, the symbol Burke pleads for, “as more basic, more of an ideal incentive, than that of the worker, is that of ‘the people,’” because that name “as distinct from the proletarian symbol, also has the tactical advantage of pointing more definitely in the direction of unity . . . It contains the ideal, the ultimate classless feature which the revolution would bring about—and for this reason seems richer as a symbol of allegiance.” This is the classless ideal for which Whitman calls. For Whitman and Burke, appealing to “the People” “makes more naturally for this kind of identification

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344 Burke, “Revolutionary Symbolism,” 269.
345 Burke, “Revolutionary Symbolism,” 270.
whereby one's political alignment is fused with broader cultural elements,”\textsuperscript{346} and thus “makes more naturally for such \textit{propaganda by inclusion} than does a strictly proletarian symbol (which makes naturally for a \textit{propaganda by exclusion}, a tendency to eliminate from one's work all that does not deal specifically with the realities of the workers’ oppression—and which, by my thesis, cannot for this reason engage even the full allegiance of the workers themselves).”\textsuperscript{347}

In Whitman’s broadest possible democracy, for example, “The Redeemer President of These States is \textit{not to be exclusive, but inclusive}. In both physical and political America, there is plenty of room for the whole human race; if not, more room can be provided.”\textsuperscript{348} In Burke’s preferred arrangement, “Reduced to a precept, the formula would run: Let one encompass as many desirable features of our cultural heritage as possible—and let him make sure that his political alignment figures prominently among them.”\textsuperscript{349} For their similarity, Burke takes Whitman as his exemplar of inclusivity: “In Whitman we find, as a cluster: immortality, brotherhood, work, I, democracy, ‘answering,’ air-sweetness, life- in-death—and, in other pivotal poems, the Union (the corporate \textit{reintegrating} symbol for his sympathetic \textit{disintegration}), and Lincoln (the “Captain” that is the Union’s \textit{personal} counterpart). The whole is Whitman’s ‘frame of acceptance.’”\textsuperscript{350} For both Burke and Whitman, “the People” is the better name for this fullness, and so in \textit{Democratic Vistas}, Whitman sets out to reconstruct a more inclusive philosophy of, by, and for “the People.”

\textsuperscript{346} Burke, “Revolutionary Symbolism,” 271.
\textsuperscript{347} Burke, “Revolutionary Symbolism,” 272-273.
\textsuperscript{348} Whitman, \textit{Notebooks}, VI, 2133. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{349} Burke, “Revolutionary Symbolism,” 271.
\textsuperscript{350} Burke, \textit{Attitudes}, 18.
§ Whitman’s Philosophy of Democracy

In an “anonymous” review of Democratic Vistas just after its publication, Whitman advertises his “tremendous & electric pamphlet” as “an inquiry into the political, social, & literary United States of to-day—not merely into the surface & show United States—but the inmost tissues, blood, vitality, morality, heart & brain—and what the reality? good and bad—what the philosophy, (as the modern term is) of all these.”^351 Five years later, in a pair of 1876 volumes, Two Rivulets, he combined Leaves of Grass and Democratic Vistas into a single edition—“these books of Poems, with their parti-varied themes, intertwinnings of Prose”—about which he reaffirms his philosophical intentions: “The idea of the books is Democracy, that is carried far beyond Politics, into the regions of taste, the standards of Manners and Beauty and even into Philosophy and Theology.”^352 As a late blooming Romantic, Whitman might with William Blake announce, “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Man’s/I will not Reason & Compare; my business is to Create.”^353 By his own words, he aims to construct a philosophy of democracy, and his conception of democratic reform would itself be constructive, not deconstructive.

Whitman’s scope, as with Hegel’s and many nineteenth century philosophies, would be universal. By his own admission, “we would say American Democracy, but the author himself never ceases to bring in other people, the British, French, German, &c.,

^352 Walt Whitman, Notes and Fragments, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke (Folcroft Library Editions, 1972), 60. Bucke gives the date as 21\textsuperscript{st} April, 1876.
and never loses sight of them or indeed of entire Humanity.”\(^{354}\) Whitman believed, with the National Endowment for Democracy, that democratic values not only “reflec[t] the hopes and ideals of the American people, but also [are] rooted in universally recognized principles.”\(^{355}\) Democratic values, like all values, may be transcendent, and so the Endowment feels legitimated mapping these from the American to the global community. To them, “the idea of democracy” is “intrinsically attractive to ordinary people throughout the world. . . indeed, it is an ideal that billions of people in all parts of the globe revere and aspire to.”\(^{356}\) The work of the Endowment sounds very “noble”—in a traditionally colonial sense. Around the world, the universal mission is clear:

These people [!] are our partners, or our potential partners. We hope that the Endowment’s work will not only help them achieve the blessings of democracy, but will strengthen the bond between them and the people of the United States, a bond based on our common commitment to democracy as a way of life.\(^{357}\)

Because Carlyle’s ideological critique is partial and divisive, his larger philosophy is out of place in the Endowment’s and Whitman’s ideal democracy. Instead, Whitman recommends, “If I were questioned who most fully and definitely illustrates Democracy by carrying it into the highest regions,”\(^{358}\) then, “without depreciating poets, patriots, saints, statesmen, inventors and the like I rate Hegel as Humanity’s chiefest teacher and the choicest loved physician of my mind and soul.”\(^{359}\) A nation as transcendent as America demands “a far more profound horoscope-casting of those

\(^{354}\) Ibid.
\(^{357}\) Ibid. Emphasis added.
\(^{358}\) Whitman, Notebooks, VI, 2017.
\(^{359}\) Whitman, Notebooks, VI, 2012.
themes—[namely] G.F. Hegel’s. “It is strange to me,” he admits, that these American points of view “were born in Germany, or in the old world at all.”

Because Hegel is one thinker “who by an inscrutable combination of train’d wisdom and natural intuition most fully accepts in perfect faith the moral unity and sanity of the creative scheme, in history, science, and all life and time, present and future,” Whitman takes Hegel’s system to offer “the most thoroughly American points of view I know. . . . an essential and crowning justification of New World democracy in the creative realms of time and space . . . which only the vastness, the multiplicity and the vitality of America would seem able to comprehend, to give scope and illustration to, or to be fit for, or even originate.” For Whitman, Hegel’s principal works thus “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, including Lessons and Warnings (encouragements too, and of the vastest) from the Old World to the New.”

At any rate, he decides, “What is I believe called Idealism seems to me to suggest, (guarding against extravagance, and ever modified even by its opposite,) the course of inquiry and desert of favor for our New World metaphysics.” In the pursuit of happiness, Whitman aims to show material America that the “final fields of pleasure for the human soul, are in Metaphysics, including the mysteries of the spiritual world, the soul itself, and the question of the immortal continuation of our identity. In all ages, the

361 Whitman, “Carlyle,” 175-177.
362 Ibid.
363 Ibid.
mind of man has brought up here-and always will. Here, at least, of whatever race or era, we stand on common ground.”

Though his preferred metaphysics “is not entirely new— . . . it is for America to elaborate it, and look to build upon and expand from it, with uncompromising reliance.”

The same year Whitman published Democratic Vistas, Charles Peirce seemed to validate Whitman’s attempted metaphysical reconstruction of the One and many as of practical import, too. To Peirce, “[t]he question whether the genus homo has any existence except as individuals, is the question whether there is anything of more dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life,” was a profound one. “Whether men really have anything in common, so that the community is to be considered an end in itself, and if so, what the relative value of the two factors is, is the most fundamental practical question in regard to every public institution the constitution of which we have it in our power to influence.”

His colleague John Dewey affirmed,

The phenomena of social life are as relevant to the problem of the relation of the individual and the universal as are those of logic; the existence in political organization of boundaries and barriers, of centralization, of interaction across boundaries, of expansion and absorption, will be quite as important for metaphysical theories of the discrete and the continuous as is anything derived from chemical analysis.

365 Ibid.
366 Ibid.
If then, as Dewey believes, “Democracy is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature,”369 then with William James it follows, “There must in short be metaphysicians. Let us for a while become metaphysicians ourselves.”370

Even the American pragmatists knew it as a quite practical affair to be conscious of the “nature” of individuals, groups, and nations, insofar as the structures of each can be reconstructed. As for how ontological projects (of this sort or any) are socially important, one group of researchers argue that, “as in all forms of human endeavour, it is quite obviously helpful to know something of the nature of whatever it is that one is attempting to express, investigate, affect, address, transform or even produce.”371 For them, as for Whitman, “[i]t is difficult to think of an area of life where knowledge of the nature of what is before us is not helpful. Ontological insight allows each of us to act differently in appropriate ways, in the face of, say, a timid bird, a fragile antique, a bull, a tree, an expectant audience, a car, a hostile enemy or an earthquake.”372 What is and what should be are equally motivating, equally relevant to how we act, or should act.

Whether the ideas were borrowed or not, Democratic Vistas, along with Whitman’s other works, explicitly and implicitly announce an ideal ontology of democracy and, by implication, an axiology of democratic engagement. His manner of

369 John Dewey, “Maeterlinck’s Philosophy of Life,” The Hibbert Journal 9, no. 4 (1911), 778. Dewey goes on to claim that Emerson, Whitman, and Maeterlinck were the only three to realize as much.
372 Ibid.
reconstruction, insofar as the act is rhetorical, illustrates Thomas Benson’s assumption that

Rhetoric is a way of knowing, a way of being, and a way of doing. Rhetoric is a way of knowing the world, of gaining access to the uniquely rhetorical probabilities that govern public and personal choice for oneself and others; it is a way of constituting the self in a symbolic act generated in a scene comprised of exigencies, constraints, others, and the self; it is a way of exercising control over self, others and by extension the scene.\textsuperscript{373}

Whitman, in offering us a new, idealistic philosophy of democracy, begins by suggesting a new way of democratic being, or ontology (the subject of Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation), toward a more democratic doing, or axiology (the subject of Chapter 5).\textsuperscript{374}

In so doing, he also constructs a “New World” alternative to ideology critique the student of rhetoric might entertain.

\textsection{New World(s): Ideology Critique as Philosophical Reconstruction}

By his own admission, Whitman’s preferred philosophy is idealism, and as we saw in Chapter 1, ideological critics today find little difficulty pointing disclaiming idealism as a valid, let alone moral, philosophy. Because he “works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination,”\textsuperscript{375} how presumptuous, these critics might say, for Whitman to believe it possible to reconstruct society on the basis of a couple of ideas. The critic of ideology will cite Marx, who in Whitman’s time argued,


\textsuperscript{374} Perhaps, as in Oscar Wilde’s estimation, “the chief value of his [Whitman’s] work is in its prophecy, not in its performance. He has begun a prelude to larger themes. He is the herald to a new era. As a man he is the precursor of a fresh type. He is a factor in the heroic and spiritual evolution of the human being. \textit{If Poetry has passed him by, Philosophy will take note of him}’’ (Oscar Wilde, review of Whitman’s \textit{November Boughs}, \textit{Pall Mall Gazette} (London, Jan. 25, 1889)).

\textsuperscript{375} Engels, “Letter.”
The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people’s imagination, but as they really are; i.e. as they operate, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will.\textsuperscript{376}

For Marx, the material context will determine a people’s social institutions and structure and, by extension, its categories, norms, and ideals. In this fairly linear ideological process, “[p]ersonal interests always develop, against the will of the individuals, into class interests, into common interests which acquire an independent existence in relation to the individual persons.”\textsuperscript{377} Here “the One” determines “the many,” regardless of the reconstructive efforts of a Whitman.

Because ideology manifests itself materially, it “always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices.”\textsuperscript{378} While for rhetorical studies generally, a given artifact is taken a network of signifiers, for the ideological critic in particular the text usually and reliably represents a certain construction of gender, race, or class. Because this construction will have been materially determined, the ideological critic’s task is, merely, to come upon an artifact after the fact and to “discover and make visible the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in an artifact and the ideologies that are being muted in it,” before then “explicat[ing] the role of communication in creating and sustaining the suppression and to give voice to those interests,”\textsuperscript{379} regardless of the artist’s intentions.

To “discover,” “appear,” and “explicate,”—all these modes of ideology critique reflect Louis Althusser’s despite its apparent materiality, “[i]deology represents the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{377} Marx and Engels. \textit{The German Ideology}, 118.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{378} Althusser, \textit{Lenin}, 112.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{379} Sonja K. Foss, \textit{Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice}, 3rd Ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2004), 295-296.}
imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”

Even, for example, as America’s business interests appeared to Whitman to be universally accepted, that “appearing” falsely covered over the (presumably harsher) reality under which people truly exist. And because it offers only the appearance of truth, “ideology is inherently suspect, and analysis naturally seeks to expose its limitations through a process of debunking, unmasking, demystifying . . . the sinister effects of its fictions, . . . to ‘see through’ it, to ‘expose’ its historical functions.” So understood, ideology critique is an epistemological project—an adjudication of truth and falsity.

Whatever licenses the critic’s epistemological criteria for true and false conditions also underscores his or her ontological understanding of real and imaginary. While ideological discourse, Whitman’s included, “presents itself as always only pointing to the given, the natural, the already agreed upon,” for literary critic Paul de Man, “What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism.” Another critic, Terry Eagleton, defines ideology as “language which forgets the essentially contingent, accidental relations between itself and the world, and comes instead to mistake itself as having some kind of organic, inevitable bond with what it represents.”

382 Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 73, no. 2 (1987), 133. For Frederick Engels, “It is above all this appearance of an independent history of state constitutions, of systems of law, of ideological conceptions in every separate domain, which dazzles most people” (Frederick Engels, “Letter to Franz Mehring, July 14, 1893,” in Marx and Engels Correspondence, trans. Donna Torr (New York: International Publishers, 1968)).
Each of these ideological critics presents a dualistic ontology—one the one side there is the real, material world, and on the other, the imagined, ideological “world” where mere “terms are definitive of the society we have inherited, . . . are conditions of the society into which each of us is born, material ideas which we must accept to ‘belong.’”\(^{385}\) Whatever ideology is hegemonic at the time—as in Whitman’s opinion, the business class—only thrives insofar as it secures “the symbolic capital to map or classify the [real, material] world for others.”\(^{386}\) In this way, the dominant ideology constrains what the rest of us “see as natural or obvious by establishing the norm,” and as a consequence, “challenges to it seem abnormal.”\(^{387}\)

This terminological shift—from natural to normal—represents a total shift in projects from epistemological to ontological to axiological. What begins as a “critique of ‘false consciousness’ from the standpoint of a ‘correct consciousness’”\(^{388}\) eventually comes to “assum[e] that the exposure of falsity is a moral act” and that “we are morally remiss if we do not discard the false and approach the true.”\(^{389}\) If the goal of ideology critique today is emancipation,\(^{390}\) then as Raymie McKeown points out, “Ideologiekritik

\(^{387}\) Ibid.
\(^{389}\) McGee, “Ideograph.”
\(^{390}\) Says Marx, “Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not in order that man shall bear the chain without caprice or consolation but so that he shall cast off the chain and pluck the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusions [dis-illusions] man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason; so that he will revolve about himself as his own true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself” (Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,” in *Karl Marx on Society and Social Change*, ed. Neil J. Smelser (University of Chicago Press, 1973/1844): 13-14).
is in fact not a method, but a *practice*” and criticism “a *performance*” toward this moral end. Critics since McKerrow have accepted this charge, and ideological critique of the *axiological* sort proceeds with vigor in the communications field today.392

In these ways, ideology critique is a project in philosophy. If the epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions of ideology critique393 have today been thoroughly accepted as a valid mode of rhetorical “theorizing,” it is because, as Karlyn Campbell assumes,

*all rhetorical theories* rest on three fundamental philosophical grounds: (1) a human ontology or theory of man used to explain how and why man is persuadable; (2) an epistemology or theory of knowledge which defines the role of rhetoric in processes by which truth is discovered and/or created; and (3) an axiology or ethical theory which describes the role of rhetoric in history and generates standards by which rhetorical acts may be evaluated.394

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393 In addition to what we have shown in this section, Guba and Lincoln, taking “Critical Theory” broadly as a paradigm, identify an ontology, wherein a “reality is assumed . . . that was, over time, shaped by a congeries of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors, and then crystallized (reified) into a series of structures that are now (inappropriately) taken as ‘real,’ that is, natural and immutable . . . [but which are actually] a virtual or historical reality.” In the effort to demystify this supposed reality, Critical Theory promotes a sort of knowledge, or epistemology, that “grows and changes through a dialectical process of historical revision that continuously erodes ignorance and misapprehensions and enlarges more informed insights.” This is in fact its axiology, insofar as the “aim of inquiry is the critique and transformation of the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender structures that constrain and exploit humankind, by engagement in confrontation, even conflict. . . . [in] the interests of the powerless and of “at-risk” audiences, . . . [which, as a result, positions] the inquirer in a more authoritative role” (E. G. Guba and Y.S. Lincoln, “Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 110-114).

In this mode of criticism, then, the response is never limited to simple “unmasking.” Implicitly or explicitly, ideology critique is always “allegorical,” the end being “to construct” a meaning which shows how discourse serves to sustain relations of domination—that is to construct another ideology which carries enough force itself to systematically redress the now undisclosed asymmetry. Ideology critique taken to full term, though intended ultimately to deconstruct a certain social order, is essentially a reconstruction of a new social order—a New World. It was Marx, after all, who strategized that “every class which is struggling for mastery, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, postulates the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination itself, must first conquer for itself political power in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest.”

An understanding that every “stance” taken is essentially a reconstruction of a new social order—a New World may serve the interests of ideology critique, if not democracy more generally. Rather than treat our adversaries as though their positions are epistemologically “false” or axiologically “abnormal,” perhaps we should first become more conscious that ontologically, as one philosopher put it, “often, different people are [simply] using different ‘maps’ of the same territory—on the one hand, we are clearly talking about the same thing, or moving about in the same space; on the other hand, we seem, in philosophical and practical ways, to be dealing with what are very different ‘things’ in the world.” In other words, if we conceive of our disagreements as

ontological—that in these moments, “what there is for you, what it is like, what relations it bears, is not what there is for me, what it is like, and what relations it bears”\textsuperscript{399}—then not only may we gain a better understanding of “the world as it is” for those with whom we disagree. We may also discover a fuller set of fundamentally common topics (on which we do \textit{essentially} agree) by which to reconstruct our shared understanding of “the world as it should be.” By emphasizing the second stasis as much as the fourth, definition as much as policy, we might, with Whitman, substitute for the axiological scholasticism of today an ontological humanism for tomorrow.

\textsuperscript{399} Mudde, “Embodied disagreements,” 106.
Chapter 3

An Ontology of Democracy, I

In Chapter 3, we show Whitman, having called for a fuller sense of Reconstruction than that which persisted in Washington, D.C. at the time, offer his own. Characterizing in detail the body politic (not to mention his own body and his body of work), Whitman offers a terminology which, when analyzed, recommends new relationships that obtain in the People, and in so doing, offers up what can be called a special or regional social ontology. His utopian vision is of a healthy body, both of individuals and of the nation, and as such, his terminology is of parts and wholes. So frequent is this choice of language, that it begs consideration of the rhetorical—specifically ontological—work these synecdoches (and synecdoches in general) do. It is argued, again with Burke, that terms like these contain an implicit set of human relationships, thereby showing us the flexibility with which we classify our world, including our nation.

§ Reconstructing The People

Whitman on Reconstruction, Political, Material, and Spiritual

When Democratic Vistas was published (1867-1871), Whitman had the benefit of hindsight to say of “THE LATE WAR,” “The Secession War in the United States appears to me as the last great material and military outcropping of the Feudal spirit, in our New World history, society, &c.”400 As he understood the conflict, the Southern “effort for founding a Slave-Holding power, by breaking up the Union” was only defeated by “the extirpation of the Slaveholding Class, (cut out and thrown away like a tumor by surgical operation.).”401 The elimination of the material and military forms of Feudalism “makes incomparably the longest advance for Radical Democracy, utterly removing its only really dangerous impediment, and insuring its progress in the United States—and thence,

400 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Late War,” 82. Emphasis added.
401 Ibid.
of course, over the world.”

Now, during Reconstruction, even greater changes were happening: “Huge and mighty are our Days, our republican lands—and most in their rapid shiftings, their changes, all in the interest of the Cause.” By the time Whitman published the full-length version of *Democratic Vistas*, three major acts of “constitutional” reform had been implemented to strengthen the idea of the democracy, each of which aimed to expand the scope of—who should now be counted among—“the People.”

These “reconstructions” of the constitution marked the ending of what Whitman called “The First Stage” of America’s life, namely “the planning and putting on record [of] the political foundation rights of immense masses of people—indeed all people—in the organization of Republican National, State, and Municipal governments, *all constructed with reference to each, and each to all.*” This ideological foundation is forever “embodied in the compacts of the Declaration of Independence, and, as it began and has now grown, with its amendments, the Federal Constitution and in the State governments, with all their interiors, and with general suffrage.” Having thus, “with all their faults, already substantially established, for good, on their own native, sound, long-

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402 Ibid. To put this victory in perspective, Whitman compares others from the Nineteenth Century: “Our immediate years witness the solution of three vast, life-threatening calculi, in different parts of the world—the removal of serfdom in Russia, slavery in the United States, and of the meanest of Imperialisms in France” (p.82).


404 The 13th Amendment (1865) abolished slavery. The 14th Amendment (1868) included a Citizenship Clause provides a broad definition of citizenship that overruled the decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), which held that blacks could not be citizens of the United States, a Due Process Clause prohibits state and local governments from depriving persons of life, liberty, or property without certain steps being taken to ensure fairness, and an Equal Protection Clause requires each state to provide equal protection under the law to all people within its jurisdiction. The 15th Amendment (1870) granted suffrage to African Americans and freed male slaves.


406 Ibid.
vista'd principles, never to be overturned, offering a sure basis for all the rest. Now, asks Whitman, “The founders have passed to other spheres—But what are these terrible duties they have left us?”

These “terrible duties” that “duly arise and follow” for Whitman are to somehow ensure that Union would endure, able to withstand future attempts to break it up. His contribution would be

To help put the United States (even if only in imagination) hand in hand, in one unbroken circle in a chant—to rouse them to the unprecedented grandeur of the part they are to play, and are even now playing—to the thought of their great future, and the attitude conform’d to it—especially their great esthetic, moral, scientific future, (of which their vulgar material and political present is but as the preparatory tuning of instruments by an orchestra,) these, as hitherto, are still, for me, among my hopes, ambitions.

Whitman wants to help bring these separate states and individuals together as a Union by cultural means—esthetic, moral, and scientific. Constitutional reform and industrial growth were both “indeed parts of the tasks of America; but they not only do not exhaust the progressive conception, but rather arise, teeming with it, as the mediums of deeper, higher progress.” If Horace Kallen sought an America that sang in harmony, Whitman saw America’s political reconstruction and unprecedented material development as “tuning up.” In keeping with his understanding of Hegelian idealism, these advancements were necessary steps in the overall march of American history, but either one of these were only the “Daughter of a physical revolution—Mother of the true revolutions, which

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are of the interior life, and of the arts. For so long as the spirit is not changed, any change of appearance is of no avail."

Presumably, the coming spiritual revolution would be different from and “profounder far than the material or inventive or war-produced ones,” on the order, for example, of “the uprisings of national masses and shiftings of boundary-lines—the historical and other prominent facts of the United States—the war of attempted Secession—the stormy rush and haste of nebulous forces.” But as things stood, “We stand, live, move, in the huge flow of our age's materialism—in its spirituality. We have had founded for us the most positive of lands.” In Whitman’s critical view, materialism had become America’s national spirit entire, but this would not be enough. In 1871, his judgment of “our New World Democracy” is that “however great a Success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, in any superb general personal character, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results.” And yet, “[f]or all these new and evolutionary facts, meanings, purposes, new poetic messages, new forms and expressions, are inevitable.” Full reconstruction would be both material and spiritual.

Toward that end, Whitman advises that this tremendous and dominant play of solely materialistic bearings upon current life in the United States, . . . must either be confronted and met by at least an equally subtle and tremendous force-infusion for purposes of Spiritualization, for

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411 Ibid. Emphasis added.
413 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Facts Beyond Dreams,” 54-55.
the pure conscience, for genuine esthetics, and for absolute and primal Manliness and Womanliness.  

When Whitman speaks of spiritual results, he once again takes his cue from Hegel. The German had just defined a nation’s spirit, or its “peculiar National Genius,” as an “idiosyncrasy” of the transcendent Spirit, specifying that within the limitations of this idiosyncrasy . . . the spirit of the nation, concretely manifested, expresses every aspect of its consciousness and will—the whole cycle of its realisation. Its religion, its polity, its ethics, its legislation, and even its science, art, and mechanical skill, all bear its stamp. These special peculiarities find their key in that common peculiarity,—the particular principle that characterises a people.  

For Whitman, this meant that a distinctly American culture must take shape. As Hegel made clear, “In the very association of men in a state, lies the necessity of formal culture—consequently of the rise of the sciences and of a cultivated poetry and art generally.” Hegel recognized this necessity—the inevitable progression of “the Spirit of a people”—as that which erects itself into an objective world, that exists and persists in a particular religious form of worship, customs, constitution and political laws,—in the whole complex of its institutions,—in the events and transactions that make up its history. That is its work—that is what this particular Nation is. Nations are [ontologically] what their deeds are.  

However, in Whitman’s mind, the American national spirit was immature, having yet stamped its ethics, morals, religions, science, literature, arts, and esthetics. The whole of America’s deeds, he held with Hegel, could not be only political and material, but also aesthetic, with an American national spirit underlies them all. With Hegel, he designates

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416 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 73.
417 Hegel, Philosophy of History, 66. Emphasis added. Later, when we hear Whitman refer to an “idiosyncrasy of universalism,” Hegel’s phrase “idiosyncrasy of Spirit” might come to mind.
418 Hegel, Philosophy of History, 71. Emphasis added.
419 Hegel, Philosophy of History, 77.
the work of the American national spirit as essential to both the nation’s and democracy’s longevity:

We see our land, America, her Literature, Esthetics, &c., as, substantially, the getting in form, or effusement and statement, of deepest basic elements and loftiest final meanings, of History and Man—and the portrayal, (under the eternal laws and conditions of beauty,) of our own physiognomy, the subjective tie and expression of the objective, as from our own combination, continuation and points of view—and the deposit and record of the national mentality, character, appeals, heroism, wars, and even liberties—where these, and all, culminate in native formulation, to be perpetuated.420

Inasmuch as ideal democracy is realized culturally, American culture should live on in perpetuity as the ideal culture. Just as

[w]e see, as in the universes of the material Kosmos, after meteorological, vegetable, and animal cycles, man at last arises, born through them, to prove them, concentrate them, to turn upon them with wonder and love—to command them, adorn them, and carry them upward into superior realms—so out of the series of the preceding social and political universes, now arise These States—their main purport being not in the newness and importance of their politics or inventions, but in new, grander, more advanced Religions, Literatures, and Art.421

America’s most significant democratic contribution to the world would be cultural—in Whitman’s terms, spiritual.

To put the idea of democratic culture in perspective, a year after Whitman published Democratic Vistas, American historian Henry Tuttle offered a critique of French democracy that helps us understand the spiritual element of Whitman’s ideal American democracy—comparatively and from the opposite direction. The current problem in France, argued Tuttle, was that “[t]he profound democratic spirit of the country has heretofore failed of its mission because no wise and comprehensive attempts

have been made to organize it—\textsuperscript{422} that is, politically. Even though the French have “the United States before them as the model of democracy crystallized into an effective system, the French invariably drift into anarchy or coups d’état. Their republics have had too little or too much \textit{cohesion among the parts, or they have had no parts at all}.”\textsuperscript{423}

In America, Whitman already attested that “the organization of Republican National, State, and Municipal governments, \textit{all constructed with reference to each, and each to all}” is in place and stronger than ever in 1871. What remained unformed—a “profound democratic spirit” like the French enjoyed—would come by “consulting ensemble, and the ethic purports, and faithfully building [upward] upon them.”\textsuperscript{424} However, says Tuttle, the architects of the French republic “begin at the dome and build downward, resting at no stages, and finishing without a base. Veritable castles in the air, which vanish at the first rude wind of adversity!”\textsuperscript{425} “If her culture be measured by her art and her literature, by her scholars, orators, and philosophers, and by the brilliant society which throngs the salons of Paris,” then, by Tuttle’s estimation, France “may place herself high up in the scale of civilization,” but unlike America, she remains “illiterate . . . [as to] a system in which the people pronounce directly on all the details of government.”\textsuperscript{426}

Both Whitman and Tuttle agreed that French and American democracies are equally incomplete, insofar as “there may be democratic peoples without strictly democratic institutions; and there may be popular institutions with a very weak

\begin{footnotes}
\item[422] Herbert Tuttle, “French Democracy,” \textit{The Atlantic} 29, no.5 (May 1, 1872), 560-565. \url{http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1872/05/french-democracy/306915/}
\item[423] Ibid.
\item[424] Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “America’s True Revolutions,” 55.
\item[425] Tuttle, “French Democracy.”
\item[426] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
democratic spirit.” So where for France, says Tuttle, “[t]he republic can be established, if the brain of the country lend itself to the heart in the work,” Whitman recommends—and in fact markets his book as—the opposite call, highlighting a different part of the whole which is in need of reconstruction.

As they had already done in France, “[t]he purport of America is not as was supposed, merely to revolutionize & reconstruct politics, but Religion, Sociology, Manners, Literature & Art.”*Democratic Vistas* would thus be both a call for and attempt at

> a native Expression Spirit, getting into form, adult, and through mentality, for These States, self-contained, different from others, more expansive, more rich and free, to be evidenced by original authors and poets to come, by American personalities, plenty of them, male and female, traversing the States, none excepted—and by native superber tableaux and growths of language, songs, operas, orations, lectures, architecture—and by a sublime and serious Religious Democracy sternly taking command, *dissolving the old, sloughing off surfaces, and from its own interior and vital principles, entirely reconstructing Society.*

In this way, Whitman would attempt to “offse[t] the material civilization of our race, our Nationality, its wealth, territories, factories, population, luxuries, products, trade, and military and naval strength,” by “breathing breath of life into all these,”—namely, “its Moral Civilization—the formulation, expression, and aidancy whereof, is the very highest height of literature.”*Where materialism tends to divide us competitively, America’s future “religious forms, sociology, literature, teachers, schools, costumes, &c.” will make us “a compact whole, uniform, on tallying principles. For how can we remain, divided, contradicting ourselves, this way? I say we can only attain harmony and stability

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by consulting ensemble, and the ethic purports, and faithfully building upon them.\footnote{Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “America’s True Revolutions,” 55.}

This is the larger motivation behind Whitman’s reconstructive efforts in \textit{Democratic Vistas}.

\textbf{Whitman on Reconstruction, One and Many}

In his attempt to “entirely reconstruct Society” in America, some have found the same motivation in other writers of his generation. In democratic theorist George Kateb’s estimation, “Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman (and Lincoln) are the second generation of intellect, the true inheritors of the founding of the American polity. They disclose the fuller meaning of the founding. I do not think that there has been a third generation.”\footnote{George Kateb, “Democratic Individuality and the Claims of Politics,” \textit{Political Theory} 12 (1984), 336.}

For Chad Kautzer, “the Civil War [itself] was a second founding of the nation. One may even argue that the Civil War provided the opportunity to establish the nation on a different foundation than the founding fathers had . . . the crucible in which a new constitution, and a new understanding of the Declaration of Independence, was forged.”\footnote{Chad Kautzer and Eduardo Mendieta, introduction, in \textit{Pragmatism, Nation, and Race: Community in the Age of Empire}, ed. Chad Kautzer and Eduardo Mendieta (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 2.}

For John Dewey, reconstruction of the polity is all part of a natural progression: “By its very nature, a state is ever something to be scrutinized, investigated, searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be remade.”\footnote{John Dewey, \textit{The Public and its Problems}, in \textit{The Later Works: 1925-1953}, Vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 255.}

Whitman appreciates this inheritance, insisting that social reconstruction should be based on—“built upon”—the founders’ “own interior and vital principles,” namely...
“by consulting ensemble, and the ethic purports, and faithfully building upon them.” If, as we saw in Chapter 1, those original political principles are contained in the motto *E pluribus unum*, “out of many, One,” then it seems appropriate for Whitman to decide that “the ambitious thought of my song is to help the forming of a great aggregate Nation . . . through the forming of myriads of fully develop’d and enclosing individuals.” To have both of these ideas be sovereign, Whitman envisions “this image of completeness in separatism,” which he builds up and upon in *Democratic Vistas*.

Regarding this new construction, Whitman plans,

First, let us see what we can make out of a brief, general, sentimental consideration of political Democracy, . . . as an aggregate, and as the basic structure of our future literature and authorship. We shall, it is true, quickly and continually find the origin-idea of the singleness of man, individualism, asserting itself, and cropping forth, even from the opposite ideas.

For Whitman, the nation and the individual should be reconstructed in such a way as to reflect their mutual implication. What we need is a national “mass, or lump character,” because “[o]nly from it, and from its proper regulation and potency, comes the other, comes the chance of Individualism. The two are contradictory, but our task is to reconcile them.” This is, in fact, the American dilemma—its peculiar problem of the One and many. As a matter of national existence, he says, “[t]he problem, as it seems to me, presented to the New World, is, under permanent law and order, and after preserving cohesion, (ensemble-Individuality,) at all hazards, to vitalize man's free play of special Personalism, . . . as the substratum for the best that belongs to us.”

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435 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “This “Culture” So Much Wanted,” 40.
437 Ibid.
438 Ibid.
opposing affinities, Whitman’s metaphysical reconstruction requires both strong holism and strong diversity. He anticipates Paolo Virno’s terminology of circular momentum (from Chapter 2) when he describes how “[t]he theory and practice of both sovereignties, contradictory as they are, are necessary. As the centripetal law were fatal alone, or the centrifugal law deadly and destructive alone, but together forming the law of eternal kosmical action, evolution, preservation, and life—so, by itself alone, the fullness of individuality, even the sanest, would surely destroy itself.”

In the wrangling over political Reconstruction, for example, Whitman identified those, “who, talking of the rights of The States, as in separatism and independence, condemn a rigid nationality, centrality.” But to Whitman’s mind, “the freedom, as the existence at all, of The States, pre-necessitates such a Nationality, an imperial Union. . . . I say neither States, nor any thing like State Rights, could permanently exist on any other terms.” For this reason, “the identities of these States” must by nature be joined in a “thoroughly fused, relentless, dominating Union—a moral and spiritual idea, subjecting all the parts with remorseless power, . . . the sine qua non of carrying out the republican principle to develop itself in the New World through hundreds, thousands of years to come.”

The fates of the larger nation, the separate states, and the independent individual are forever linked, because, as Whitman learned from Hegel, “Freedom, (under the universal laws,) and the fair and uncramped play of Individuality, can only be

439 Whitman, “Nationality—(and Yet),” 318.
440 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “General Notes,” 83-84.
441 Ibid.
442 Ibid.
had at all through strong-knit cohesion, identity." To avoid anything like the Civil War again,

what most needs fostering through the hundred years to come, in all parts of the United States, north, south, Mississippi valley, and Atlantic and Pacific coasts, is this fused and fervent identity of the individual, whoever he or she may be, and wherever the place, with the idea and fact of AMERICAN TOTALITY, and with what is meant by the Flag, the stars and stripes. We need this conviction of nationality as a faith, to be absorb’d in the blood and belief of the people everywhere, south, north, west, east, to emanate in their life, and in native literature and art.

Whitman’s call for patriotism requires a new arrangement such that the many take their various identities from the identity of the One. In (Neo-Platonic) philosophical terms, the many participate in the One.

If we look at Whitman’s reconfigured metaphysics from the other direction, from the bottom-up, we find that in addition to the wholeness of “Democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, is surely joined another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensable to it, opposite, (as the sexes are opposite,) and whose existence, confronting and ever modifying the other, often clashing, paradoxical, yet neither of highest avail without the other.” As and as much as we strengthen the individual, we also strengthen the Union. So for Whitman,

it remains to bring forward and modify everything else with the idea of 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 authority, or any rule derived from precedent, state-safety, the acts of legislatures, or even from what is called religion, modesty, or art. . . . characterized in the main, not from extrinsic acquirements or position, but in the pride of himself or herself alone.

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443 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “General Notes,” 83.
444 Whitman, “Nationality—(and Yet),” 318.
445 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 35.
446 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism Versus the Aggregate,” 16.
Whitman’s scheme allows for as much diversity as any individual human experience allows. Though the One sustains the many, it does not constrain the many. In (Neo-Platonic) philosophical terms, the One also participates in the many.

So, says Whitman, “to help prepare and brace our edifice, our plann’d Idea, . . . we still proceed to give it in another of its aspects—perhaps the main, the high facade of all”—that is, “Individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself,—Identity—Personalism.” In Whitman’s twined configuration, individuality “forms, in a sort, or is to form, the compensating balance-wheel of the successful working machinery of aggregate America.” A truly American metaphysics would “illustrate, at all hazards, this doctrine or theory that man, properly trained 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.” The trick is to somehow honor both the One and the many—the nation and the individual—and the essential ideas behind them.

**Whitman’s Social Ontology**

Thus, in Whitman’s reconfigured “ideology,” it will be the “idea of perfect individualism . . . that deepest tinges and gives character to the idea of the Aggregate,” the two together forming “the only Scheme worth working from, as warranting results

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447 Ibid.
448 Ibid.
like those of Nature's laws, reliable, when once established, to carry on themselves.”

Nothing less than the “culmination and fruit of literary artistic expression, and its final fields of pleasure for the human soul, are in Metaphysics, including the mysteries of the spiritual world, the soul itself, and the question of the immortal continuation of our identity. In all ages, the mind of man has brought up here-and always will. Here, at least, of whatever race or era, we stand on common ground.” The stakes were the existence of the nation itself.

If it is Whitman’s aim is to “entirely reconstruct society” on the same basis as “Nature’s laws,” it brings to mind a kind of social ontology, not an exhaustive metaphysical system. Though Whitman proceeds with Hegel, “To the heights of such estimate of Nature indeed ascending, . . . to make observations for our Vistas, breathing rarest air. . . . for our New World metaphysics, . . . giving hue to all,” even this transcendent vantage is limited. Whitman is clear about this. Throughout Democratic Vistas, he offers variations of the qualifier, “[t]he argument of the matter is extensive, and, we admit, by no means all on one side. What we shall offer will be far, far from sufficient.” The universal scope of metaphysics obviates that Whitman will have to “leav[e] unsaid much that should properly even prepare the way for the treatment of this many-sided question of political liberty, equality, or republicanism,” to “leav[e] unanswered, at least by any specific and local answer, many a well-wrought argument

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450 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism Versus the Aggregate,” 17.
Anticipating detractors, he defends his speculations in *Democratic Vistas* in that,

though passages of it have been written at widely different times, (it is, in fact, a collection of memoranda, perhaps for future designers, comprehenders,) and though it may be open to the charge of one part contradicting another—for there are opposite sides to the great question of Democracy, as to every great question—I feel the parts harmoniously blended in my own realization and convictions, and present them to be read only in such oneness, each page modified and tempered by the others.  

Even though “we could talk the matter, and expand it, through lifetime,” Whitman knew that even Hegel, systematic as he was, left much unaccounted for. In his judgment, “Nor does the Hegelian system, strictly speaking, explain the universe, either in the aggregate or in detail. The sense, eyesight, life, the least insect, growth, the dynamics of nature are not eclairicized. Thought is not caught, held, dissected—mainly, one might argue, for lack of time. Therefore, “we have to say there can be no complete or epical presentation of Democracy in the aggregate, or any thing [sic] like it, at this day,” but nonetheless, Whitman would boldly make the attempt by offering a reconstructed social ontology for democracy.

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457 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Far-Stretch, in Distance, Our Vistas,” 32-33.
§ Social Ontology and Symbols

Social Ontology

Whitman’s planned construction of a limited social metaphysics for America belongs to the larger field of “social ontology,” the domain today of Tony Lawson and a group of scholars working under the moniker the Cambridge Social Ontology Group. As they distinguish their project, whereas ontology in general aims to construct classifications that account systematically and exhaustively all that is, \(^{458}\) that group characterizes their fieldwork as a regional ontology, arguing that within the larger field of general ontology “there is a domain of phenomena reasonably demarcated as social reality or the social realm that provides a site for a viable regional project in ontology.”\(^{459}\) In the social realm are included “all phenomena, existents, properties, etc. (if any), whose formation/coming into existence and/or continuing existence necessarily depend at least in part upon human beings and their interactions,”\(^{460}\) that is, anything and everything “whose existence depends at least in part on us. It thus includes tables, chairs, language

\(^{458}\) In general, says Lawson, ontology “amounts to the study of anything and everything; for everything is a part of being. But ontology is only the study of anything under the aspect of its being, of what is involved in its existing” (Tony Lawson, “A Conception of Ontology,” (2004), 1). Mario Bunge specifies regional ontology by first defining ontology as “The serious secular version of metaphysics. The branch of philosophy that studies the most pervasive features of reality, such as real existence, change, time, chance, mind, and life. [...] Ontology can be classed into general and special (or regional). General ontology studies all existents, whereas each special ontology studies one genus of thing or process—physical, chemical, biological, social, etc. Thus, whereas general ontology studies the concepts of space, time, and event, the ontology of the social investigates such general sociological concepts as those of social system, social structure, and social change. Whether general or special, ontology can be cultivated in either of two manners: speculative or scientific. The ontologies of Leibniz, Wolff, Schelling, Hegel, Lotze, Engels, Mach, W. James, H. Bergson, A N. Whitehead, S. Alexander, L. Wittgenstein, M. Heidegger, R. Carnap, and N. Goodman are typically speculative and remote from science. So is the contemporary possible worlds metaphysics” (Mario Bunge, Dictionary of Philosophy (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999), 200-201).


systems, pollution, wars, nations and societies, and even social and philosophical reasoning itself." Defined so broadly, the “predicate ‘social’ thus signifies membership of that realm or domain."

In particular, the Social Ontology Group studies “the collective practices, positions, rights and obligations [that] organise a certain group of individuals as members of, or participants in, a community.” All of these collected they refer to as the category “social structure,” the components of which are either

1) accepted or actual structural patterns or structural features of accepted forms of human practice; or 2) ideational, constituting various representations of the former along with interpretations of various aspects or properties as norms or rules, including positions, rights and obligations, along with the content of other previous and ongoing acceptances, including the outcomes of decision-making processes, or the content of official declarations, all bearing on matters such as collective practices or the distribution of rights of access to community positions (and so to accompanying positional rights and obligations), etc.; or 3) both.

In other words, “social structure” contains both those structures which have already been adopted and accepted, as well as representations of those structures in culture.

Importantly, the Social Ontology Group identify these representations as the loci where the social structure is and may be transformed for better or worse. Though ontology implies a static configuration, “position occupants regularly transform their positional rights and obligations, and indeed all forms of social structure.”

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464 Lawson, “A Conception of Social Reality,” 41, 42. Ontology in the sense of “the study of any ‘external’ reality is thus replaced by the study of how a particular community or individual conceptualises a particular domain. The goal is merely to identify the conceptual presuppositions of sets of belief systems, languages and so forth. These proponents of ‘internal metaphysics’ thus seek to uncover features not of the world beyond conceptions, but of the belief systems of their subjects; the goal is an account not of the broader reality but of such features as the taxonomic system presupposed by speakers of a particular language or by researchers working within a scientific discipline” (pp. 24-25).
Lawson and the Group earlier characterized the social realm as that which humans have some say over, and “[a]ll aspects of social structure depend on us,” not only does “their continuing existence depends on their being reproduced through our individual practices in total,” but their occasional transformation through representations do too. In fact, specifically “social entities” do not independently exist . . . Rather, change is essential to what they are, to their mode of being.”\(^{466}\)

Social ontology is therefore of such a nature, that reconstruction is its very essence. Every time we act socially, “the contents of previous acceptances, whether embedded in agreements, precedents or whatever, are given to us; and through our acting we both draw on them (whether or not we are explicitly aware of this)” toward either reproduction or transformation.\(^{467}\) This is why we, or Whitman, consider ontology at all: the presumption is that to change a particular social structure, one should be cognizant of the structure he or she would reconstruct.

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**Social Order: Ideological, Rhetorical, and Cultural**

The territory where ideation meets social structure is one well-trod by ideology critics, but also more generally, rhetoric. If we take Kenneth Burke’s position that rhetoric is rooted in motives, then, for colleague Hugh Dalziel Duncan, “[f]rom a sociological view motives must be understood as man’s need for order in his social relationships.”\(^{468}\) With the Social Ontology Group, Duncan “assume[s] that society arises

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\(^{466}\) Lawson, “A Conception of Ontology,” 17.
\(^{467}\) Ibid.
in and through communication,” and thus “the study of communication becomes the study of human relations,” of “what kind of order they involve and above all how this order is expressed in communication.”

The ideological critic concurs, emphasizing the fact that “[s]ocial order is expressed through hierarchies which differentiate men into ranks, classes, and status groups, and, at the same time resolve differentiation through appeals to principles of order which transcend those upon which differentiation is based.” That is to say, what is often disclosed or unmasked in ideological critique is a static structure of predetermined hierarchies—of class, race, gender, or sexuality—as well as transcendent terms that mask this reality.

A more explicitly rhetorical emphasis like Duncan’s agrees with the ideological critic that “[o]ur consciousness of being bound together in a specific kind of social relationship is determined by the forms of expression used in the communication that takes place in the relationship.” What the Social Ontology Group refers to as ideational representations take shape as these forms of expression. Though we think of these relationships as codified by means of politics, Whitman, with Duncan, believes that “[t]hese forms originate in our attempts to relate to each other, but as forms they are perfected in art,” and the focus of rhetorical critics should be on these forms. A

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472 Duncan, Symbols, 222.
473 Ibid. Conversely, “Art performs its social function when it is used to interpret experience to the individual as the shared experience of the community of which he feels himself a part” (p.223). A communication scholar might go so far as to say, “Wherever activities or artifacts have symbolic values that articulate individuals into positions vis-à-vis each other or their collectivities, the communicative is
rhetorician like Ed Black might argue, contra the ideological critic, that “[g]roups become distinctive . . . not by the beliefs they hold, but by the manner in which they hold them and give them expression. Such people do not necessarily share ideas; they share rather stylistic proclivities and the qualities of mental life of which these proclivities are tokens.”

Again, an ideological critic might be more likely to stress with Antonio Gramsci the material existence of those forms, of “the press, . . . libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets,” not to mention

1) the education system; 2) newspapers; 3) artistic writers and popular writers; 4) the theatre and sound films; 5) radio; 6) public meetings of all kinds, including religious ones; 7) the relations of ‘conversation’ between the more educated and less educated strata of the population . . . ; 8) the local dialects, understood in various senses (from the more localized dialects to those which embrace more or less broad regional complexes . . . ).

On the other hand, the student of rhetoric like Wrage is after the “ideas” that are “embodied in rhetorical forms and structures,” considering this embodying itself as part of the dynamic social structure. For both the ideological critic and the rhetorical critic, once social structure is “framed as public practice, and within the contexts of reception, the critic cannot separate ‘idea’ from its materialization in the texts of culture. What is available to the astute reader is a kind of sedimented content to be found in the structure present” (E.W. Rothenbuhler, “Argument for a Durkheimian Theory of the Communicative,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 3 (1993), 162).


and forms of texts.” In this regard, rhetorical studies share a space with cultural studies,

both aiming to reveal the relationship between expressive forms and social order; both existing within the field of discursive practices; both sharing an interest in how ideas are caused to materialize in texts; both concerned with how these structures are actually effective at the point of ‘consumption’; and both interested in grasping such textual practices as forms of power and performance.\footnote{Thomas Rosteck, “A Cultural Tradition in Rhetorical Studies,” in \textit{At the Intersection: Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies} (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 232.}

Taken this way, both cultural studies and rhetorical studies are motivated by the same end, namely “how we bring about positive changes in those relationships with the end of, as Stuart Hall has put it, ‘making the world a more humane place.’”\footnote{Ibid.}

In order to distinguish this mode of research from ideological critique, it is helpful, with anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to distinguish a cultural system from its corresponding social system, “to see the former as an ordered system of meaning and of symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place; and to see the latter as the pattern of social interaction itself.”\footnote{Geertz, \textit{Interpretation of Cultures}, 144f.} After all, says Ernest Cassirer,

political life is not the only form of a communal human existence. In the history of mankind the state, in its present form, is a late product of the civilizing process. Long before man had discovered this form of social organization he had made other attempts to organize his feelings, desires, and thoughts. Such organizations and systematizations are contained in language, in myth, in religion, and in art.\footnote{Ernest Cassirer, \textit{An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture} (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 87-88.}

If then, as Geertz defines it, “culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their action,” then the corresponding “social structure is the form that
action takes, the actually existing network of social relations.” Again, an ideological critic like Gramsci might focus his or her critical lens on “the structuration of social systems” by “studying the modes in which such systems . . . are produced and reproduced in interaction.” In that understanding, “the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize.”

This simplified equation of “mode,” “outcome,” and “medium,” however, makes the project of ideological critique both overly ambitious and, as a result, intellectually meaningless. As Geertz views the sort of work ideological critique produces, he finds that

Both interest theory and strain theory go directly from source analysis to consequence analysis without ever seriously examining ideologies as systems of interacting symbols, as patterns of interworking meanings. Themes are outlined, of course; among the content analysts, they are even counted. But they are referred for elucidation, not to other themes nor to any sort of semantic theory, but either backward to the effect they presumably mirror or forward to the social reality they presumably distort. The problem of how, after all, ideologies transform sentiment into significance and so make it socially available is short-circuited by the crude device of placing particular symbols and particular strains (or interests) side by side in such a way that the fact that the first are derivatives of the second seems mere common sense or at least post-Freudian, post-Marxian common sense. And so, if the analyst be deft enough, it does. The connection is not thereby explained but merely educed.\footnote{Geertz, \textit{Interpretation of Cultures}, 207.}

The problem with this method is that

\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{Anthony Giddens, \textit{The Constitution of Society: Outline of a Theory of Structuration} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 25. Emphasis added. In this line of research, it is assumed that “Structure is not external to individuals: as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices, it is in a certain sense more ‘internal’ than exterior to their activities in a Durkheimian sense. Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling. This, of course, does not prevent the structured properties of social systems from stretching away, in time and space, beyond the control of any individual actors. Nor does it compromise the possibility that actors’ own theories of the social systems which they help to constitute and reconstitute in their activities may reify those systems. The reification of social relations, or the discursive ‘naturalization’ of the historically contingent circumstances and products of human action, is one of the main dimensions of ideology in social life” (p.25).}
networks of signifiers are a dime a dozen in literary texts; without the constraining obligation to read those signifiers off the inner dynamic of form, a reading is free to attach the signifiers it gathers up to any framework of meaning (any constellation of signifieds) it chooses, and it is the gender/race/class grid that supplies that framework. The grid is flexible because its three categories can variously he construed as problems of identity, difference, hierarchy, or power.\(^{486}\)

Without any sense of the how real signification works, ideology critique is merely an exercise in association. As Paul Ricoeur puts it,

\[\text{without recourse to the ultimate layer of symbolic action, of action symbolically articulated, ideology has to appear as the intellectual depravity that its opponents aim to unmask. But this therapeutic enterprise is itself senseless if it is incapable of relating the mask to the face. This cannot be done as long as the rhetorical force of the surface ideology is not related to that of the depth layer of symbolic systems that constitute and integrate the social phenomenon as such.}\(^{487}\)

By “merely educing”—or associating—a material artifact with an ideology, hegemonic or otherwise, and then simply assigning a causality between them, “ideology” can be whatever the critic wants it to be. For Geertz, in the “absence of any analytical framework within which to deal with figurative language,” ideology critique operates unchallenged in “viewing ideologies as elaborate cries of pain.”\(^{488}\) However, by the same line of thinking, with some “notion of how metaphor, analogy, irony, ambiguity, pun, paradox, hyperbole, rhythm, and all the other elements of what we lamely call ‘style’ operate . . . in casting personal attitudes into public form,”\(^{489}\) we may gain access to a better understanding of how social structures themselves are constructed and might therefore be better reconstructed toward a more humane life.

\(^{486}\) John Brenkman, “Extreme Criticism,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 26, no. 1 (Autumn, 1999), 120.


\(^{488}\) Geertz, \textit{Interpretation of Cultures}, 209.

\(^{489}\) Ibid.
Social Order: Uncertainty, Symbols, Maps, and New Worlds

A more dynamic and less deterministic view of ideology would “believ[e], with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” and thus “take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”490 In Weber’s neutral view, ideology is neither a cause nor an effect. Instead, says Erik Erikson, an ideology is, at its best, “the social institution which is the guardian of identity,” but in all cases, it is simply “a coherent body of shared images, ideas, and ideals which ... provides for the participants a coherent, if systematically simplified, overall orientation in space and time, in means and ends.”491 In Erikson’s conception, ideology serves an adaptive, psychological function, as, says Stuart Hall, a “mental framework—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.”492 For the most part, we are unaware of this framework, these “templates for the organization of social and psychological processes,” but we become most aware of them “where the particular kind of information they contain is lacking, where institutionalized guides for behavior,

490 Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 5. Emphasis added.
491 Erikson, Identity, 133, 189-190.
492 Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees,” in Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen, et al. (London: Routledge, 1996), 26. Ideology is also taken, as Geertz points out, as “the attempt . . . to render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful, to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them, that accounts both for the ideologies' highly figurative nature . . . novel symbolic frames against which to match the myriad "unfamiliar somethings" that, like a journey to a strange country, are produced by a transformation in political life. Whatever else ideologies may be—projections of unacknowledged fears, disguises for ulterior motives, phatic expressions of group solidarity” (p. 220).
thought, or feeling are weak or absent. It is in country unfamiliar emotionally or topographically that one needs poems and road maps. So too with ideology.⁴⁹³

In Reconstruction-era America, for example, when the balance between the ideologies of nationalism and individualism was being restruck, the nation experienced what Whitman called “Indefiniteness in 1868,” what Gadamer refers to as that which brings our understanding to a standstill . . . the atopon . . . “the placeless,” that which cannot be fitted into the categories of expectation in our understanding and which therefore causes us to be suspicious of it . . . this experience of not being able to go any further with the pre-schematized expectations of our orientation to the world, which therefore beckons to thinking.⁴⁹⁴

In these moments, it is the sensed “loss of orientation that most directly gives rise to ideological activity, an inability, for lack of usable models, to comprehend the universe of civic rights and responsibilities in which one finds oneself located.”⁴⁹⁵ The post-bellum period was clearly one of those moments when new models, rights, and responsibilities were being championed, each staking its claim, says Hayden White, as “the forms reality should take even if it fails to assume those forms (especially if it fails to assume those forms) in existentially vital situations.”⁴⁹⁶ Richard Rorty, too, notices in particular that “[i]n such periods, people begin to toss around old words in new senses, to throw in the occasional neologism, and thus to hammer out a new idiom which initially attracts attention to itself and only later gets put to work . . . becomes the bearer of assimilable

⁴⁹³ Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 218.
⁴⁹⁵ Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 219.
meanings and provides the tools with which to resume normal operations.”

For Geertz, White, and Rorty, it is the figurative nature of ideologies that allows for the possibility of re-form, “to render otherwise incomprehensible social situations meaningful, to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them.” By focusing our attention on the minute symbolic work within ideologies, we can better understand their work and better use them for progressive reasons.

This symbolic conception of ideology is also better aligned with the discipline of rhetoric, which here might be defined with Richard Weaver as “in the whole conspectus of its function an art of emphasis embodying an order of desire. It is ‘advisory’ in that it has the “office of advising men with reference to an independent order of goods and with reference to their particular situation as it relates to these.” Weaver’s conception of rhetoric has the advantage of uniting material circumstances with ideas, in that each is drawn upon in shaping the other. Ideological reform, in this sense, is a matter of purposeful symbol use toward a new “order of desire.” Weaver’s “art of emphasis” is akin to Chaim Perelman’s theory of “presence,” which turns on “certain elements on which the speaker wishes to center attention in order that they may occupy the foreground of the hearer's consciousness.”

From the perspective of the rhetorical critic, a sensitive analysis would locate these as pivotal terms, chosen by the user as cardinal points in their new map. “[T]he

498 Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 220. Emphasis added.
metaphors that men predicate upon themselves” serve as markers indicating “the movements they desire to make in the culture they occupy.”501 In any artifact or activity presumed ideological, the total interaction of these key images—“this ‘play’ or ‘argument of images’”—recommends a new and better world—“knits together of ‘cosmologizes’ or at least suggests a coherent and overarching social and cultural order or worldview”502 any one of us might and should inhabit, at least by someone’s estimation. As the rest of this chapter and the next shows, Whitman’s symbols and terminology operate as guideposts toward a map of his reconstructed social order.

Taken this way, ideology is equivalent to utopian rhetoric, or “the use of symbolic communication in an attempt to move the actual state of human affairs into alignment with an imagined, better state of affairs.”503 Rhetoric more than any other discipline recognizes that symbols are available means of transforming our material existence. With their use, we can “expand the range of the possible in the present, changing the meaning of situations.”504 Symbols are uniquely positioned as representations of “encounter[s] between mental geographies and material, actualized societies located in space and time”505—between the real and the ideal, between materials and ideas.

When we take imagination to be “the ability to see the actual in light of the possible,”506 we sanction Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric. For rhetoric more generally,
[t]he great mission . . . is to make room for the possible as opposed to a passive acquiescence in the present actual state of affairs. It is symbolic thought which overcomes the natural inertia of man and endows him with a new ability, the ability constantly to reshape his human universe.\textsuperscript{507}

However, because “utopia is an imagined society that currently resides in no time and no place,”\textsuperscript{508} to the most materialist of ideological critics, utopian rhetoric is open to charges of idealism in the worst sense—as merely conceptual—in the presumed tradition of Hegel. Though for the ideological critic, utopian rhetoric is merely “a type of spirituality primarily oriented toward possibility rather than actuality,” this model of ideology is still more open-minded than the materialist version, in that only the imaginative critic admits into their ontology “possibility as a fundamental feature of existence.”\textsuperscript{509}

An ideological critic would find much of Whitman’s proposed “New World” to be far-fetched and rose-colored. There is plenty to unmask as “unrealistic.” However, as we saw above, Whitman’s ideal reconstruction of the nation—in word if not deed—was to be both spiritual and material. America’s national spirit, demands Whitman, “must in no respect ignore science or the modern, but inspire itself with science and the modern.”\textsuperscript{510} Likewise, her national arts “must vocalize the vastness, splendor and reality”\textsuperscript{511} of all things, not simply ideas and ideals. In keeping with Dewey’s conception of imagination as both possible and actual, Whitman, a half-century earlier had recommended to the artists of his time,

Whatever may have been the case in years gone by, the true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give ultimate vivification to facts, to

\textsuperscript{507} Cassirer, An Essay on Man, 86.
\textsuperscript{508} Portolano, “Rhetorical Function of Utopia,” 118.
\textsuperscript{509} Alexander, Eros, 354, 356, quoting Dewey from A Common Faith.
\textsuperscript{510} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Drama,” 58-59.
\textsuperscript{511} Whitman, “Preface, 1876,” 286.
science, and to common lives, endowing them with the glows and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing, and to real things only.\textsuperscript{512}

In fact, says Whitman, “[w]ithout that ultimate vivification—which the poet or other artist alone can give—reality would seem incomplete, and science, democracy, and life itself, finally in vain.”\textsuperscript{513}

Again, Whitman finds a warrant for his material-ideal program in Hegel. After all, the German made clear that his (much-maligned) philosophy of history, like all others, “must be derived from experience.”\textsuperscript{514} For Hegel, the fact of (the) matter was that even abstract concepts like Freedom and Spirit are held in consciousness, and “whatever is in consciousness is experienced.”\textsuperscript{515} It is Hegel himself who cautioned would-be idealists that “if thought never gets further than the universality of the Ideas, as was perforce the case in the first philosophies,” it is justly “open to the charge of formalism.”\textsuperscript{516} Therefore, even for the utopian critic, “[s]ome acquaintance or outside familiarity with its objects, therefore, and a certain interest in them, philosophy may and even must presume, even if it were for no other reason than this: that in point of time the mind makes general \textit{images} of objects, long before it makes \textit{notions} of them.”\textsuperscript{517}

This admonition was not lost on Whitman, who himself warned, “Poet! beware lest your poems are made in the spirit that comes from the study of pictures of things—

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\textsuperscript{512} Whitman, “A Backward Glance,” 716.
\textsuperscript{513} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{514} Hegel, \textit{The Philosophy of History}, 67.
\textsuperscript{515} Georg W. F. Hegel, “Introduction,” in \textit{The Logic of Hegel, Translated from the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences}, ed. William Wallace (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1874/1830), 11. Hegel, defending himself, reasons that the only “real ground for assigning them to another field of cognition is that their \textit{scope and content} evidently shows these objects to be infinite” (p. 11). Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{516} Hegel, “Introduction,” 17.
\textsuperscript{517} Hegel, “Introduction,” 1. Emphasis added.
\end{flushright}
and not from the spirit that comes from the contact with real things themselves.”

In his own work toward reconstruction, he resolves, “I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems.”

Taking utopian rhetoric as the ideal means to reconstruct material circumstances nonetheless still runs counter to the sort of determinism one finds in ideology critique, where material circumstances dictate ideals, not the other way around. Whitman cannot subscribe to a world without ideas and agents. Instead, he aligns himself with the rhetorical project of imagination, and in so choosing, with he agrees with Richard Rorty that

the only thing that can displace an intellectual world is another intellectual world—a new alternative, rather than an argument against an old alternative. The idea that there is some neutral ground on which to mount an argument against something as big as ‘logocentrism’ strikes me as one more logocentric hallucination. I do not think that demonstrations of ‘internal incoherence’ of ‘presuppositional relationships’ ever do much to disabuse us of bad old ideas or institutions. Disabusing gets done, instead by offering us sparkling new ideas, or utopian visions of glorious new institutions. The result of genuinely original thought, on my view, is not so much to refute or subvert our previous beliefs as to help us forget them by giving us a substitute for them. I take refutation to be a mark of unoriginality.

A more informative project in ideology, Emerson taught both Whitman and Rorty, is to

“Build, therefore, your own world.”

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521 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in Essays and Lectures (New York: Library of America, 1983), 48. At one point Walt Whitman explicitly sketches a new world, “Nor is this so incredible. I can conceive a community, to-day and here, in which, on a sufficient scale, the perfect Personalities, without noise, meet; say in some pleasant Western settlement or town, where a couple of hundred best men and women, of ordinary worldly status, have by luck been drawn together, with nothing extra of genius or wealth, but virtuous, chaste, industrious, cheerful, resolute, friendly, and devout. I can conceive such a community organized in running order, powers judiciously delegated, farming, building, trade, courts, mails, schools,
Whitman’s reconstruction of American society runs throughout *Democratic Vistas*, and the reconfiguration is total. In one note, he reminds himself,

The best way to promulge native American models and literature is to supply such forcible and superb specimens of the same that they will, by their own volition, move to the head of all and put foreign models in the second class. I to-day think it would be best not at all to bother with Arguments against the foreign models or to help American models—BUT JUST GO ON SUPPLYING AMERICAN MODELS.  

His project, in the spirit of Emerson and Rorty, would begin anew, because for him, the critique of ideologies is simply not enough to foment any real change: “I say that if once the conventional distinctions were dispelled from our eyes we should see just as much. I do not expect to dispel them by arguing against them, I sweep them away by advancing to a new phase of development where they fail of themselves.”

Whitman might in fact characterize the ideological critic the way he once characterized historians:

You who celebrate bygones!
Who have explored the outward, the surfaces of the races—the life that has exhibited itself;
Who have treated of man as the creature of politics, aggregates, rulers and priests;
I, habitué of the Alleghanies, [sic] treating man as he is in himself, in his own rights,
Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom exhibited itself, (the great pride of man in himself;)
Chanter of Personality, outlining what is yet to be,

elections, all attended to; and then the rest of life, the main thing, freely branching and blossoming in each individual, and bearing golden fruit. I can see there, in every young and old man, after his kind, and in every woman after hers, a true Personality, developed, exercised proportionately in body, mind, and spirit. I can imagine this case as one not necessarily rare or difficult, but in buoyant accordance with the municipal and general requirements of our times. And I can realize in it the culmination of something better than any stereotyped eclat of history or poems. Perhaps, unsung, un-dramatized, unput in essays or biographies—perhaps even some such community already exists, in Ohio, Illinois, Missouir, or somewhere, practically fulfilling itself, and thus outvying, in cheapest vulgar life, all that has been hitherto shown in best ideal pictures” (Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Women—Portraits—Speculation,” 46-47).

522 Walt Whitman, “Caution,” IV, 1588.
I project the history of the future.\footnote{Walt Whitman, “To a Historian,” \textit{Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum} (1860), 307.}

So, Whitman announces, “we presume to write, as it were, upon things that exist not, and travel by maps yet unmade, and a blank,” but the timing is right for a new mode of reconstruction:

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 may fall upon us, more or less; and then, hot from surrounding war and revolution, our speech, though without polished coherence, and a failure by the standard called criticism, comes forth, real at least, as the lightnings.\footnote{Walt Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “Far-Stretch, in Distance, Our Vistas,” 34.}

Even though Whitman acknowledges that “[t]ime alone can finally answer these things,” nevertheless, “as a substitute in passing, let us, even if fragmentarily, throw forth a short direct or indirect suggestion of the premises of that other Plan, in the New spirit, under the new forms, started here in our America.”\footnote{Walt Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “Democracy (Introduction),” 18.}

§ Ontology of the Body

The Body as Organon

Whitman’s reconstructed America would be, as we saw in the last section, one that unites the One \textit{and} the many, the material \textit{and} the spiritual. When he announced on the frontispiece of \textit{Leaves of Grass}, “I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be the most spiritual poems,” the rest of that line reads, “& I will make the poems of my body \& mortality.”\footnote{Walt Whitman, “Starting from Paumanok,” 277.} This last clause offers a clue to Whitman’s preferred symbol,
the *organon* to his new organization. Whitman imagines a new “United States, (composed of many contradictory parts. Like the body but One and Indivisible, and in that indivisibility, the sine qua non of its life, action, & potency.”\(^{528}\) In keeping with his allegiance to science, at least as he understood it, he sketches in his notebooks

> A poem in which is minutely described the whole particulars and ensemble of a *first-rate healthy Human Body*—it looked into and through, as if it were transparent and of pure glass—and now reported in a poem—
> Read the latest and best anatomical works
> talk with physicians
> study the anatomical plates
> also casts of figures in the collections of design.\(^{529}\)

In another note we learn that *Democratic Vistas* will offer up from these studies,

> “Lessons — Clear, alive, luminous,— full of facts, full of physiology — acknowledging the democracy, the people,” and, crucially, that the “enclosing theory of ‘Lessons’ [is] to permeate All The States, answering for all.”\(^{530}\)

Presumably satisfied with his studies, Whitman begins by mapping the human body onto geographical America, forecasting that

> In a few years, the dominion-heart of America will be far inland, toward the West…The main social, political spine-character of The States will probably run along the Ohio, Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, and west and north of them, including Canada. Those regions, with the group of powerful brothers toward the Pacific, (destined to the mastership of that sea and its countless Paradises of islands,) will compact and settle the traits of America, with all the old retained, but more expanded, grafted on newer, hardier, purely native stock. A giant growth, composite from the rest, getting their contribution, absorbing it, to make it more illustrious. From the North, Intellect, the sun of things—also the idea of unswayable Justice, anchor amid the last, the wildest tempests. From the South, the living Soul, the animus of good and bad, haughtily admitting no demonstration but its own. While from the West itself comes solid Personality, with blood and brawn, and the deep quality of all-accepting fusion.\(^{531}\)

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\(^{528}\) Whitman, *Notebooks*, VI, 2157.

\(^{529}\) Whitman, *Notebooks*, I, 304.

\(^{530}\) Whitman, *Notebooks*, IV, 1443.

Such a mapping would not have been entirely original. Whitman’s depiction of the nation as a single body belongs with Hobbes’ bodily commonwealth in *Leviathan*. In that work, Hobbes sanctions Whitman’s reconstruction, because

Art goes yet further, imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, Man. For by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE (in latine CIVITAS) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, of whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which, the Soveraignty is an Artificiall Soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; The Magistrates, and other Officers of Judicature and Execution, artificiall Joynts; Reward and Punishment (by which fastned to the seate of the Soveraignty, every joynt and member is moved to performe his duty) are the Nerves, that do the same in the Body Naturall; The Wealth and Riches of all the particular members, are the Strength; Salus Populi (the peoples safety) its Businesse; counsellors, by whom all things needful for it to know, are suggested unto it, are the Memory; Equity and Lawes, an artificiall Reason and Will; Concord, Health; Sedition, Sickness; and Civill War, Death. Lastly, the Pacts and Covenants, by which the parts of this Body Politique were at first made, set together and united, resemble that Fiat, or the Let us make man, pronounced by God in the Creation.532

The image most frequently associated with *Leviathan* (figure 3-1) symbolizes Hobbes’ ideal commonwealth as one body composed of many parts in a unity that is greater than the sum of its parts, and which therefore has a life and body of its own.

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In both Whitman’s and Hobbes’ case, the goal is to show the many people, with all their differences, brought together—simultaneously—as One state, the sort of union that the human body naturally exhibits.

Both Whitman and Hobbes knew what George Mason believed, that “the most effectual means that human wisdom hath ever been able to devise, is frequently appealing to the body of the people.”¹⁵³³ Even the earliest English settlers in the New World saw fit in their Mayflower Compact to,

Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first Colony in the northern Parts of Virginia; Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually, in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid: And by Virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Officers, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due Submission and Obedience.⁵³⁴

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For their “better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid,” the settlers thought that the arrangement of the body should also frame their own national constitution, because, as Josiah Quincy said, if the people conceived of themselves ‘as a body,” the would be “never interested to injure themselves.” By 1782, Thomas Paine could report, “We are now really another people...Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used.” So Whitman’s symbolic preference for the body is in keeping with a tradition as old as the nation itself.

With the original colonists, he saw this organon as definitive of the United States, a nation whose very purpose would be

substantially, the getting in form, or effusement and statement, of deepest basic elements and loftiest final meanings, of History and Man—and the portrayal, (under the eternal laws and conditions of beauty,) of our own physiognomy, the subjective tie and expression of the objective, as from our own combination, continuation and points of view.

Whitman’s voluminous compositions would be each one an attempt at constructing the nation’s “types of personal character, of individuality, peculiar, native, its own physiognomy, man’s and woman’s, its own shapes, forms, and manners, fully justified under the eternal laws of all forms, all manners, all times.” Unfortunately, his

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538 Whitman, “Poetry To-Day in America,” 288. Emphasis added. For Whitman, “The hour has come for democracy in America to inaugurate itself in the two directions specified—autochthonic poems and personalities—born expressers of itself, its spirit alone, to radiate in subtle ways, not only in art, but the
impression of larger American “culture” at the time was that the arts in America were shirking their constructive responsibilities in favor of pecuniary ends. He could “find nowhere a scope profound enough, and radical and objective enough, either for aggregates or individuals,” certainly not enough to “worthily fill . . . electrifying all and several, . . . the essence and integral facts, real and spiritual, of the whole land, the whole body.”539

The Body in Whitman’s Social Ontology

Whitman’s terminology—“its own physiognomy, man’s and woman’s,” “aggregates or individuals,” “the whole land, the whole body”—make it clear that his reconstructed social ontology would be, literally, in terms of a single body. When Montaigne says, “We are all framed of flaps and patches and of so shapeless and diverse a contexture that every piece and every moment playeth his part,” 540 Whitman understands this “We” on multiple levels—the individual, the state, the nation, and so forth. What would hold these vital parts together would be, in Whitman’s terms, [w]hat the great sympathetic is to the congeries of bones, joints, heart, fluids, nervous system and vitality, constituting, launching forth in time and space a human being—aye, an immortal soul—such relation, and no less, holds true poetry to the single personality, or to the nation.541

The “immortal” relations in Whitman’s social ontology would be those relations that obtain within the long-enduring species “human being”—from the human body up.

Throughout *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman thus “presences” not only the body parts of individual people, but also, on a different levels, the same in the nation, and, in keeping with his equation of America and democracy, those in democracy.

On the most literal level, for example—the individual human body—he presumes that ideal democracy “[d]oubtless, . . . resides, crude and latent, well down in the hearts of the fair average of the American-born people, mainly in the agricultural regions.” If we looked closely at these regions, we might find there “a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-trained, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers.” Unfortunately, as he looked around America more generally, Whitman confesses that, “rather to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics.” “What penetrating eye,” he asks, “does not everywhere see through the mask? The spectacle is appalling.”

Those who would represent these in “Washington City” hardly offer better. For Whitman, it remained curious to me that while so many voices, pens, minds, in the press, lecture-rooms, in our Congress, &c., are discussing intellectual topics, pecuniary dangers, legislative problems, the suffrage, tariff and labor questions, and the various business and benevolent needs of America, with propositions, remedies, often worth deep attention, there is one need, a hiatus, and the profoundest, that no eye seems to perceive, no voice to state.

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543 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 76.
The problem, as he saw it, was that though “[w]e have frequently printed the word Democracy . . . I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests, out of which its syllables have come, from pen or tongue.”547 So, despite these ineffective representatives, “we cannot, fixing our eyes on them alone, make theirs the rule for all.”548 On the contrary, says Whitman, “Let no tongue ever speak in disparagement of the American races, North or South, to one who has been through the war in the great army hospitals.”549

This terminology of individual body parts Whitman then transfers to the body of the nation. When, for example, he describes his ideal national spirit, he reasons that, “Both [individualism and nationalism] are to be vitalized by Religion, (sole worthiest elevator of man or State,) breathing into the proud, material tissues, the breath of life.”550 As an unfulfilled ideal, however, “the element of the moral conscience, the most important, the vertebrae, to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking or seriously enfeebled or ungrown.”551 We have already heard Whitman’s concern, “the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunts me.”552 If we would only “look our time and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease,” we would find that “[n]ever

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547 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 37.
was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us.”553

We need somehow to awaken “the passionate yearnings, the pulses of sympathy, forever throbbing in the heart of These States”554 So, “Who now,” Whitman asks, “is ready to begin that work for America, of composing music fit for us-songs, choruses, symphonies, operas, oratorios, fully identified with the body and soul of The States?”555

If we need a fit example, we should turn to “the genius of Greece, and all the sociology, personality, politics and religion of those wonderful states,” that came to

for[m] its osseous structure, holding it together for hundreds, thousands of years, preserving its flesh and bloom, giving it form, decision, rounding it out, and so saturating it in the conscious and unconscious blood, breed, belief, and intuitions of men, that it still prevails powerfully to this day, in defiance of the mighty changes of time, was its literature, permeating to the very marrow.556

Even though these “powerful and resplendent” exemplars “were, in your atmospheres, grown not for America, but rather for her foes, the Feudal and the old—while our genius is Democratic and modern,” we should want that the same cultural legacy could “indeed, but breathe your breath of life into our New World's nostrils—not to enslave us, as now, but, for our needs, to breed a spirit like your own.”557 Those nations, like our own, are composed as a body whose parts give it long life.

As America and democracy are for Whitman “convertible terms,” we see him even apply the terminology of body parts to the idea of democracy itself. Even though his ideal democracy is a “programme” with “a scope generous enough to include the widest

554 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “General Notes,” 84.
555 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 75.
557 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Yet We Thank this Culture,” 52.
human area[, i]t must have for its spinal meaning the formation of a typical Personality of character, eligible to the uses of the high average of men-and not restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses.”\textsuperscript{558} In his ideal democracy, not only is it not enough that the new \textit{blood}, new frame of Democracy shall be \textit{vivified} and held together merely by political means, superficial suffrage, legislation, &c., but it is clear to me that, unless it goes deeper, gets at least as firm and as warm a hold in men's \textit{hearts}, emotions and belief, as, in their days, Feudalism or Ecclesiasticism, and inaugurates its own perennial sources, welling from the centre forever, its strength will be defective, its growth doubtful, and its main charm wanting.\textsuperscript{559}

As we saw, this will require a new democratic culture, “far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole-mass of American \textit{mentality}, taste, belief, \textit{breathing} into it a new \textit{breath} of life, giving it decision.”\textsuperscript{560} Unfortunately, the culture consumed in Whitman’s America, “[t]he great poems, Shakespeare included, are poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the \textit{life-blood} of Democracy.”\textsuperscript{561} Yet in 1871, we still find in “the bequeathed libraries, countless shelves of volumes, records, &c.; . . . of the \textit{bloodless vein, the nerveless arm}”\textsuperscript{562} of Feudalism.

To change “these lamentable conditions, to \textit{breathe} into them the \textit{breath} recuperative of sane and heroic life,” Whitman calls for “a new founded Literature, not merely to copy and reflect existing surfaces,”\textsuperscript{563} but creative. American democracy in the future will thrive by imagination and, specifically, by “the image-making faculty, coping with material creation, and rivaling, almost triumphing over it. This alone, when all the

\textsuperscript{558} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “This ‘Culture’ So Much Wanted,” 40.
\textsuperscript{561} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “A Thought in My Musings,” 32.
\textsuperscript{562} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “True Use of the Old Theology, Politics, Personal Models,” 76.
other parts of a specimen . . . are ready and waiting, can breathe into it the breath of life, and endow it with Identity.”\(^{564}\) It is in the democratic imagination that “the great Literature, especially verse, must get its inspiration and throbbing blood.”\(^ {565}\)

By these examples, it is clear that Whitman “presences” the individual parts of a whole human body, and he does that at multiple levels of generality—the individual, the nation, and democracy itself. Throughout Democratic Vistas, in instances like these, his “art of emphasis” turns on the trope synecdoche.

**Synecdoche**

“Synecdoche,” Vico reminds us, “is called in Latin comprehensio, and it is a trope by means of which the whole is taken for the part and vice versa. In the schools the whole (totum) was called either the universal or the essential or the integral.”\(^ {566}\) Because any given whole can be considered “whole” from (at least) three perspectives—as universal, as essential, or as integral—there have been centuries of debate as to how many types of synecdoche could be identified, from as few as two to as many as ten.\(^ {567}\) The Belgian


\(^{567}\) It is cognitive linguists who most disagree over how many types of synecdoche belong in that category. For Seto (Ken-ichi Seto, “Distinguishing Metonymy from Synecdoche,” in Metonymy in Language and Thought, ed. Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999), 91–120), there are only those of the genus/species sort: the transfer from a less comprehensive category (species) to a more comprehensive (genus) & from a more comprehensive (genus) to a less comprehensive (species). Rice and Schofer (Donald Rice and Peter Schofer, Rhetorical Poetics: Theory and Practice of Figural and Symbolic Reading in Modern French Literature (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983)), on the other hand, stretch that category to include both Physical (or Spatial) Synecdoches: physical part for the whole (head for body); physical attribute for the whole (black for Negro); object or physical attribute for possessor (crown for king); material or physical attribute for object (steel for sword); container for contained (stein for beer, Paris for Parisians), as well as, Conceptual (or
rhetoricians Group Mu, having spent more time than any others in the field of late, suggest that “[w]e must immediately insist on the nonrigorous character of these terms. . . . We can be content with the criterion of the ancient rhetoricians: *more for less*”\(^{568}\) and vice versa.

A primary argument of this dissertation is that Whitman’s reconstruction of the American nation and the individual members therein is to figure some arrangement where these are not opposed, but balanced in mutual inclusion, *E pluribus unum*. Along those lines, Fontanier’s 1830 definition of synecdoche takes it as a “relationship of connection, [whereby] two objects form an ensemble, a physical or metaphysical whole, *the existence or idea of one being included in the existence or idea of the other.*”\(^{569}\) Given Whitman’s ontological design, incorporating the mutual inclusion of the individual and the nation, the many and the One, Fontanier’s definition seems most useful.

Then too, since we have also seen him attribute the *part/whole* relationship at wider and wider scales—from the individual to states to the nation fully through the “kosmos”—*the species equally with the genus*—Whitman’s ontological whole seems to thus be organized by two types of synecdoche. Group Mu refers to these as, first, the *anatomical* mode—giving whole-for-part or part-for-whole (*totum pro parte/pars pro toto*)—and second, the *taxonomic* mode—giving genus-for-species or species-for-genus

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The operations of this twin arrangement in Whitman’s social ontology will be elaborated more fully in Chapter 4, after we decide whether Whitman’s style is really a matter of invention.

**The Body in Whitman’s Corpus**

Talk of classifying tropes makes most contemporary rhetorical scholars shudder. Whitman is a poet, and so it would be natural for him to make frequent use of countless tropes, including synecdoche, as a means of dazzling and the eye and the ear and stirring the imagination. Poetry itself—“good poetry,” at least—purposefully deviates language—regardless of the subject: that is its *modus operandi*. So, we might expect Whitman’s synecdochic wordplay to drift into a prose work like *Democratic Vistas*, particularly someone so naturally attracted to the parts of the human body. It should not be unusual to see Whitman anonymously advertise *Democratic Vistas* as “an inquiry into the political, social, & literary United States of to-day—*not merely into the surface & show United States*—but the *inmost tissues, blood, vitality, morality, heart & brain*—and what the reality? good and bad—what the philosophy, (as the modern term is) of all these.”

A look at Whitman’s larger body of work shows that his fetish has always been the human body. The *corpus* is his *corpus, organs* his *organon*. He readily admits as

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*Group Mu, A General Rhetoric*, 109. In their system, a 2 x 2 matrix serves to illustrate these two modes differently, with two “directions”—generalizing and particularizing—crossed with two “perspectives” on individuals—as parts and as species. As rhetoricians are wont to do, Group Mu cautions that “the taxonomy proposed aims less at building a closed system than at making clear the possibilities of creation and generalization” (p. 231).

*Whitman, anonymous review*, 79. Emphasis added, except for the term “philosophy.”
much, saying, “My poems when complete should be a unity, in the same sense that the earth is, or that the human body, (senses, soul, head, trunk, feet, blood, viscera, man-root, eyes, hair,) or that a perfect musical composition is.”\textsuperscript{572} Singing the body electric has been his “style” all along: “Of the whole, poems and prose,” he reveals, “the chants of ‘Leaves of Grass,’ my former volume, . . . radiates physiology alone,” while Democratic Vistas, “the present one, though of the like origin in the main, more palpably doubtless shows the pathology which was pretty sure to come in time from the other.”\textsuperscript{573} In both cases, says Whitman, “my enclosing purport [has been] to express, above all artificial regulation and aid, the eternal bodily composite, cumulative, natural character of one’s self.”\textsuperscript{574} In the broadest possible sense, “Man’s PHYSIOLOGY complete I sing.—Not physiognomy alone is worthy for the muse—I say the perfect form, with all that with it goes, is only fully worthy. \textit{I think the human form the epitome of all—the universal emblem.”}\textsuperscript{575}

For sure, one would be hard-pressed to find a poem from \textit{Leaves of Grass} in which Whitman does not in some way sanctify the human body and its parts. In “I Sing the Body Electric,” he celebrates “a well-made man, . . . [whose] dress does not hide him;/The strong, sweet, supple quality he has strikes through the cotton and flannel;/To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more;/You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.”\textsuperscript{576} In the case of this man or any other, no part of him is more important than another—all are worthy of Whitman’s reverence.

\textsuperscript{572} Whitman, \textit{Notebooks}, I, 352.
\textsuperscript{573} Whitman, “Preface, 1876,” 283.
\textsuperscript{574} Ibid. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{576} Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric,” \textit{Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum} (1855), 122.
As he puts it, “Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean. Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest,” including, for example, “[t]he scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer.”

In fact, if a microscopic look at the healthy human body be a new style, Whitman takes his own fully as his own. As he explains the choice to himself,

Prevalent poems cast back only facial physiognomy, a part. In the following chant, the apparition of the whole form, as of one unclothed before a mirror is cast back. The teachers of the day teach, (and stop there) that the unclothed face is divine. It is indeed; but I say that only the unclothed body, diviner still is fully divine. These Leaves image that physiology—not apologizing for it, but exulting openly in it, and taking it to myself ........... I know the rectitude of my intentions, & appeal to the future. I seek, by singing these, to behold & exhibit what I am as specimen to all—these material, aesthetic and spiritual relations, I am & tally the same in you wherever you are The Body merged with & in the soul & the Soul merged in the Body, I seek.

Therefore, when the reader of the first postwar edition of Leaves of Grass opens the book, prior to the poems proper, they encounter not merely a representative portrait of Whitman, but also his entire program for American reconstruction:

INSCRIPTION.
SMALL is the theme of the following Chant, yet the greatest—namely, ONE'S-SELF— that wondrous thing, a simple, separate person. That, for the use of the New World, I sing.
Man's physiology complete, from top to toe, I sing. Not physiognomy alone, nor brain alone, is worthy for the muse;—I say the Form complete is worthier far. The female equally with the male, I sing.
Nor cease at the theme of One's-Self. I speak the word of the modern, the word EN-MASSE.
My Days I sing, and the Lands—with interstice I knew of hapless War.
O friend, whoe'er you are, at last arriving hither to com-

579 Whitman, Notebooks, IV, 1450. Emphasis added.
mence, I feel through every leaf the pressure of your hand, which I return. And thus upon our journey link'd together let us go.\textsuperscript{580}

One cannot underestimate this short poem as Whitman’s most concise statement of his ideal ontology of democracy—why perhaps it earned such pride of place in 1867.

\textbf{§ Social Ontology and Tropes}

As we saw from Hobbes through the earliest American settlers, the human body is not Whitman’s choice alone as an ideal symbol. All of these thinkers demonstrate, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that the “body schema is a lexicon of corporeality in general, a system of equivalences between the inside and the outside which prescribes from one to the other its fulfillment in the other.”\textsuperscript{581} For Whitman and anyone else, the human body is uniquely available as a “natural symbolism.” We know it by the name of synecdoche, one of Kenneth Burke’s “Four Master Tropes.”

While the traditional understanding of tropes is that “some tropes are employed to help out our meaning and others to adorn our style, . . . some from words used properly and others from words used metaphorically,” the Roman rhetorician Quintilian specifies not one but two reasons for using them. “We do this,” he says, “either because it is necessary or to make our meaning clearer.”\textsuperscript{582} Thus it is \textit{not always} the case that tropes are used to help make our meaning clear—sometimes, says Quintilian, we use a

\begin{footnotes}
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“necessary metaphor,” when, for example, “we speak of a hard or rough man, there being no literal term for these temperaments.”\footnote{Ibid.} In this sense, tropes serve a necessary, vital function in day-to-day living.

With Quintilian, Vico reasons, “Given that words are characters of things . . . and there are many more things in nature than words for them and since every language lacks its own proper words for many things, other words must be found, and this is termed necessity.”\footnote{Vico. \textit{The Art of Rhetoric}, 137. For Nerlich, it was first the Stoics who emphasized “necessary relation between the poverty of languages and the need to make words shift from one meaning to another according to a certain number of logical or natural relations” (Brigitte Nerlich, “Synecdoche: A Trope, a Whole Trope, and Nothing but a Trope?” in \textit{Tropical Truth(s): The Epistemology of Metaphor and Other Tropes}, ed. Armin Burkhardt and Brigitte Nerlich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 299.).} Since the linguistic turn, many are familiar with Nietzsche’s discussion on tropes and truth, namely that from the beginning of language use, “[n]o such thing as an unrhetorical, ‘natural’ language exists that could be used as a point of reference: language is itself the result of purely rhetorical tricks and devices.”\footnote{Friedrich Nietzsche, “Description of Ancient Rhetoric,” in \textit{Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language}, ed. Sander L. Gilman, et al. (Oxford University Press, 1989), 21. Nietzsche is a thus champion for the study of generalized rhetoric, since “It is not difficult to prove that what is called ‘rhetorical,’ as a means of conscious art, had been active as a means of unconscious art in language and its development, indeed, that the rhetorical is a further development, guided by the clear light of understanding [Verstandes], of the artistic means which are already found in language” (p. 21). Perhaps this is where Aristotle’s “available means” are to be found.} That is to say,

\begin{quote}
[t]ropes are not something that can be added or subtracted from language at will; they are its truest nature. . . . What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms - which after long usage, seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding: truths are illusions of which one has forgotten they are illusions.\footnote{Ibid.}
\end{quote}

W.V.O. Quine, from an analytic perspective, finds it thus a mistake, then, to think of linguistic usage as literalistic in its main body and metaphorical in its trimming. Metaphor, or something like it, governs both the growth of language and our acquisition of it. What comes as a subsequent refinement is rather cognitive discourse itself, at its most dryly literal. The neatly
worked inner stretches of science are an open space in the tropical jungle, cleared by clearing tropes away.\textsuperscript{587} Extending this metaphor, historian Hayden White holds that, in fact, “Tropic is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however is futile; for tropics is the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively.”\textsuperscript{588} For each of these thinkers, as much as for Whitman, the language of tropes is how we get to “the real.”

The mysterious truth for Whitman’s ontology—and the role synecdoche plays in it—is, as he puts it,

\textit{The spirit and the form are one}, and depend far more on association, identity and place, than is supposed. Subtly interwoven with the materiality and personality of a land, a race—Teuton, Turk, Californian, or what not—there is always something—I can hardly tell what it is,—History but describes the results of it,—it is \textit{the same as the untellable look of some human faces.}\textsuperscript{589}

Many after Whitman have pointed out a “viable interaction between forms of language and forms of life,”\textsuperscript{590} a “close relationship between ‘way of talking’ and ‘way of life’.”\textsuperscript{591}

\textsuperscript{588} White, \textit{Tropics of Discourse}, 2.
\textsuperscript{590} Dominick LaCapra, \textit{Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 59. For Paul Ricoeur, there is “something similar to the depth semantics of a text in social phenomena” (Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text,” in \textit{Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation}, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 219). Before Whitman, in France, Dumarsais (1730) and the subsequent \textit{Commentaire} by Fontanier (1830) are often credited with some of the earliest “metarhetorics” of tropes. It was Fontanier, says Ricoeur, who stressed three master tropes as “an exhaustive theory of the relationships between ideas by distinguishing between \textit{relations of correlation} or \textit{correspondence}, \textit{relations of connection}, and \textit{relations by resemblance}. . . . \textit{[metaphor] consists ‘in presenting one idea under the sign of another that is more striking or better known’} (99). . . . By correspondence . . . [or metonymy] a relationship that brings together two objects each of which constitutes an ‘\textit{absolutely separate whole}’ (79). . . . relationship of cause to effect, instrument to purpose, container to content, thing to its location, sign to signification, physical to moral, model to thing. In the relationship of connection [synecdoche], two objects ‘form an ensemble, \textit{physical or metaphysical whole, the existence or idea of one being included in the existence or idea of the other}’ (87). . . . relations of part to whole, of material to thing, of one to many, of species to genus, of abstract to concrete, of species to individual”
The connection is apt, insofar as the Middle Liddell definition of the Greek *tropos* reads, “I. a turn,” but also a “direction, course, way, II. a way, manner, fashion, III. of persons, a way of life, habit, custom, V. in speaking or writing, manner, style, Isocr.:—but in Rhetoric, tropes, figures, Cic. . . . way, manner, method; b. fashion, musical style; c. I. mode of life.” A trope like synecdoche, then, is not only a *possible way of speaking* but also a *possible way of living*. Any act of troping, says Hayden White, is “not only a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation towards another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right and proper and true ‘in reality.’” In other words, if by language in general we sustain “the real,” with tropes we reconstruct the real. To accept this view in full is to believe with Cary Nelson that “[i]t is entirely possible that everything operates like a language . . . because we organize our world and make sense of it through language,” that “Everything we can know passes through the fire of our languages to be remade therein.”

From the perspective of rhetoric, divisions of part and whole, species and genus are equally real, insofar as “man, as a symbol-using animal, experiences a difference between this being and that being as a difference between this kind of being and that kind of being.” For Kenneth Burke, “Here, implicit in our attitude toward things, is a principle of classification. And classification in this linguistic, or formal sense is all-inclusive,


White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 2. For White, “Discourse is the genre in which the effort to earn this right of expression, with full credit to the possibility that things might be expressed otherwise, is preeminent. And troping is the soul of discourse, therefore, the mechanism without which discourse cannot do its work or achieve its end” (p. 2).

Cary Nelson, quoted in Rosteck, *At the Intersection*, 216.
‘prior’ to classification in the exclusively social sense. The ‘invidious’ aspects of class arise from the nature of man not as a 'class animal,' but as a ‘classifying animal’. The feigned “reality” that the ideology critic aims to unmask—its “intensities, morbidities, or particularities of mystery”—may indeed “come from institutional sources, but the aptitude comes from the nature of man, generically as a symbol-using animal.”

John Dewey, once again, offers an explanation for the devolution of Burke’s fundamental idea. To quote him at length,

To classify is, indeed, as useful as it is natural. The indefinite multitude of particular and changing events is met by the mind with acts of defining, inventorying and listing, reducing to common heads and tying up in bunches. But these acts like other intelligent acts are performed for a purpose, and the accomplishment of purpose is their only justification. Speaking generally, the purpose is to facilitate our dealings with unique individuals and changing events. When we assume that our clefts and bunches represent fixed separations and collections in rerum natura, we obstruct rather than aid our transactions with things. We are guilty of a presumption which nature promptly punishes. We are rendered incompetent to deal effectively with the delicacies and novelties of nature and life. Our thought is hard where facts are mobile; bunched and chunky where events are fluid, dissolving. The tendency to forget the office of distinctions and classifications, and to take them as marking things in themselves, is the current fallacy of scientific specialism. It is one of the conspicuous traits of highbrowism, the essence of false abstractionism. This attitude which once flourished in physical science now governs theorizing about human nature. Man has been resolved into a definite

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595 Burke, A Rhetoric, 282-283. Even for a scientist like David Bohm, “the process of division is a way of thinking about things that is convenient and useful mainly in the domain of practical, technical and functional activities (e.g., to divide up an area of land into different fields where various crops are to be grown). However, when this mode of thought is applied more broadly to man’s notion of himself and the whole world in which he lives (i.e. to his self-world view), then man ceases to regard the resulting divisions as merely useful or convenient and begins to see and experience himself and his world as actually constituted of separately existent fragments. Being guided by a fragmentary self-world view, man then acts in such a way as to try to break himself and the world up, so that all seems to correspond to his way of thinking.” Over time, “society as a whole has developed in such a way that it is broken up into separate nations and different religious, political, economic, racial groups, etc. Man’s natural environment has correspondingly been seen as an aggregate of separately existent parts, to be exploited by different groups of people. . . . The notion that all these fragments are separately existent is evidently an illusion, and this illusion cannot do other than lead to endless conflict and confusion” (David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order (London: Routledge, 1980), 1-3).

596 Burke, A Rhetoric, 279.
collection of primary instincts which may be numbered, catalogued and exhaustively described one by one. Theorists differ only or chiefly as to their number and ranking. Some say one, self-love; some two, egoism and altruism; some three, greed, fear and glory; while today writers of a more empirical turn run the number up to fifty and sixty. But in fact there are as many specific reactions to differing stimulating conditions as there is time for, and our lists are only classifications for a purpose.  

In other words, class as a social division or social motive, such as it is used in ideology critique, is a late development that began with a “purely formal motive that organizes the material [of the world] in terms of class. Since this motive is formal, it will be felt as natural. Class will be the natural form in which symbol-using animals see their world. ”

The economic, racial, and gender classifications which are unveiled as determining our world should be first seen as, respectively, “three different forms of the fundamental drives to classify and order that inhere within language,” and only later as “an illicit move from difference to social privilege.” Again, if by language we construct and then sustain our classed, social “reality,” then by the same we should be able to, over time, reconstruct that those divisions. Language as rhetoric, and more particularly, tropes “remind us that the world out there is not as statically classified and delineated as we might (at least at times) assume. Indeterminacy indeed is the very mechanism that enables creative energy to engender polytropic and polysemic symbols. . . Ultimately, the new creations are enacted by individual actors who are constrained but

599 Ibid.
not determined by the received categories at a given historical period and by the context of their social interaction."\(^{600}\)

In Whitman’s reconstructed social ontology, he uses the symbol of the body—with it attendant synecdoches—to offer up new classifications of the American “People.” His effort is “natural” since most “humans organize their social worlds into domains of belonging and that a great deal of human life is spent in maintaining, arranging, or rearranging these domains . . . not so much with our intellectual organization of the world as with social dynamics and the aggregation and disaggregation of groups.”\(^{601}\) In the most basic sense, say psychologist Henry Murray and anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, we all believe that “Every man is in certain respects: a. like all other men, b. like some other men, c. like no other man.”\(^{602}\) With Crocker, this dissertation argues that Whitman’s synecdoches, like “metaphor[,] must be viewed not just as a way into the generative logical models of a society, but also as a way out, as ways people come to ‘understand’ and, then, act’\(^{603}\) within that society. In particular, Whitman would reconstruct the way we understand society’s parts, wholes, species, and genera, so that we—as individuals and as a nation—might enjoy the same healthy relations as in a first-rate human body.

When we talk of importance of language to “aggregation and disaggregation” of “domains of belonging,” we call to mind Burke’s rhetorical theory of identification,

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\(^{600}\) Ohnuki-Tierney, “Embedding and Transforming,” 189.

\(^{601}\) Fernandez, Persuasions and Performances, xii.

\(^{602}\) Henry A. Murray and Clyde Kluckhohn, “Personality Formation: The Determinants,” in Personality in Nature, Society, and Culture, eds. C. Kluckhohn and H. A. Murray (New York: Knopf, 1950), 35. Arguably, it could be shown that Murray and Kluckhorn’s three perspectives correspond in language with the workings, respectively, of metaphor, synecdoche (the dynamic middle), and metonymy

“whereby a sense of consubstantiality is symbolically established between beings of unequal status,”—for Burke, the fundamental rhetorical motive. While this is sometimes understood to define an overall rhetorical strategy, in Burke’s theory individual names themselves can identify and divide. We should be on the lookout, he says, for “[b]asically, . . . two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart.” The parts of the body that Whitman attributes to the individual, to the nation, and to democracy signify the relationships he seeks within these larger wholes, since tropes like synecdoche “always define a relationship between terms . . . [and are] never about a term taken by itself.”

The advantage of locating identification and division in single terms is that Burke’s theory thus resists being seen as merely dialectical. As he reasons, “put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric.” While the ideological critic “consider[s] it our task to "dispose of" any ambiguity by merely disclosing the fact that it is an ambiguity,” for Burke, “what we want is not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise,” in order to fully understand the “transformation” intended in any given rhetoric. Burke advises rhetorical critics to thus “conside[r] the

604 Burke, A Rhetoric, 46.
607 Burke, A Rhetoric, 25.
608 Burke, A Grammar, xix.
609 Burke, A Grammar, xviii. Emphasis Burke’s.
grammatical relations inherent in the key terms which the author selects as the coordinates for his calculus of human relations, . . . to characterize the disposition and the transposition of terms" in order to give an account of a rhetoric’s reconstructive “Constitutional tactics.”

In Democratic Vistas, Whitman gives a reconstructed ontology of the People. Since he learned from Hegel (and wrote) that “Truth consists in the just relations of objects to each other,” he characterizes these “just relations” for the American context in several key terms which delimit, in Burke’s terms, a “calculus of human relations”—namely, relations of One and many. Whitman’s terms of identification and division—even taken singly—suggest “grammatical relations”—namely, synecdochic., and in these, his new Constitution for the American social body, the subject of the next chapter.

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610 Burke, A Grammar, 354, 402. Emphasis added. Burke’s choice of the term “calculus” to describe identification and division is apt, insofar as “With reference to the problem of finding an arc of a known curve, the Differential Calculus ascertains what is the form and value of the parts which are to be added; the Integral Calculus adds them together and gives the result” (Augustus De Morgan, The Differential and Integral Calculus (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1842), 24). Otherwise put, “The first is, to show how to descend from quantities to their elements; and the method of accomplishing this is called the Differential Calculus. The second is, to point out the way of ascending from the elements of quantities to the quantities themselves; and this method is called the Integral Calculus” (Etienne Bézout, First Principles of the Differential and Integral Calculus (Cambridge, N.E.: Harvard University Press, 1824), 7-8). Emphasis added with underlines.

611 Whitman, “Carlyle,” 176.
Chapter 4
An Ontology of Democracy, II

In Chapter 4, we find that Whitman argues—contra many sociological thinkers—on behalf of a hybrid organic-atomistic ontology, and in so doing avoids the potential dangers of both worldviews taken singly. Specifically, he recommends an organic (part-whole) view toward people of each and every conceivable class (species-genus). To borrow a term from contemporary biology, Whitman’s America and every single individual therein are both “microbiomes.” In reviewing this argument, the latter part of this chapter places Whitman’s contribution in the context of other ways language and metaphysics may be implicated, the way in which names and symbols—even taken singly—articulate new configurations of the world, and thereby, our objective “sense” of it.

§ Organicism vs. Atomism

Whitman’s Names for the One: The Whole

We have already seen Whitman’s affinity for the human body and its anatomy. As synecdoches, each “eye,” “mind,” “spine,” “breath” he identifies suggests not just the whole body of which they are a part, but also, this chapter argues, his preferred arrangement for the otherwise undivided whole nation. We should see the whole nation as constituted by vital parts, each of which serves an important function, without which the whole would suffer or die. That idea in mind, when Whitman describes “Our lands, embracing so much, (embracing indeed the whole, rejecting none.)” the word whole suggests more than just “the One” nation, but also an underlying arrangement whereby individuals, groups, states, etc. are seen as vital parts.

612 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 70. Emphasis added throughout this section.
For example, even given the “antics of the parties and their leaders, these half-brained nominees, and the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers” we saw Whitman chastise in Chapter 2, his diagnosis, we remember, is that “America, it may be, is doing very well, upon the whole.”\textsuperscript{613} These less savory parts are still vital parts. Elsewhere, when Whitman suggests that the American political system, despite its own faults, had “substantially established, for good, on their own native, sound, long-vista’d principles, never to be overturned, offering a sure basis for all the rest,” he adds, “With that, their future religious forms, sociology, literature, teachers, schools, costumes, &c., are of course to make a compact whole, uniform, on tallying principles. For how can we remain, divided, contradicting ourselves, this way?”\textsuperscript{614} The sort of union Whitman idealizes is one where political democracy and cultural democracy are thus equally parts of a whole. For him, this is the best social structure to ensure equally “the general proportionate development of the whole man,”\textsuperscript{615} each of whom is similarly “parted.”

In addition to a cultural element, “Democracy infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself.”\textsuperscript{616} Again, the term “incomplete” suggests a whole—in this case, with some part missing. Without a spirit of affection between these different parts, “all else in the contributions of a nation or age, through its politics, materials, heroic personalities, military eclat, &c., remains crude, and defers.”\textsuperscript{617} Whitman takes

\begin{footnotes}
\item[613] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Element, First, Last, Indispensable,” 43.
\item[614] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “America’s True Revolutions,” 55.
\item[615] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Democracy’s Last Real Triumph,” 63.
\item[617] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Yet We Thank This Culture,” 50.
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this “adhesiveness” to be fundamental to the body politic, in the same way “[a]s the human frame, or, indeed, any object in this manifold Universe, is best kept together by the simple miracle of its own cohesion.”

“Cohesion,” then, is another pivotal term indicating the wholeness of the body as well as its essential partness. Applied to the nation, “[t]he problem, presented to the New World, is, under permanent law and order, and after preserving cohesion, (ensemble-Individuality,) at all hazards, to vitalize man's free play of special Personalism.” From the other direction, “Freedom, (under the universal laws,) and the fair and uncrammed play of Individuality, can only be had at all through strong-knit cohesion, identity.”

Toward this ideal wholeness, Whitman calls for and would contribute “vitalized . . . national, original archetypes in literature. They only put the nation in form, finally tell anything, prove, complete anything—perpetuate anything.” Where there was no common understanding, these artistic representations would serve to bind different parts of the nation together. At the same time, the individual encountering these representations would with that understanding become a fuller person: as Whitman advises, “Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does.” If we would one day be a whole nation, we should develop whole persons, in keeping with “Lo! Nature, (the only complete, actual poem,) existing calmly in the divine scheme,

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618 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Reformers, Money-Makers, &c.,” 27.
619 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “This ‘Culture’ So Much Wanted,” 40.
620 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “General Notes,” 83.
621 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Yet We Thank This Culture,” 50.
622 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 76.
containing all, content, careless of the criticisms of a day, or these endless and wordy chatterers,“\(^{623}\) and structured, forever, as \textit{a whole with parts}. 

\textbf{Whitman’s Names for the Many: The Parts}

As often as Whitman’s terms variously “identify” \textit{wholes}, as frequently does he use terms which indicate the implied “division”—the \textit{parts}. These terms, too, bespeak a particular arrangement, again of a “parted” whole. In Whitman’s mind, “Nature” is the only perfectly arranged whole, but since “what we now \textit{partially} call Nature is intended, at most, only what is entertainable by the physical conscience, . . . it must be distinctly accumulated, incorporated, that man, comprehending these, has, in towering super-addition, the Moral and Spiritual Consciences, indicating his destination beyond the ostensible, the mortal.”\(^{624}\) Despite that holistic capacity, Whitman “see[s] the sons and daughters of the New World, ignorant of its genius, not yet inaugurating the native, the universal, and the near, still importing the distant, the \textit{partial}, and the dead.”\(^{625}\) Partisanship is a somewhat necessary perspective, of course: each of us is “occupied” by some part of the world, but Whitman would have us consider more of them in his ideal social ontology.

For example, we have already heard Whitman endorse America’s business interests: “Not the least doubtful am I on any prospects of their material success. The triumphant future of their business, geographic, and productive \textit{departments}, on larger

\(^{624}\) Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “Nature as Much Ideal as Real,” 64. 
\(^{625}\) Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “America’s True Revolutions,” 57.
scales and in more varieties than ever, is certain."626 In his complete ontology, “the extreme business energy, and this almost maniacal appetite for wealth prevalent in the United States, are vital parts of amelioration and progress, and perhaps indispensably needed to prepare the very results I demand.”627 Since for Whitman, “[n]ot for nothing does evil play its part among men,”628 then the money-making motive must play its part.

To the same extent, so must “the eager and often inconsiderate appeals of reformers and revolutionists,” as these are “indispensable to counterbalance the inertness and fossilism making so large a part of human institutions.”629 That is, both greed and charges of greed are parts of Whitman’s ideal American whole. So too are “the equal franchise, an elective government . . . the respectability of labor, . . . a nation of practical operatives, law-abiding, orderly and well-off.” As we saw in Chapter 1, he also advises that “To practically enter into Politics is an important part of American personalism.”630 Just as importantly, “[t]hese scientific facts, deductions, are divine too—precious counted parts of moral civilization, and, with physical health, indispensable to it, to prevent fanaticism.”631 Therefore, “the department of Science, and the specialty of Journalism,”632 too, are also equally vital parts.

All of these, says Whitman, “are indeed parts of the tasks of America; but [still] they not only do not exhaust the progressive conception, but rather arise, teeming with it,

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627 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Reformers, Money-Makers, &c.,” 27.
630 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Element, First, Last, Indispensable,” 43.
as the mediums of deeper, higher progress." If the nation is considered only as a material entity resulting from material processes, still other vast parts of the American experience are forgotten. Whitman acknowledges,

To the ostent of the senses and eyes, I know, the influences which stamp the world's history are wars, uprisings or downfalls of dynasties, changeful movements of trade, important inventions, navigation, military or civil governments, advent of powerful personalities, conquerors, &c. These of course play their part; yet, it may be, a single new thought, imagination, principle, even literary style, that plays just as definitive a role in Whitman’s ideal democracy.

Regrettably, the ideal, cultural part of democracy remained unformed. In the “field of Imagination” we find “not a single first-class work, not a single great Literatus,)” Whitman decries, “Painting, sculpture, and the dramatic theatre, it would seem, no longer play an indispensable or even important part in defining America. The reason for this absence is that “Feudalism, caste, the Ecclesiastic traditions, though palpably retreating from political institutions, still hold essentially, by their spirit, even in this country, entire possession of the more important fields, indeed the very subsoil, of education, and of social standards and Literature.” As we saw, Whitman’s remedy is that “we must entirely recast the types of highest Personality from what the Oriental, Feudal, Ecclesiastical worlds bequeath us, and which yet fully possess the imaginative and esthetic fields of the United States, pictorial and melodramatic.” So for him, “in

633 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “America’s True Revolutions,” 56.
635 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Is Literature Really Advancing?,” 53.
the *region* of imaginative, spinal and essential attributes, something equivalent to creation is imperatively demanded.”

Uniquely American arts should highlight, for example, “[t]he idea of the women of America, . . . developed, raised to become the robust equals, workers, and, it may be, even practical and political deciders with the men . . . but great, at any rate, as man, in all *departments.*” To ensure a healthy vitality between America’s undeveloped artistic parts and all of these other important fields requires “the esthetic worker in any *field,*” who can “seiz[e] what is in them” (the other fields), and “by the divine magic of his genius, projects them, their analogies, by curious removes, indirections, in Literature and Art.” Whitman’s own output can be taken as his attempt to bring together these “indispensable” “parts,” “departments,” “fields,” and “regions” into one national body.

**Synecdoche and Organicism**

All of the terms just highlighted constitute what Richard Weaver called “an art of emphasis embodying an order of desire,” Whitman’s own order of desire being a *whole people*, the individuals and combinations of which are taken as *essential parts* with vital functions. It is not simply the case that Whitman calls for “wholes” in *Democratic Vistas*. These names he gives for these wholes (“complete,” “cohesion”)—and parts (“departments,” “fields,” “regions”)—are each one synecdoches. As we saw in Chapter 3,

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Whitman presences synecdoches of the body, its eyes, mind, heart, and spine, and these new names too imply the same arrangement of parts and wholes.

The terminology of wholes and parts constitute what Group Mu calls the _anatomical_ mode of synecdoche, whereby any thing that can be taken as a whole, including “the totality of the universe (TOTUS),” is decomposable “by an unlimited analysis into its ultimate and hypothetical elements (OMNIS).”  

This configuration is illustrated (in Figure 4-1) as a “Disjunctive Tree.” Any real tree, for example, “may be considered as an organic whole, decomposable into coordinate parts that differ from one another”—as a “conjunction” of branches _and_ leaves _and_ a trunk, etc. whereby “not one of the parts is a tree,” but where each part serves an important, distributed function. Importantly, adding or subtracting any one part changes the tree, perhaps fatally.

![Disjunctive Tree: Synecdoche in the Anatomic Mode.](image)

Because in this mode the tree is seen as decomposable, it is “naturally” seen as having been “organically” composed of these parts, but as Aristotle shows in the _Metaphysics_, “organicism” itself is a human conception—a construction.

Aristotle locates organicism “[i]n the case of all things which have several parts and in which the totality is not, as it were, a mere heap, but [instead] the whole is

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642 Group Mu, _A General Rhetoric_, 97-98.
643 Group Mu, _A General Rhetoric_, 99-100.
something beside the parts, there is a cause.” The question arises, “What, then, causes this” sort of construction—where some given whole is composed of parts. His answer, as “in the case of [all] things which are generated,” is “the agent.” As a human construction, this schema asserts logically that “the whole is prior to its parts because it is only possible to conceive of the parts qua parts once one has grasped the whole.”

That a whole is prior to its parts has been interpreted, however, to mean that this whole is therefore “more real” than its parts—that is, “the whole determines the nature of the parts.” While this explanation suggests that whatever we take as a whole can be seen as composed of parts, later interpretations assert the realism of the organic structure as, says Ernest Gellner, “the more customary way of seeing the world, which accepts habitual linkages as inherent in the nature of things, and has little if any sense of the fragility or contingency of these associations, and does not presume to experiment with them.” Even on matters of right and wrong, the “sensitive mind and heart see and feel the totality; they appreciate the connectedness of all its parts and do not seek to break up that unity.” For those of the organic persuasion, the nature of the parts is ever determined by “some inhering force—the Good, telos—that unites beings into a single Being and therefore [ensures] that apparent clashes or disparities between

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645 Ibid.
649 Gellner, Language and Solitude, 6.
opposites are entirely illusory." In the manner of neo-Platonic and Hegelian idealisms, the organicist believes, like Goethe, that

[in every living thing what we call the parts is so inseparable from the whole that the parts can only be understood in the whole, and we can neither make the parts the measure of the whole nor the whole the measure of the parts; and this why living creatures, even the most restricted, have something about them that we cannot quite grasp and have to describe as infinite or partaking of infinity.]

This something that Goethe cannot grasp—what Aristotle calls that “something beside the parts—is referred to by some idealists as “spirit” and by other thinkers as an emergent phenomenon, but in either case, this something accounts for mystery in the world—the undefinable Logos.

The mystery notwithstanding, burgeoning sciences in the Nineteenth Century accepted this organic configuration as the only natural one. What came to be called “functionalism,” says Anthony Giddens, became the preeminent “science[,] providing the closest and most compatible model for social science,” too. Biology in fact offered the best model for “conceptualizing the structure and the function of social systems,” not to mention an apt way to “analyz[e] processes of [social] evolution via mechanisms of adaptation.” However, with that model, social science also imported the ontological priority, the determinism, and, consequently, “the pre-eminence of the social world over its individual parts (i.e. its constituent actors, human subjects).”

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650 Gellner, Language and Solitude, 5.
653 Ibid. Emphasis added.
654 Ibid.
Karl Marx, having accepted this natural determinism, rationalizes, “The further back we go into history, the more the individual, and, therefore, the producing individual seems to depend on and belong to a larger whole: at first it is, quite naturally, the family and the clan, which is but an enlarged family.”\(^6^{55}\) Marx’s organicism precludes manifestations of individualism, an idea which for him was only even invented in the last (eighteenth) century “as a historic necessity to provide capitalism with a needed ideology.”\(^6^{56}\) Though the parts are vital, only the whole is real, and in all Marxist thought since, it remains “above all necessary to avoid postulating ‘society’ once more as an abstraction confronting the individual. The individual is a social being”\(^6^{57}\)—naturally. In the words of Rousseau before him, “a People” comes into being only when “each individual, by himself a complete and isolated whole,” is finally taken as “a piece of a greater whole from which that individual may receive his life and being.”\(^6^{58}\) For the organicist, the individual exists in functional service to the nation.

**Social Organicism vs. Social Atomism**

As an ontological structure, organicism is traditionally understood to oppose atomism, an ontological arrangement whereby the sum of the parts remains merely a sum, with no one “element” more or less important than any other, with no mysterious remainder. Along the same lines, organicism and atomism are theorized as mutually

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exclusive social ontologies. What Marx’s organic ideal sought to replace, after all, was “sociological individualism,” “the theory that society is to be conceived as an aggregate of individuals whose relations to each other are purely external.”

In Ferdinand Tönnies’ late nineteenth-century sociological theory, both of these social configurations are possible, society being “conceived of either as real and organic life . . . the essential characteristic of the Gemeinschaft (community); or as an imaginary and mechanical structure . . . the concept of Gesellschaft (society).” As a general ontological structure, “Gemeinschaft should be understood as a living organism, Gesellschaft as a mechanical aggregate and artifact.” Another way to think of the distinction is on private/public terms: “All intimate, private, and exclusive living together, so we discover, is understood as life in Gemeinschaft (community), Gesellschaft (society) is public life—it is the world itself.”

Examples of the organic Gemeinschaft range from “the domestic home life” and marriage to the way “the Church wishes to be regarded” fully through “the whole of mankind.” This organic social ontology, we saw above, “starts from the assumption of perfect unity of human wills as an original or natural condition which is preserved in spite of actual separation.” Naturally holding together this ideal organic community is a “[r]eciprocal, binding sentiment . . . a peculiar will of a Gemeinschaft we shall call

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661 Tönnies, Community and Society, 35.
662 Ibid. Emphasis added.
663 Tönnies, Community and Society, 37.
understanding (*consensus*). . . the special social force and sympathy which keeps human beings together as members of a totality.”

What Whitman calls for ideally as a binding “comradeship” or “affectionate” national spirit, for Tönnies develops naturally in in the evolution of any organic society. As anthropologist Louis Dumont described,

> Think rather of the child, slowly brought to humanity by his upbringing in the family, by the apprenticeship of language and moral judgment, by the education which makes him share in the common patrimony — including, in our society, elements which were unknown to the whole of mankind less than a century ago.

From this familial “concord” develops a stable set of “folkways, mores, and religion,” a “common center” from which “each individual receives his share” and which “is manifest in his own sphere, i.e., in his sentiment, in his mind and heart, and in his conscience as well as in his environment, his possessions, and his activities.”

> It is in this center that the individual’s strength is rooted, and his rights derive, . . . the one original law which, in its divine and natural character, encompasses and sustains him, just as it made him and will carry him away.

As in the organic conception of the natural world, in social organicism, “institutions, values, concepts, [and] language” are thus all “sociologically prior to its particular members, the latter becoming human beings only through education into and modelling by a given society.”

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664 Tönnies, *Community and Society*, 47.
666 Tönnies, *Community and Society*, 225.
667 Ibid.
“traditional,” where, just as in Plato’s organic Republic, the individual ultimately defers to and serves “society as a whole,” a society thus marked by order and by hierarchy—with both taken as natural. If society as a whole is the end, the individual parts are merely means.

Even under these conditions, however, there inevitably develops, says Dumont, a different set of relationships, an atomistic Gessellschaft, a “Societas,” composed strictly by means of voluntary “consociation.” In this arrangement, a number of “partnerships” are consummated, typically represented by “contract[s] by which the individuals composing it have ‘associated’ themselves in a society.”\(^669\) The sum total of these associations amount to what we call “Society,” but in this additive view, there are first “individuals prior to the groups or relationships that they constitute or ‘make’ by combination, more or less of their own accord.”\(^670\) They can thus be dissolved as quickly as they are formed, without much damage to the larger Society, which persists forthwith.

In this “modern” perspective, the fundamental unit, “the Human Being[,] is regarded as the indivisible, ‘elementary’ man, both a biological being and a thinking subject”—the measure of all things. And because each one “in a sense incarnates the whole of mankind, . . . [t]he kingdom of ends coincides with each man’s legitimate ends, and so the values are turned upside down. What is still called ‘society’ is the means, the life of each man is the end.”\(^671\) Under these conditions of independence, the individual appears as a “free agent” to those of the organic persuasion.

\(^{669}\) Ibid.
\(^{670}\) Ibid.
As Dumont explains, the “common spirit” of Gemeinschaft has thus become “so weak [and] the link connecting him with the others worn so thin,” there is hardly a common understanding, and in fact most likely, increased misunderstanding. For Dumont, “This means war and the unrestricted freedom of all to destroy and subjugate one another,” as well as an “underlying mutual fear.” Under such conditions, the state becomes necessary, if for nothing else, to adjudicate contracts and disagreements. Nevertheless, because in this ontology, the individual is sacred, absolute in self-reliance, it is inherently attractive in ideal democracy, and it was so for Whitman.

Whitman’s muse, Hegel, maintained the same dichotomy—organicism vs. atomism—in his early nineteenth-century Philosophy of Right, with what for some were frightening political consequences. With Dumont and Tönnies, Hegel’s preferred manifestation of Gemeinschaft is the family, “the institution where human beings first experience the non-heteronymous priority of the whole over the part.” In his expansive philosophy, the family actually holds pride of place as “the direct substantive reality of spirit.” What would attract Whitman to Hegel’s organic view is the requisite general will which binds the family—its unity—is “the feeling of love,” of such depth that “we are not independent persons but members.” Hegel calls this kind of Love, “the ethical in the form of the natural. . . . As a solution it is an ethical union.”

672 Tönnies, Community and Society, 225.
673 Ibid.
674 Timothy C. Luther, Hegel’s Critique of Modernity: Reconciling Individual Freedom and the Community (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 158.
676 Ibid.
677 Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 139. As we will see in Chapter 4 of this volume, it is also part of Whitman’s ethical solution.
However, Hegel agrees with Dumont, that once the family is “dissolved,” then those “who should be members, become in feeling and reality self-dependent persons. What was theirs by right of their position in the family, they now receive in separation in an external way, in the form of money, maintenance, or education.”\(^{678}\) This atomistic *Gesellschaft* Hegel calls the “civic community,” a mere “union” by addition of different persons, wherein “to each particular person others are a means to the attainment of his end”\(^{679}\)—and should be treated as such.

For this reason, Hegel’s (apparent) preference for the organic model has come to be interpreted by ideological critics among others as a warrant for subjugation, hierarchy, and power, all of which are taken as inevitable under such an arrangement. In the next century, five years removed from the Great War, John Dewey judged that the consequential effect of the organic worldview had been “to supply the apparatus for intellectual justification of the established order . . . to provide a bulwark for the maintenance of the political status quo.”\(^{680}\) What came to be understood as “a philosophy of fixed obligations and authoritative law” had come to characterize German political thinking, in contradistinction to “revolutionary France” and Britain, where “liberal social philosophy tended true to the spirit of its atomistic empiricism to make freedom and the exercise of rights ends in themselves.”\(^{681}\)

Frequently taken as representative of this latter, “liberal” view is John Stuart Mill. Though much of *Democratic Vistas* adopts a Hegelian perspective, the very first paragraph of Whitman’s work identifies Mill’s thoughts on variety and freedom as

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\(^{678}\) Ibid.


\(^{681}\) Dewey, *Reconstruction*, 208
important to the workings of Nature as functionalism. As we will see in the next section, an important part of Whitman’s social ontology—in addition to its organicity—will be Mill’s conception of freedom, that a rich society is composed of the sum total of “the laws of the actions and passions of human beings.” Unlike in the organic arrangement, individuals united in this additive way remain individuals:

their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature. Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance, with different properties; . . . Human beings in society have no properties but those which are derived from, and may be resolved into, the laws of the nature of individual man.

Mill’s was a reaction to the sort of biological necessity (apparently) implied by organicism. Any individual might, under that system, say, with Mill, “I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our own power.” Only the atomic model (it seemed to Mill) admits freedom—an equally essential feature of Whitman’s total American ontology.

**Whitman’s Names for the Many: The Species**

For Whitman, the atomic model is no less “natural” than the organic one, and its terminology of differences—special and general—is no less important to his social

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683 Ibid.
ontology. The first sentence from *Democratic Vistas* indicates Whitman’s conception of nature as more atomistic than organic:

As the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe are perhaps the lessons of *variety* and *freedom*, the same present the greatest lessons also in New World politics and progress. If a man were ask’d, for instance, the distinctive points contrasting modern European and American political and other life with the old Asiatic cultus, as lingering-bequeath’d yet in China and Turkey, he might find the amount of them in John Stuart Mill’s profound essay on Liberty in the future, where he demands two main constituents, or sub-strata, for a truly grand nationality—1st, a large *variety* of character—and 2nd, full play for human nature to expand itself in *numberless* and even conflicting directions—(seems to be for general humanity much like the influences that make up, in their limitless field, that perennial health-action of the air we call the weather—an infinite number of currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures, and cross purposes, whose ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart brings constant restoration and vitality.)  

So understood, Whitman’s ideal nation should take an atomic structure, characterized by unlimited variety and freedom. In the same way, says Whitman, that for an individual, “*[p]erfect health is simply the right relation of man himself, & all his body, by which I mean all that he is, & all its laws and the play of them, to Nature & its laws & and the play of them,*” if the nation were arranged in this way, the individual would remain “the sovereign & whole & sufficient good, & the inlet & outlet of every good.” That nation, like the individuals within, will thrive on the “infinite,” “numberless,” “ceaseless,” sometimes conflicting play of differences within itself.

While the “architecture of Individuality will ever prove *various*, with *countless* different combinations,” in the atomic nation “they rise as into common pinnacles, some

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higher, some less high, only all pointing upward.” In this model, the nation is viewed as an aggregate of all of the “countless different combinations” of individuals—none of which are “indispensable,” as is the case in the organic model, but any and all of which equally serve to define the larger genus “nation.”

His favorite “specimen” of this of the atomic nation is the “million-headed city,” New York. Of this particular species, he appreciates the

[alertness, generally fine physique, clear eyes that look straight at you, a singular combination of reticence and self-possession, with good nature and friendliness—a prevailing range of according manners, taste and intellect, surely beyond any elsewhere upon earth—and a palpable outcropping of that personal comradeship I look forward to as the subtlest, strongest future hold of this many-item’d Union—are not only constantly visible here in these mighty channels of men, but they form the rule and average. Today, I should say—defiant of cynics and pessimists, and with a full knowledge of all their exceptions—an appreciative and perceptive study of the current humanity of New York gives the directest proof yet of successful Democracy, and of the solution of that paradox, the eligibility of the free and fully developed individual with the paramount aggregate.]

Here we find free individuals combined in contingent species toward the larger genus “New York,” which in and of itself defines “America,” as One and many.

As “[m]uch is said, and opportunely said, with reference to aggregate-tendencies, masses,” those general “vast and sweeping movements, influences, moral and physical, of humanity, now and always current over the planet,” in Whitman’s atomic model, “it is also good to reduce the whole matter to the consideration of a single self, a man, a woman, on permanent grounds. Even for the treatment of the universal, in politics, metaphysics, or anything, sooner or later we come down to one single, solitary Soul.”

687 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Element First, Last, Indispensable,” 42.
689 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 37. Emphasis added.
So sacred was the individual to Whitman, he finds the human being itself a “[m]iracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth’s dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts.”

For an ideal individual specimen, he recommends Abraham Lincoln, of whom he says,

there is a cement to the whole people, subtle, more underlying, than any thing [sic] in written constitution, or courts, or armies. Namely, the cement of a death identified thoroughly with that people, at its head, and for its sake. Strange (is it not?) that battles, martyrs, agonies, blood, even assassination, should so condense, perhaps only really, lastingly condense, a Nationality.

He also “specifies” any number of the wounded soldiers he nursed during the Civil War. Of this type, he boasts, “Descending to detail, entering any of the armies, and mixing with the private soldiers, we see and have seen august spectacles.” In their individual selves, finds Whitman, “We have seen the alacrity with which the [entire] American-born populace, the peaceablest and most good-natured race in the world.” New Yorkers, Presidents, soldiers—as Whitman characterizes them here, they are less vital parts of an organic whole than decorated species of the genus “American.” In fact, any specific individual is seen as “special” because, not in spite of, their differences—their distinctions.

As we saw earlier, this means that Whitman, “as Democrat,” will “see clearly enough, (as already illustrated,) the crude, defective streaks in all the strata of the common people; the specimens and vast collections of the ignorant, the credulous, the

690 Ibid.
693 Ibid.
unfit and uncouth, the incapable, and the very low and poor." 694 True freedom, however, admits all varieties of individuals, and all “specimens of the cost,” including “treachery among Generals, folly in the Executive and Legislative departments, schemers, thieves everywhere—cant, credulity, make-believe everywhere.” 695

These species notwithstanding, Whitman’s ideal order aims consistently, “at all hazards, to vitalize man's free play of special Personalism, recognizing in it something that calls ever more to be considered, fed, and adopted as the substratum for the best that belongs to us.” 696 What will define America the nation is the independence of its individuals, “[f]reedom from all laws or bonds except those of one’s own being, controlled by the universal ones. To lands, to man, to woman, what is there at last to each, but the inherent soul, nativity, idioscrasy, free, highest-poised, soaring its own flight, following out itself?” 697 Freedom is not a preference for Whitman—an axiology—but an ontological reality, a type of “BEING . . . and of growing therefrom . . . according to its own central idea and purpose, . . . the precious idioscrasy and special nativity and intention that he is.” 698

Throughout Democratic Vistas, he therefore aims “to bring forward and modify everything else with the idea of that Something a man is, (last precious consolation of the drudging poor,) standing apart from all else, divine in his own right, and a woman in hers.” 699 Solitude, in fact, represents an ideal state of being in Whitman’s ontology. As energetically as he celebrates the vast masses of difference in a New York crowd, he

695 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “What These Pages Are For, to Suggest Leaders Fit for the Future,” 72.
696 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “This “Culture” So Much Wanted,” 40.
697 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “America’s True Revolutions,” 57.
698 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 38.
699 Ibid.
idealizes equally “Singleness and normal simplicity, and separation, amid this more and more complex, more and more artificialized, state of society—how pensively we yearn for them! how we would welcome their return!”

In an ideal America, then, Whitman “see[s] steadily pressing ahead, and strengthening itself, even in the midst of immense tendencies toward aggregation, this image of completeness in separatism, of individual personal dignity, of a single person, either male or female, characterized in the main, not from extrinsic acquirements or position,” as in the case of the organic model, “but in the pride of himself or herself alone.”

What becomes clear from this survey of Whitman’s treatment of individuals is that here he recommends a different social ontology than the organic one we saw above. All of Whitman’s names for the many species of the American genus—“a man,” “a woman,” “individual,” “specimen,” “special,” “single,” “own,” “nativity,” “idiocrasy,” and so on—do not simply specify a singularity. Each of these terms, as we saw above, also signifies the larger ontological structure (in this case atomic) in which it is contained.

**Whitman’s Names for the One: The Genus**

Now, in addition to—or in spite of—Whitman taking the nation as a whole with parts, “the New World, includ[es] in itself the all-leveling aggregate of Democracy,” as much as “including the all-varied, all-permitting, all-free theorem of Individuality.”

Ideal individualism—in Whitman’s system “personalism”—“forms, in a sort, or is to

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700 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 38.
702 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Yet We Thank this Culture,” 48.
form, the compensating balance-wheel of the successful working machinery of aggregate America,”\textsuperscript{703} Whitman celebrates the unique distinctions between American individuals as in keeping with “Democracy's rule that men, the Nation, [be] a common aggregate of living identities.”\textsuperscript{704} In this additive compositional structure, each of these terms is nonetheless representative of the other. “This idea of perfect individualism it is indeed,” says Whitman, “that deepest tinges and gives character to the idea of the Aggregate.”\textsuperscript{705} In other words, for Whitman, “the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies which are theirs”\textsuperscript{706} are one in the same, synecdochic representations. Taken most generally, this mode of existence “form[s], over this continent, an Idiocracy of Universalism.”\textsuperscript{707}

When all of these idiosyncratic individuals and species are combined together, “consolidated,” Whitman takes them—in general—as an “aggregate.” In fact, “it is mainly or altogether to serve independent separatism that we favor a strong generalization, consolidation”\textsuperscript{708} at all. When Whitman confesses an “unshaken faith in the elements of the American masses, the composites, of both sexes, and even considered as individuals,” it is because he “recognize[es] in them the broadest bases of the best literary and esthetic appreciation.”\textsuperscript{709} The very purpose of “our land, America, her Literature, Esthetics, &c.,” was, as Whitman saw it, “substantially, the getting in form, or effusion and statement, of deepest basic elements and loftiest final meanings, of

\textsuperscript{703} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 35.
\textsuperscript{704} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Consideration—Customs—Law—the Esthetic—Cohesion,” 22. Emphasis added throughout this section.
\textsuperscript{705} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism versus the Aggregate,” 17. As we will see in Chapter 5 of this volume, it will be “Adhesiveness or Love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all” in Whitman’s ontology (p. 24).
\textsuperscript{706} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “A Thought in My Musings,” 31.
\textsuperscript{707} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “This ‘Culture’ So Much Wanted,” 40.
\textsuperscript{708} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism versus the Aggregate,” 17.
\textsuperscript{709} Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism Versus the Aggregate,” 15.
History and Man—and the portrayal, (under the eternal laws and conditions of beauty,) of our own physiognomy, the subjective tie and expression of the objective, as from our own combination, continuation and points of view."

A hundred years into its existence, it was finally time for America to “sternly promulgate her own new standard,” by “accepting the old, the perennial, elements, and combining them into groups, unities, appropriate to the modern, the democratic, the West, and to the practical occasions and needs of our own cities, and of the agricultural regions.”

Even as “the old, undying elements remain,” the American “task is, to successfully adjust them to new combinations, our own days.”

The New World Whitman envisioned would contain within it countless “peculiar combinations,” any one species of which could be taken as “particular modes of the universal attributes and passions.” This last statement represents the part of Whitman’s idealism that can be taken negatively, and as history has since demonstrated, dangerously. If, as Whitman believes, the representative “thought” or “fact” “amid our own land's race and history,” is “the thought of Oneness, averaging, including all; of Identity—the indissoluble sacred Union of These States,” and the American “programme” should be designed, “not for a single class alone,” but of “a scope generous enough to include the widest human area,” then as a practical matter, some differences

\[710\] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “True Use of the Old Theology, Politics, Personal Models,” 77-78.

\[711\] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Women—Portraits—Speculation,” 47.


\[713\] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Yet We Thank this Culture,” 51.


\[715\] Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “This “Culture” So Much Wanted,” 40.
will be ignored. Whitman’s construction “includes all” in an additive union, but that system takes democracy as “the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average.”

Some differences, the ideological critic will charge, Whitman simply ignores:

“Curiously enough, too, the proof on this point comes, I should say, every bit as much from the South, as from the North. Although I have spoken only of the latter, yet I deliberately include all. Grand, common stock!” From the totality of “The States, with all their variety of origins, their diverse climes, cities, standards, &c.,” Whitman can nevertheless characterize general qualities which are “common to all, typical of all . . . what is universal, native, common to an, inland and seaboard, northern and southern.”

In each of us, he holds,

> There is in the possession of such by each single individual, something so transcendent, so incapable of gradations, (like life,) that, to that extent, it places all beings on a common level, utterly regardless of the distinctions of intellect, virtue, station, or any height or lowliness whatever . . . in each and in the whole, on one broad, primary, universal, common platform.

Whitman spends a large part of *Democratic Vistas* speculating on this something:

> “Out of such considerations, such truths, arises for treatment in these Vistas the important question of Character, of an American stock-personality, with Literatures and Arts for outlets and return-expressions, and, of course, to correspond, within outlines common to all.”

Although he sets out to “[a]ttempt then, however crudely, a basic model or portrait of Personality, for general use for the manliness of The States, (and doubtless that is most useful which is most simple, comprehensive for all, and toned low

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716 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 35.
719 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “Consideration—Customs—Law—the Esthetic—Cohesion,” 22-23. This “something so transcendent,” of course, belongs also to “general Humanity, (for to that we return, as, for our purposes, what it really is, to bear in mind,)” (p. 21).
enough,) fortunately, he never really fills out this “typical American.” The danger for him, says the ideological critic, lies in believing that such generalization is possible, amidst so much (changing) diversity, but also that the preferred type (selected) is thus universally applicable around the world. To the extent that Whitman wishes to celebrate what is “general,” “universal,” “common to all,” “regardless of distinctions,” he necessarily minimizes the “variety,” “idiocrasies,” and “single” “details” he also spoke so highly of. These ethical concerns notwithstanding, as names, each of these indicates a larger synecdochic structure—in this case, atomic.

**Synecdoche and Atomism**

As in the organic model, all of these divisions of species and genus are human constructions. Unlike the organic arrangement, however, in the atomic model, adding and subtracting new members—new species—does not (vitaly) change the nature or reality of any larger class, or genus, or universe. We can see this phenomenon in Group Mu’s model of “classification,” depicted (in Figure 4-2) as “Nested Classes.”

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722 Crucially, Group Mu add that “Between these two categories of words [anatomical/taxonomic], . . . there result intermediary terms that are prone to both analyses. That is why we have been able to consider the tree, *at the same time*, as both an empirical conjunction with all parts (leaves, roots, trunk) and a rational disjunction of all its modalities (birch, linden, larch).” With Burke, Group Mu hold that, “Such considerations prove that the word is not, for the sender or for the receiver, a global entity of meaning. It is, in fact, instantly decomposable into semes or parts according to either of the modes demanded by the context. All the expressive or cognitive riches of discourse, and particularly the rhetorical ones, are based on this decomposition” (Group Mu, *A General Rhetoric*, 100-101). Emphasis added.
Figure 4-2. Nested Classes: Synecdoche in the Taxonomic Mode.

In this ontological configuration, any specific tree, for example, is seen as both a “individual member of the class Tree” at level D and as “belong[ing] to one or other of the subclasses poplar, oak, birch, etc,”\(^7\) at level A or A’. A particular tree’s membership in one of these smaller classes is mutually exclusive, or “disjunctive,” in that “x is a tree” means “x is a poplar or x is an oak or birch.” As we descend through subclasses (above, D→C→B→A), “we can expect that their members possess at least leaves, a trunk, roots, and so on . . . [but also some extra] particular determinants.”\(^5\) Each of these added qualities accounts for the sheer variety of the world. Encountering the novel, we can always add a new distinction, a new level of discrimination to the bottom of the Nested Class diagram above.

As a general ontology, the mode of genus and species emphasizes the additive, compositional nature of everything. Like Democritus’ atoms of matter, the “stuff of knowledge begins, as it were, in a disaggregated condition: aggregation or totality is achieved or constructed, but is not there at the start.”\(^6\) In this view of the world, the “bricks of knowledge . . . are individual, isolable sensations or perceptions or ideas:

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\(^7\) Group Mu, *A General Rhetoric*, 100.
\(^5\) Ibid.
granular entities of some sort, which accumulate so as to form large, and perhaps massive structures.”

Given the contingent nature of these “granular entities,” the “main device for achieving innovation and discovery is the recombination of elements: in order to have a keen eye for the possibility of new combinations, one must first of all not be overly wedded to and overawed by their habitual associations.”

Carried to its logical inclusion, the atomic ontology holds that “all social phenomena, [too,] and especially the functioning of all social institutions, should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc., of human individuals, and ... we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called 'collectives'.”

Contra Marx, social institutions are not somehow metaphysically prior to or more real than the specific individuals of which they are made. What Whitman endorses instead is a different “Natural Law,” like the organic, whereby “the individual was the ultimate and only source of Group-authority, [and] the community was only an aggregate—a mere union, whether close or loose—of the wills and powers of individual persons.”

Only under the atomic arrangement can the individual both flourish and innovate.

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727 Ibid.
728 Ibid.
§ Organicism and Atomism, Organic Through and Through

Either Whitman is true to his earlier admission and contradicts himself because he contains multitudes, or he has outlined a social ontology which could be described as at once organic and atomic. He wants it all, and with Hegel believes that although in the civic community particular and universal fall apart, they are none the less mutually connected and conditioned. While the one seems to be just the opposite of the other, and is supposed to be able to exist only by keeping the other at arm’s length, each nevertheless has the other as a condition.\(^731\)

For Whitman, both Gemeinschaft and Gessellschaft, community and society, are viable American constructions, both arrangements of the One in terms of the many. It is not necessarily the case, as Negri and Hardt hold, that only the “multitude” supports the freedom of many individuals while the “people” tend toward the One regardless of differences. In fact, Whitman adopts from Hegel’s organic model Hegel’s specification that any “particular interest shall in truth be neither set aside nor suppressed, but be placed in open concord with the universal. In this concord both particular and universal are inclosed.”\(^732\) While the traditional view of Hegel’s organic state is of one in which the individual roles and rights are determined, in the way a whole dictates the function of the parts,\(^733\) a closer looks reveals that Hegel—as much as nineteenth century British idealists—actually posited that “[t]he essence of the modern state binds together the

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\(^731\) Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 155.
\(^732\) Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 201.
\(^733\) Isaiah Berlin, among others, warns us of the “perils of using organic metaphors to justify the coercion of some men by others in order to raise them to a ‘higher’ level of freedom . . . renders it easy for me to conceive of myself as coercing others for their own sake, in their, not my, interests . . . Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their ‘real’ selves” (Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969/1958), 133).
universal and the full freedom of particularity, including the welfare of individuals.”\textsuperscript{734}

Thus, for Hegel (as much as for Whitman), “The universal must be actively furthered, but, on the other side, subjectivity must be wholly and vitally developed. Only when both elements are present in force is the state to be regarded as articulate and truly organized.”\textsuperscript{735}

Immanuel Kant, in fact, took the newly formed America as an exemplar of this sort of “organization:”:

Thus, in the case of a recently undertaken fundamental transformation of a great people into a state, the word organization has frequently been quite appropriately used for the institution of the magistracies, etc., and even for the entire body politic. For in such a whole each member should certainly be not merely a means but at the same time also an end, and insofar as it contributes to the possibility of the whole, its position and function should also be determined by the idea of the whole.\textsuperscript{736}

Ultimately, whatever “the universal purpose”—Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft—“can make no advance without the private knowledge and will of a particularity, which must adhere to its right.”\textsuperscript{737} That is, “you cannot have the moral world unless it is willed; that to be willed, it must be willed by persons.”\textsuperscript{738} In a democratic organicism, the parts cannot be entirely dependent on the whole: after all, “in a healthy body all the parts may develop together.”\textsuperscript{739}

\textsuperscript{734} Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 199.
\textsuperscript{735} Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 199.
\textsuperscript{736} Immanuel Kant, “Critique of the Teleological Power of Judgement,” in The Nature of Life: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives from Philosophy and Science, ed. Mark Bedau and Carol Cleland (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47.
\textsuperscript{737} Hegel, Philosophy of Right, 199.
Therefore, in Hegel’s (and Whitman’s) ideal ontology, “the unity of the whole is built on the relatively independent life of every part, and the independent life of every part nourishes and maintains itself through its connection with the unity of the whole body.” As a social ontology, “the individual realizes himself . . . in society and society realizes itself in the individual’. Only by this understanding can both the individual and the nation be seen as co-constituting, as only by way of their mutual interdependence can both be taken as non-reductive, where neither the whole nor the parts are taken as ontologically prior to the other. Only this hybrid organic-atomic ontology ensures that “The individual element must not be degraded into a predicate of the whole” as in the worst forms of organicism, “nor the whole into a mere collection of the parts,” as in extreme atomism. As a reconstructed social ontology, only this social structure gives full play to the best of both modes.

Every Thing an Organism

In the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries, some theories of biology have recognized this hybrid ontology itself as real. Until then, most scientists accepted an atomistic ontology of nature, “that the whole of nature could ever be explained from the bottom upwards in terms of ultimate, indivisible, eternal, material particles or 'atoms'
(Greek: *a-tomos*, that which cannot be split)." It was only when “far-reaching changes in physics associated with the theory of relativity and the field concept” emerged that Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920s would argue that all “enduring entities” like crystals, molecules, atoms and sub-atomic particles “should be regarded not as material objects, but as *structures of activity,*” no less “*organisms*” than animals and plants, organs, tissues, and cells. Today, biology describes bodies as composed of organs, tissues, cells, organelles, genes, chromosomes, genetic material, DNA, etc., where each new whole is taken as an “organism” that is “made up of parts which are themselves organisms at a lower level.”

When Whitman identifies “the triumph of America’s democratic formules” as “moral Conscience,” he calls for its realization, “inauguration, growth, acceptance, and unmistakable supremacy among *individuals, cities, States, and the Nation*”—each of which is a different social level. For him, this “analogy” holds throughout “the material universe:” it is at every level for him “what holds together this world, and every object upon it, and carries its dynamics on forever sure and safe.” By way of comparison, Whitman suggests, “The subtle antiseptic called health is not more requisite to the bodily physiology, than Conscience is to the moral and mental physiology.” Spread widely and thoroughly, health and conscience should be the ideal for Americans, each and all.

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745 Ibid.
748 Ibid.
749 Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, “The Element First, Last, Indispensable,” 42. David Bohm points out that the bodily “health” that nurse Whitman sought during the Civil War is based on an Anglo-Saxon word “*hale*” meaning “whole”—in that, “to be healthy is to be whole” (Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, 3).
too. In Whitman’s multi-leveled ontology, “there is nothing else higher, for Nation, Individual, or for Literature, than the idea, and practical realization and expression of the idea, of Conscience, kept at topmost mark, absolute in itself,” but distributed widely. Whitman’s ontology requires “the invariable application” of “simple, unsophisticated Conscience” at each level—“persons, eras, [and] nations.”

For sure, at each new level of complexity—individual, group, state, nation, world—important differences persist. In each, “new properties emerge”—we find something new that is more than the sum of its parts. But, the (democratic) advantage of this model is “seeing this difference as part of the general scheme of things rather than as a unique discontinuity in nature,” which might not otherwise fit into an existing class. Here is an organic model that respects the plurality of characteristics in species and individuals. In Whitman’s, then, we have a social ontology that is built on the organic model, but which sees this vital arrangement throughout the universe—scaled through all possible species and genera. His is an ontology that could be described as organic through and through.

750 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “When the Present Century Closes,” 62. As for whether or not “Conscience” can be considered an ontological entity, Whitman reasons, “By the names Right, Justice, Truth, we suggest, but do not describe it. To the world of men it remains a dream, an idea as they call it. But no dream is it to the wise—but the proudest, almost only solid lasting thing of all” (p. 62).
751 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “The Element First, Last, Indispensable,” 42. Emphasis added. In keeping with his terminology of the body, he adds, “Our triumphant modern Civilizee, with his all-schooling and his wondrous appliances, will still show himself but an amputation while this deficiency remains” (p. 42).
Microbiomes

Whitman’s multi-leveled organic ontology is validated today by new developments in biology. The “Human Microbiome Project,” for example, is an attempt by some researchers to “categorize the vast number of microbiological species and organisms that live in and on the ‘healthy’ human body.” The assumption here is symbiotic, that, “[i]n exchange for shelter and raw materials,” these microorganisms “help feed and protect their hosts: the bacteria are actually essential for [the host’s] survival and are integral to the host’s well-being.” In this view, any individual human being can thus be seen as “a community of multiple species of microscopic organisms.” This unique “community” the researchers refer to as a microbiome, which includes “the totality of microbes, their genetic information, and the milieu in which they interact.”

However, “the metaphysical presupposition about the integrity of singular individuals of a species,” which we find in the atomistic ontology, is what “drives and subtends our anxiety and subsequent reactive war on microbial communities”—a “cultural drive to eliminate bacteria.” In the atomistic model, that is, deviant bacteria, individuals, and groups can be classed as such, isolated, and eliminated. This axiological

754 Gregory W. Schneider and Russell Winslow, “Parts and Wholes: The Human Microbiome, Ecological Ontology, and the Challenges of Community,” Perspectives in Biology and Medicine 57, no. 2 (2014), 208. By their estimation, “The ‘healthy’ human adult houses hundreds of trillions of bacteria, 100 trillion in the digestive tract alone. In fact, the average adult in the study had 10 times as many microbial cells as cells descended from the germ cells of his or her parents. . . . [and the HMP] now estimates that the commensal bacteria that reside on and in that individual’s body incorporate a total of some 3 million different genes, suggesting a ratio of microbial to human genes of at least 130 to 1” (pp. 209-210).


756 Ibid.

757 Ibid.

758 Schneider and Winslow, “Parts and Wholes,” 213.
“warlike attitude seems to arise out of a metaphysical conception of individuality that looks at individuals as substances, defined by a static taxonomic characteristic.”\(^{759}\)

If the individual is seen, however, as a “microbiome,” and “if we consider microbes as members of a more-or-less well-functioning community,” as in the revised organic model, “we might be a little more hesitant to declare war on a member of that community.”\(^{760}\) This ontological conception of “individuals emerging as communities, and within communities, challenges us [axiologically] to reframe how we should behave towards other biological organisms.”\(^{761}\) Differences at each level of civilization, nation, society, family, etc.—each a community—emerge not as deviance to be eliminated, but as vital “individuality.”

This philosophy is Whitman’s own, one that is at once both organic and atomistic and sees each and every “human being is an ecological phenomenon, a phenomenon with a collection of activities out of which emerges an identifiable whole,”\(^{762}\) —that is, “the individual composed of plurality.”\(^{763}\) It underscores what, arguably, Whitman takes \textit{E pluribus unum} to mean ontologically, that “[i]n some very real way, we are each a ‘polis,’ even as we are parts of some larger political community.”\(^{764}\)

\(^{759}\) Schneider and Winslow, “Parts and Wholes,” 219.
\(^{760}\) Schneider and Winslow, “Parts and Wholes,” 221.
\(^{761}\) Schneider and Winslow, “Parts and Wholes,” 209.
\(^{762}\) Schneider and Winslow, “Parts and Wholes,” 218.
\(^{763}\) Schneider and Winslow, “Parts and Wholes,” 216.
\(^{764}\) Schneider and Winslow, “Parts and Wholes,” 221.
§ Language and Ontology

Social Reconstruction: Articulating Indeterminate Relations

In Whitman’s ontology, every thing and everyone is a microbiome, a whole with vital parts, through any and all species, or specific divisions we make of our general world. The language of microbiomes sanctions this as a general ontology, but also as the special social ontology Whitman elaborates in Democratic Vistas. Between the nation and the individual, there is a vital, symbiotic relationship. William James described this social ontology in a different context, where “[t]he community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.” 765 While, says Edward Sapir, “A healthy national culture is never a passively accepted heritage from the past, but implies the creative participation of the members of the community,” it is equally true that “that the individual is helpless without a cultural heritage to work on.” 766 In biology and in society, the vitality of the organism and that of the community are one and the same—synecdochic. The argument of this chapter and the last has been that the symbiotic relations implied by Whitman’s social ontology are especially apparent in his synecdochic representations of the One and the many, in that each such term suggests possible communal or cultural relations—part/whole and species/genus—we might enter into in a democratic society.

It is important that these relationships of One and many described now as *synecdochic* not be interpreted as *dialectical*, ever-shifting between the opposed poles of *the* One and *the* many. When these relationships are taken as polar opposites, in *Gesellschaft*, people “are essentially separated in spite of all uniting factors,” whereas in *Gemeinschaft*, “they remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors.”

However, what the interpretive variety of Whitman’s ever-present synecdoches seem to do ontologically is to show that neither of these (extreme) social arrangements really exists as a permanent, static form. Whitman’s synecdoches are themselves not static forms—they urge his reader toward possible relationships, ideal ways of being and acting.

In fact, in Whitman’s social ontology, as in Jean Piaget’s, “[t]here are no more such things as societies qua beings than there are isolated individuals. There are only relations . . . and the combinations formed by them, always incomplete, cannot be taken as permanent substances.”

John Dewey agrees, saying, “Society is, of course, but the relations of individuals to one another in this form and that.” And like all social relations, these are “interactions, not fixed molds,” requiring “the give and take of participation, of a sharing that increases, that expands and deepens, the capacity and significance of the interacting factors. Conformity is a name for the absence of vital interplay; the arrest and benumbing of communication.” At all times, the One and the many are “in play” in Whitman’s terminological choices.

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767 Tönnies, *Community and Society*, 64.
770 Ibid.
If we are to believe Laclau and Mouffe (from Chapter 1), real democracy exists if and when “the dichotomy universality/particularity is constantly renegotiated.” For them, “[b]etween the logic of complete identity and that of pure difference, the experience of democracy should consist of the recognition of the multiplicity of social logics” that should “be constantly re-created and renegotiated,” because “there is no final point at which a balance will be definitively achieved.” Neither purely necessary nor purely contingent, democracy holds pride of place as the name for and the “institutionalization of this space of renegotiation” between the One and the many. What is democratic rhetoric but the constant “assertion and reproduction of this undecidability in the relation between the universal and the particular”?

For Laclau as much as for Whitman, any truly democratic identity is “purely relational,” forever marked by “unfixity,” because the “moment of the ‘final’ suture never arrives.” Ideal democracy itself is always à venir—“to come.” All that is required in “simply the continual commitment to keep open the relation to the other,” an “other” who can also never be completely defined. Again, neither necessity nor (pure) contingency are valid democratic modes. We need “new theoretical categories.”

What Whitman’s ontology offers by way of “new theoretical categories,” Laclau and Mouffe call an “articulation”—“any practice establishing a relation among elements

772 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (London: Verso, 2001), 188.
774 Ibid.
775 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony, 86.
777 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony, 86.
such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.”

In any given articulation—such as Democratic Vistas—the relational “elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it.” If these relations are real—that is, if “relations’ and ‘objectivity’ are synonymous”—then rhetorical discourse—where relations of identification and division are established—is by its nature “co-terminous with the very structure of objectivity.”

The touchstone for this constructivist sort of work in rhetorical studies is Carl Hausman’s 1991 article, “Language and Metaphysics: The Ontology of Metaphor.” In that piece, Hausman argues that language in general and metaphors in particular “not only create new meanings” but also create “new and unique objects or referents that function in the world.” In any given metaphor, what is conceived—newly brought into the world—is “a relation,” one that “may be understood as a given that makes a difference to something,” in the way the relation of “father-of makes a difference to both the child and the father.” The relations so conceived are real, created objects in that they are “distinct from the referents of the ideas or terms that are brought into interaction

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778 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony, 86. “The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice,” they continue, “we will call discourse.”
783 Hausman, “Language and Metaphysics,” 29. As for what Hausman takes as ontologically given, he specifies “Givens include whatever is indeterminate or vague, as well as what is determinate. They include whatever is possible as well as what is actual. I assume only that a given is capable of being discriminated or distinguished. The term may cover space-time objects, events (physical and mental or conscious), properties, relations, qualities, concepts (mental objects or abstractions), clear and fuzzy images, and objective abstractions such as generals or universals” (p. 28).
by the metaphor.” Whether we accept Hausman’s ontological assumption or not, he shows (at least one way) how (by rhetoric) we make and therefore remake at least some of our objective world.

Along the same lines, Whitman believes that because “Nature consists not only in itself, objectively, but at least just as much in its subjective reflection from the person, spirit, age, looking at it, in the midst of it, and absorbing it . . . takes, and readily gives again,” even the relations of “Nature” are available for reconstruction. Already in his America, “Not only is the human and artificial world we have establish’d in the West a radical departure from any-thing hitherto known—not only men and politics, and all that goes with them—but Nature itself, in the main sense, its construction, is different. The same old font of type, of course, but set up to a text never composed or issued before.” Therefore, Whitman can realistically envision a time when America itself will be a perfected “moral and political unity in variety, such as Nature shows in her grandest physical works,” but, actually, “much greater than any mere work of Nature, as the moral and political, the work of man, his mind, his soul, are, in their loftiest sense, greater than the merely physical.”

For Gilles Deleuze, Whitman’s entire poetic style can be summarized as not “a form, but rather the process of establishing relations . . . a polyphony: it is not a totality but an assembly, a ‘conclave,’ a ‘plenary session’ . . . in which the melody of one part
intervenes as a motif in the melody of another (the bee and the flower).” That is, whether the subject is Nature or Democracy, “when Whitman speaks in his own manner and his own style, it turns out that a kind of whole must be constructed.” Because in either case “relations are external to their terms,” they will “consequently be posited as something that can and must be instituted or invented”—that is, by the reader. Whitman’s synecdoches offer possible names for these ontological relations “in this form and that”—organic and atomistic, in this reader’s opinion.

**Synecdoche and Naming**

What Whitman’s reconstructed relations also illustrate well is that because a fixed balance between the One and many “cannot be logically sutured, the result is that any suture will be rhetorical: a certain particularity, without ceasing to be particular, will assume a certain role of ‘universal’ signification.” Like all names, Whitman’s synecdochic names for the one whole and the many parts, the one genus and the many species have to “emerg[e] from within the field of heterogeneous particularities to designate the field as a totality that bestows on these particularities the status of differences.” For Laclau, the mere names have broader ontological consequences.

This presumption finds an ally in Kenneth Burke’s theory of naming, in “the sense in which the name for a class of objects ‘transcends’ any particular member of that

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791 Ibid.
“[A]ny name or title,” says Burke, “sums up a manifold of particulars under a single head (as with the title of a book, or the name of some person or political movement).” As he holds and Whitman shows, “Such a process of abbreviation, whereby some one element of a context can come to be felt as summing up a whole, is no rarity. It is a normal resource of the representative function that the old rhetoricians call synecdoche, the resource whereby a part can come to stand for a whole.”

By this reasoning, any name or term can be taken synecdochically. Since Quintilian’s *Institutes*, “Some also apply the term *synecdoche* when something is assumed which has not actually been expressed, since one word is then discovered from other words, . . . Again, one thing may be suggested by another.” Fundamentally, *symbolism* is characteristic of all synecdoches, but more generally, of any name taken synecdochically. As Karlyn Campbell posits,

The motive forces within language arise from its nature as an instrument of transcendence, as in naming, man not only draws arbitrary boundaries about an event or object, but goes beyond it to speak of the event or object in terms of what it is not, a word, by which he codifies his experience into meanings which reflect his and his group’s perspectives and attitudes. Any such term goes beyond particular objects to abstract a category, and the structure of language is such that each category can, in turn, become a part of an ever more abstract category. Man

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794 Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*, 3. As he put elsewhere, naming is a “mod[e] of abbreviation whereby the whole sentence, considered as a title, can be summed up in one word, as were we to sum up the sentence ‘the man walks down the street’ by saying that it had to do with either a ‘man-situation,’ or a ‘walk-situation,’ or a ‘street-situation.’ ‘Entitling’ of this sort prepares for the linguistic shortcut whereby we can next get ‘ universals’ such as ‘man,’ ‘dog,’ ‘tree,’ with individual men, dogs, and trees serving as particularized instances or manifestations of the ‘perfect forms’ that are present in the words themselves (which so transcend any particular man, dog, or tree that they can be applied universally to all men, dogs, or trees)” (Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 361).
795 Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 371. Burke seems to go so far as to identify synecdoche as the quintessential rhetorical trope, insofar as “we consider synecdoche to be the basic process of representation” and “For ‘represent’ here we could substitute ‘be identified with’” (Burke, *A Grammar*, 508). Elsewhere, he dubs “representative” an “OTHER WOR[D] FOR SYMBOLIC” (Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 25).
796 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 222.
surpasses the particular, experienced and concrete, when he uses language. He makes an inductive leap from sensation to inference.\textsuperscript{797}

Because for Burke “[a]ll symbolism can be treated as the ritualistic naming and changing of identity,”\textsuperscript{798} then it is by naming that we reconstruct our world—namely, by “the mediating symbolic action of the rhetor by which phenomena are relabeled, situations restructured, and concepts re-interpreted or associated.”\textsuperscript{799} These three actions that Burke specifies, we have shown, are all functions of synecdoche, and while for him, the human is the symbol-using animal, we might as easily say, “the synecdoche-using animal.” When we name and rename, we introduce, to paraphrase Kant, “categorical imperatives” of order, to and for the world, however locally we conceive that at the time.

This is what I. A. Richards meant when he argued that words are “the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavour to order itself,” and in this effort, language in general becomes, “the instrument of all our distinctively human development, of everything in which we go beyond the other animals.”\textsuperscript{800} For James Carey, too, this is our human agency, the “particular miracle we perform daily and hourly—the miracle of producing reality and then living within and under the fact of our own productions.”\textsuperscript{801} This is a capacity which “rests upon a particular quality of symbols; their ability to be both representations ‘of’ and ‘for’ reality.”\textsuperscript{802}

\textsuperscript{797} Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Ontological Foundations of Rhetorical Theory, Philosophy & Rhetoric 3, no. 2 (Spring 1970), 104.
\textsuperscript{798} Burke, \textit{Attitudes}, 285.
\textsuperscript{800} Ivor Armstrong Richards, \textit{The Philosophy of Rhetoric} (Oxford University Press, 1965), 131.
\textsuperscript{801} Carey, \textit{Communication as Culture}, 29.
\textsuperscript{802} Ibid.
Ontology is, after all, like language, a human construction—a representation for as much as of reality. As nominalism holds, and Whitman’s frequent neologisms illustrate, his synecdochic relations of One and many have “being” because they have names. Not only does “[t]he name tells what something is; that is, the name objectifies the thing”\textsuperscript{803}—in this case, Whitman’s ontological relations. Taken to its logical conclusion, says Ernst Cassirer, “Only as a speaking creature does man have a world opposite him”\textsuperscript{804}—not just a scattered collection of things or people.

Symbols and Sense

Clifford Geertz challenged critics of ideology to account for the symbolic interface between ideas and the material effects they are merely “supposed” to have. Campbell posited above that the human “surpasses the particular, experienced and concrete, when he uses language,” but particularly when he or she “makes an inductive leap from sensation to inference.” For symbols to have consequences, categorical or otherwise, they must affect the body—they must make sense, literally. I. A. Richards held up words as “the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition come together.”\textsuperscript{805} Whitman’s words for parts and wholes, genera and species—and especially his terminology of the human body (eye, mind, spine, breath)—illustrate that idea, that some words—most obviously, tropes—are not merely

\textsuperscript{803} David Bleich, \textit{Subjective Criticism} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1978), 61.
\textsuperscript{805} Richards, \textit{The Philosophy of Rhetoric}, 131.
“a deviation from the norm” but “a deviation into sense.” Insofar as his “art of emphasis embod[ies] an order of desire,” the point of his embodiment, says Burke, is “to produce in the observer a corresponding state of consciousness (that is, the artist proceeds from ‘mind’ to ‘body’ that his representative reduction may induce the audience to proceed from ‘body’ to ‘mind’).” Thus, while from the perspective of the artist, “Under a ‘symbolic form’ should be understood every energy of spirit through which a spiritual content or meaning is connected to a concrete sensory sign,” from the perspective of the admirer, symbols are taken “broadly [as] . . . any physical, social, or cultural act or object that serves as the vehicle for a conception.”

This understanding of symbols informs Whitman’s expressed intention—that by his material symbols we conceive something larger. In his voluminous notebooks, Whitman frequently reminds himself, “Make the Works—Do not go into criticisms or arguments at all. Make full-blooded, rich, flush, natural works. Insert natural things, indestructibles, idioms, characteristics, rivers, states, persons, &c. Be full of strong sensual germs.” In another note, specifically “for Dem Vistas,” he reveals that within that work, “the subtle thread-hold running through all the meditations & descriptive Memoranda should be the thought of Nature, & the conception of all its shows and

809 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 208. Emphasis added.
sounds, viewed and heard and felt, from the inner & spinal centrality of Democracy."\textsuperscript{811}

In fact, we see this motivation throughout Whitman’s corpus, of which he decides,

All through writings preserve the equilibrium of the truth that the material world, and all its laws, are as grand and superb as the spiritual world and all its laws. Most writers have disclaimed the physical world and they have not over-estimated the other, or soul, but have under-estimated the corporeal. How shall my eye separate the beauty of the blossoming buckwheat field from the stalks and heads of tangible matter? How shall I know what the life is except as I see it in the flesh? I will not praise one without the other or any more than the other. Do not argue at all or compose proofs to demonstrate things. State nothing which it will not do to state as apparent to all eyes.\textsuperscript{812}

Whitman’s symbolism, like all symbolism, served his aim to integrate in meaning the material and the ideal.

The material and the ideal, in other words, are not necessarily contradictory or even dialectical, as is so often argued, but necessarily constituted by each other. The poet—or “esthetic worker in any field”—is simply more accustomed to sensing, “absorbing materials, and, in their own sense, the shows of Nature.”\textsuperscript{813} Bested only, perhaps, by Thoreau, Whitman’s fetish is for natural sensory material. “Out of these, and seizing what is in them,” says Whitman, the sensitive artist, “by the divine magic of his genius, projects them, their analogies, by curious removes, indirections, in Literature and Art.”\textsuperscript{814} Whitman’s is, of course, “No useless attempt to repeat the material creation, by daguerreotyping the exact likeness by mortal mental means,” but always a reconstruction, toward the end of arousing in the reader “both directly and indirectly, a freeing, fluidizing, expanding, religious character, exulting with science, fructifying the moral

\textsuperscript{811} Whitman, \textit{Notebooks, II}, 861.
\textsuperscript{813} Whitman, \textit{Democratic Vistas}, “A Moral Purpose Behind Everything,” 66.
elements, and stimulating aspirations, and meditations on the unknown.”

Whitman’s reader is active by symbolic design. *Democratic Vistas*, perhaps more than any of his other works, challenges the reader’s skill at interpretation. Aware of this, he warns the reader

In the following book I have combined together what at first reading may appear incongruous—(and I had better say here at once that he or she who is not willing to give the book at least two or three perusals, had better leave it untouched altogether). But the truest analogies and connections are not those of the surface, or of first sight, or visible; they are often like the subterranean streams of far-apart outlets and different names, but identical at bottom. So my songs refuse to be described or grouped or classified in a statement and are themselves their only real description and classification.

Defiant of future ideological critics, he assures them

In certain parts in these flights, or attempting to depict or suggest them, I have not been afraid of the charge of obscurity, in either of my two volumes—because human thought, poetry or melody, must leave dim escapes and outlets—must possess a certain fluid, aerial character, akin to space itself, obscure to those of little or no imagination, but indispensable to the highest purposes. Poetic style, when address’d to the soul, is less definite form, outline, sculpture, and becomes vista, music, half-tints, and even less than half-tints. True, it may be architecture; but again it may be the forest wild-wood, or the best effect thereof, at twilight, the waving oaks and cedars in the wind, and the impalpable odor.

As is his intention, it falls on the reader to make sense of Whitman’s trees. Of course, as Burke shows us, “A tree, for instance, is an infinity of events—and among these our senses abstract certain recordings which ‘represent’ the tree”—perhaps the parts, perhaps the whole, perhaps the species, perhaps the genus. *How we record those senses* is a choice given only to individuals—each of us either fit the novel tree into our preconceived categories, or we broaden or reconstruct those categories. As much as each

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815 Ibid.
817 Whitman, “Preface, 1876,” 287.
of us must organize “our world” as One and many, regardless of the balance chosen, “Stress upon synecdochic representation,” argues Burke, “is thus seen to be a necessary ingredient of [any] truly realistic philosophy (as against a naturalistic one, that would tend to consider our sensory representations as "illusory"). The ambiguity in Whitman’s terminology of One and many is thus less a fault to be disclosed or unmasked by ideological critique than a demonstration of how by means of language we construct and reconstruct our world and all the sensory stuff therein.

**Literature and Politics**

Contemporary political theorist Jacques Ranciere seems to have Whitman’s ontological reconstruction in mind when he defines the “political” as “the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world,” because

Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking. The politics of literature thus means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world.

By extension, if there is a “politics of literature,” it is not the politics of a work’s writer or time, but its “mode of intervention in the carving up of objects that form a common world, the subjects that people that world and the powers they have to see it, name it, and

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819 Ibid.
act upon it.”821 Whitman’s terminology “carves up” and reconstructs the One and many as they were variously, sometimes antagonistically, understood in his time. In so doing—in “shift[ing] a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination”—Whitman’s service is to “mak[e] visible what had no business being seen, and mak[e] heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise.”822 His political activism is thus not one that “attacks the relationships of authority” over, for example, inadequate wages, but one that would instead “reconfigure[e] the relationships that determine the workplace in its relation to the community.”823 This seems to be what Robert Ivie had in mind too when he called for a more inclusive sense of dissent.

Still, the ideological critic will charge that what results is nothing but another ideology—one that will also be replaced in its turn. But Gramsci himself showed that ideological critique is always no more or no less than “a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of the old ideological complex used to possess. What was previously secondary or subordinate, or even incidental, is now taken to be primary—becomes the nucleus of a new ideological and theoretical complex.”824 Ideas are the available means to whatever change we seek, regardless of position. For all of us, “It is through the construction of ideologies, schematic images of social order, that [the hu]man makes himself for better or worse a political animal. The function of ideology is to make an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly

823 Ranciere, Disagreement, 32.
grasped.”

Material in form, these reconstructions have very real material consequences. In Geertz’s understanding, “to rework the pattern of social relationships is to rearrange the coordinates of the experienced world. Society’s forms are culture’s substances.”

Art generally, and literature particularly, are thus uniquely suited for political (i.e., reconstructive) purposes. More than other cultural substances, literature, says Merleau-Ponty, “is ordinarily more resolute in accepting that it can never aim at being total and offering us only open significations.” This ambiguous quality is makes possible both the openness and active participation ideal democracy demands. Most rhetorical scholars today, at least implicitly, believe with Richard Weaver, that “Rhetoric must be viewed formally as operating at that point where literature and politics meet, or where literary values and political urgencies can be brought together. The rhetorician makes use of the moving power of literary presentation to induce in his hearers an attitude or decision which is political in the very broadest sense.” Rhetorical criticism, in turn, held Herbert Wichelns, “lies at the boundary of politics (in the broadest sense) and literature, its atmosphere is that of the public life, its tools are those of literature, its concern is with the idea of the people as influenced by their leaders.” Criticism’s best political service might be, not to eliminate ambiguity and contradiction, but, since “[t]he communicational

825 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 218.
826 Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 28.
828 Weaver, “Language is Sermonic,” 225.
functions and the poetic functions of language actually never cease to overlap,” to offer its own combination of “argumentative and poetic”—its own “art of emphasis embodying an order of desire.”

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Chapter 5

An Axiology of Democracy

In Chapter 5, we see Whitman apply his “microbiomic” treatment to the individual, thereby developing in full his original axiology, Personalism. In this ethic, the individual is a synecdochic representation for the nation (if not the universe), and the way he or she should approach any other is as the same. American thinkers including Alcott, Bowne, James, as well as Husserl, Buber, and others give explicit and implicit credit to Whitman for this idea, and one can trace a direct lineage from Whitman to Martin Luther King, Jr. along these same ethical lines. If “each and all” are taken as divine in their own right, our critical disagreements would surely defer to “comradeship,” “adhesiveness,” or love. Ultimately, Democratic Vistas teaches us that when Whitman thinks of himself as “universal,” as a “Kosmos,” “enfolding” all, he intends that each American do the same. As such, he brings an entirely new meaning to the national motto. To paraphrase the framers of the nation, “from many diverse identities, One complete person.”

§ From Ontology to Axiology: Whitman’s Personalism

Whitman on The People as Persons

It is clear from what we have seen that Whitman’s art is “politically” motivated. He cautions the casual reader, “I do not wish to amuse or furnish so-called poetry, and will surely repel at first those who have been used to sweets and the jingle of rhymes.”

“No one will get at my verses,” he advises, “who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism.” What he promises instead is that “every page of my book emanates Democracy, absolute, unintermitted, without the slightest compromise, and the sense of the New World in its future, a thoroughly revolutionary formation to be exhibited less in

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politics and more in theology, literature and manners.” As we saw in previous chapters, Whitman’s sense of America’s political system in 1871 is that, notwithstanding “party antics” and moneied interests, it fundamentally up and running in the manner and intentions of its founders. However, as we also saw, “the political section of Democracy” only “introduces and breaks ground for further and vaster sections,” namely, the spiritual, cultural section of democracy. The purpose of a democratic culture would be to establish and sustain a democratic “Conscience,” because, in Whitman’s ideal, “That which really balances and conserves the social and political world is not so much legislation, police, treaties, and dread of punishment, as the latent eternal intuitional sense, in humanity, of fairness, manliness, decorum, &c. Indeed, the perennial regulation, control and oversight, by self-suppliance is the sine qua non to Democracy.”

Once again, Whitman turns to fundamentally American principles as a basis for this democratic Conscience. As both an ontology and an axiology, “few probably are the minds, even in These Republican States, that fully comprehend the aptness of that phrase, ‘THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE,’ which we inherit from the lips of Abraham Lincoln; a formula whose verbal shape is homely wit, but whose scope includes both the totality and all minutia of the lesson.” That is, just as “the People” was the locus for his reconstructed social ontology, so to would “the People” be the arbiter of social right and wrong. Whitman witnessed the death of Feudalism in the Civil War and with it the “absoluteness of established dynastic

834 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism versus the Aggregate,” 18.
rulership, temporal, ecclesiastical, and scholastic.”837 With that, declares Whitman, “the mission of government, henceforth, in civilized lands,” is to be “not repression alone, and not authority alone, not even of law, nor by that favorite standard of the eminent writer, [Carlyle.] the rule of the best men, the born heroes and captains of the race . . . but, higher than the highest arbitrary rule, to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves.”838 After all, the very “purpose of Democracy” is “to illustrate, at all hazards, this doctrine or theory that man, properly trained 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.”839 Not only is the democratic citizen capable of creating, sustaining, and reconstructing his wider social relations (as we saw in Chapters 3 and 4), he or she can be trusted to do so rightly, with a larger “personal” ideal in mind. Because in Whitman’s view, this equally democratic axiology is “the only Scheme worth working from, as warranting results like those of Nature's laws, reliable, when once established, to carry on themselves,”840 he resolves in his own work to “Produce great Persons, the rest follows.”841 In Democratic Vistas, he identifies this as a deliberate program, “a science as it were of healthy average Personalism, on original-universal grounds, the object of which should be to raise up and supply through

837 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism versus the Aggregate,” 17.
839 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism versus the Aggregate,” 17.
840 Ibid.
The States a copious race of superb American men and women, cheerful, religious, ahead of any yet known.”

Truthfully, this had always been Whitman’s motivation. He suggests elsewhere that the “whole drift of my books is to form a race of fuller athletic, yet unknown characters, men and women for the United States to come.” From “Song of Myself” onward, his had been “an attempt, from first to last, to put a Person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America) freely, fully, and truly on record.” By offering his own creative self, Whitman encouraged his reader to see their own self as equally powerful. As he pursued health and wholeness, so to should the reader. One by one, he would teach us all, for as he maintained even late in life, “the ambitious thought of my song is to help the forming of a great aggregate Nation . . . through the forming of myriads of fully develop’d and enclosing individuals.” Because each of us already has a “latent eternal intuitional sense,” each of us is capable of democratic decision-making—of being a representative for the nation. In a sense, Whitman would abandon representative republican politics in favor of “Personalism,”

A new doctrine—leading feature. There is in the soul an instinctive test of the sense and actuality of anything—of any statement of fact or morals. Let this decide. Does it not decide? Thus the soul of each man, woman, nation, age, or what not realizes only what is proportionate to itself. For a new school (or theory)—Let the test of anything proposed in metaphysics be this instinct of the soul—this self-settling power. First however prepare the body—it must be healthy, mature, clean.

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842 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 39.
843 Walt Whitman, note, April, 1869, in The Complete Prose Works, VI, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, et al. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1902), 34
Just as “what is” and “what could be” are in the eye of the beholder, so too is “what is right”—democratically or otherwise. The “sense” of all of these is in individual persons—more specifically, in their bodies. If those bodies are healthy, so too will be their democratic sensibilities and, on the whole, the nation.

**Whitman on the Person in Nature/Nature in the Person**

To be healthy *is* to be whole, but for Whitman, this whole becomes ultimate: “All comes by the body, only health puts you in rapport with the universe.”  

It could be that what is good for the universe is also good for democracy, but for Whitman, the ultimate question of one’s “place” in the universe is essentially a democratic question: “What is the fusing explanation and tie—what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit, &c., on the one side, of and with the (conservative) Not Me, the whole of the material objective universe and laws, with what is behind them in time and space, on the other side?”

Regardless of station or nation, “final and paramount to all is man’s idea of his own position in the universes of time, space and materials, his faith in the scheme of things, the destinies which it necessitates, his clue to the relations between himself and the outside world, his ability in intellect and spirit at any rate to cope and be equal with them, and with Time and Space.”

Because “[t]hese, and thoughts upon these . . . touch all human beings without exception and include everything that is of permanent importance to them,” these are

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847 Whitman, “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” 192.
humankind’s “greatest themes. They are greater than Science, History, Art, Democracy, or any problems of the Utilities or prosperity or wealth or any sectarian Religion.”

Therefore, Whitman reasons, these are also “the themes, questions, which have directly or indirectly to do with any profound consideration of Democracy and finally testing it, as all questions and as underlying all questions.”

In any context, the answer comes for Whitman that “the lesson of Nature” is “[t]he quality of BEING, in the object's self, according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom and thereto—not criticism by other standards, and adjustments thereto.” Of America or anywhere, Whitman asks, “What is independence? [but] Freedom from all laws or bonds except those of one's own being, controlled by the universal ones. To lands, to man, to woman, what is there at last to each, but the inherent soul, nativity, idiocracy, free, highest-poised, soaring its own flight, following out itself?” In each person, there is (if only) potentially “a towering Selfhood, not physically perfect only—not satisfied with the mere mind's and learning's stores, but Religious, possessing the idea of the Infinite, (rudder and compass sure amid this troublous voyage, o'er darkest, wildest wave, through stormiest wind, of man's or nation's progress).” Because for Whitman, “the last, best dependence is to be upon Humanity itself, and its own inherent, normal, full-grown qualities, without any superstitious support whatever,” the person, like the poet, “submits only to himself.”

850 Ibid.
852 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individuality—Identity—a Mystery—the Centre of All,” 38.
853 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “America’s True Revolutions,” 57.
854 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Yet We Thank This Culture,” 48. Emphasis added.
855 Whitman, Democratic Vistas, “Individualism versus the Aggregate,” 17.
What Whitman calls “religious” does not “consis[t] in one particular form or creed—the Christian or any other,” nor any of “a hundred, a thousand other Saviors and Mediators and Bibles—they too just as much revelations as any.” Whitman’s spirituality “is the whole universal heart of man . . . must admit all.”

And yet, the universal heart is any one of ours. As Whitman told “the Reader at the Entrance of Leaves of Grass,” “That something vast and great which, I see in you as man or woman to me no fraction of the universe, but curiously absorbing all, as if all made for you, and you to yourself, you more than all outside yourself, however vast and great—that is the main and spine of these.” As the universal heart “must admit all,” so too must the individual human’s heart, because “The most perfect wonders of the earth are not rare and distant but present with every person, you as much as any.” Here Whitman equates the genus with the species, even as he highlights the heart, the most essential part of the whole. Here again, that is, we see him operate in both the atomic and organic model simultaneously—traditionally, a forbidden arrangement. But what Whitman learned from Hegel is that

the same general and particular intelligence, passion, even the standards of right and wrong, which exist in a conscious and formulated state in man, exist in an unconscious state, or in perceptible analogies, throughout the entire universe of external Nature, in all its objects large or small, and all its movements and processes—thus making the impalpable human mind, and concrete Nature, notwithstanding their duality and separation, convertible and in centrality and essence one.

This is a fundamental position of idealism, particularly of the Berkeleyan sort. However, Whitman the pragmatist consistently admits that there is a real world opposite each of us.

857 Ibid.
When he calls for “...poets not only possessed of the religious fire and abandon of Isaiah, luxuriant in the epic talent of Homer, or for characters as Shakespeare,” he insists that they also be “consistent with the Hegelian formulas, and consistent with modern Science.”

The truly universal poet, like the universal person, must account for realism and materialism as much as idealism. In fact, “America needs, and the world needs, a class of bards who will, now and ever, so link and tally the rational physical being of man, with the ensembles of Time and Space, and with this vast and multiform show, Nature, surrounding him, ever tantalizing him, equally a part, and yet not a part of him, as to essentially harmonize, satisfy, and put at rest.” Because “A [hu]man only is interested in anything when [s]he Identifies himself with it,” the best poetry or art should depict him or her as, literally, one with Nature: “[s]he must himself be whirling and speeding through space like the planet Mercury—[s]he must be driving like a cloud—[s]he must shine like the sun—[s]he must be orbic and balanced in the air like this earth—[s]he must crawl like the pismire.”

The only basis Whitman can find for this positioning of the human as the ultimate manifestation of Nature, while remaining appropriate for daily democratic living is not Berkeley, but Hegel. “Only Hegel is fit for America,” Whitman reasons, because, for one, only Hegel “is large enough and free enough.”

More important for Whitman, however, is the sense Hegel conveys of the essential oneness of the material and the ideal. Unlike Berkeley’s immaterialism, in Hegel’s idealism Whitman sees, “As a face in a mirror... the world of materials, nature

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862 Ibid.
864 Whitman, Notebooks, VI, 2011.
with all its objects, processes, shows, reflecting the human spirit and by such reflection
formulating, identifying, developing and proving it. Body and mind are one; an
inexplicable paradox, yet no truth truer.”\(^{865}\) Whereas “mind” is traditionally understood
as a part of the body that makes sense of, however idealistically and incompletely, the
objective, material world before it, in Whitman’s ideal, the relationship between mind
and nature is immediate. In this arrangement,

The human soul stands in the centre, and all the universes minister to it, and serve
it and revolve round it. They are one side of the whole and it is the other side. It
escapes utterly from all limits, dogmatic standards and measurements and adjusts
itself to the ideas of God, of space, and to eternity, and sails them at will as
oceans, and fills them as beds of oceans.\(^{866}\)

Whitman’s oft-celebrated human being is here elevated to the ultimate metaphysical
position. Once again, he assures us that “such may be called the general aim of this
author, . . . [that] everything, in both volumes, revolves around the central human
personality.”\(^{867}\)

From this perspective, all the institutions of society, industry, government, and
nations—not to mention Nature in general—are taken as lesser forms: important, but only
insofar as they help the human being “at the center” to survive and thrive. The ideal for
the individual, then, is to “understan[d] well that, while complete in himself in a certain
sense, he is but a part of the divine, eternal scheme, and whose special life and laws are
adjusted to move in harmonious relations with the general laws of Nature.”\(^{868}\) To help
ensure this harmony between the individual and any larger entity, “the principal

\(^{866}\) Ibid.
\(^{868}\) Whitman, “Poetry To-Day in America—Shakspere [sic]—The Future,” 299.
underlying and elementary qualities of all Whitman's writings,” says Whitman himself, “are a powerful sense of physical perfection, size, health, strength and beauty, with great amativeness, adhesiveness, a wonderfully buoyant joyousness of spirit, and of immortality, not as an intellection—but as a pervading instinct,” and not just in the body, but all bodies. This pervading instinct, we saw above, he calls “Personalism.”

**Personalism as Ontology**

Some attribute the larger philosophy of “Personalism” to Whitman, but at any rate it is clearly of his time and place. Others find its origin in Bronson Alcott in 1863, to whom Whitman wrote a letter in 1868. In it, Whitman offers the Transcendentalist Alcott early drafts of what would become *Democratic Vistas*, and, as he did with Whitman, seems to be soliciting validation. At any rate, Alcott recorded in his journal two days later, “Letter from Walt Whitman, with his paper on Personalism in the Galaxy. . . . Say what men may, this man is a power in thought, and likely to make his mark on times and institutions. I shall have to try a head of him presently for my American Gallery: Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt. If there be an ideal Personalism, so is there an actual individualism, of which Thoreau and Whitman are prodigious impersonations—Walt for

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870 Walt Whitman, *The Correspondence*, Vol. II, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 29. The letter reads, “To Mr Alcott, April 26 68. Your kind & welcome letter came to hand. Pardon me for not responding sooner. I esteem your friendly appreciation of "Democracy." I have just sent you "Personalism"—which is to be followed, in perhaps a couple of months or so, by another article, addressing itself mainly to the question of what kind of Literature we must seek, for our coming America, &c. In the three articles (to be gathered probably in book) I put forth, to germinate if they may, what I would fain hope might prove little seeds & roots.”
institutions, Thoreau for things.” Alcott, a member of the Transcendental Club, could easily recognize Emerson’s personalistic metaphysics. In his seminal essay “Nature,” Emerson illustrated an ideal ontology not unlike Whitman’s:

> The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? . . . The sun shines to-day also. . . . These are not the dreams of a few poets, here and there, but 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. . . . The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass. ‘The visible world and the relation of its parts, is the dial plate of the invisible.’ The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics.

Clearly, both he and Whitman believe with Alcott that “the ultimate reality of the world is a Divine Person who sustains the universe by a continuous act of creative Will.” To paraphrase Bacon, while scientific ontology conceives the world *ex analogia universi*, personalism does the same *ex analogia hominis*.

While these descriptions bring to mind the same abstractions and teleology faulted in Berkeley’s and Hegel’s idealism, Alcott identifies his as a *personal* idealism. Alcott’s protégé, Elizabeth Peabody, characterized this distinction in the context of Alcott’s school, as “Instead, therefore, of making it his aim to make children investigate External nature, after Spirit, Mr. Alcott leads them in the first place, to the contemplation of Spirit as it unveils itself within themselves,” that by the “study of [one’s] own consciousness of feelings,” a sense of “moral law may be gained; external nature being

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only made use of, as imagery, to express the inward life which he experiences." This is not simply a substitution of absolute pluralism for absolute monism, nor an either-or matter at all: it recognizes both, that while all reality is personal, this world of persons must have some unity or at least coherence as its source and ground.

This both Whitman and Alcott call “personality.” As he would stress to his students, Alcott specifies, “I can only ask you to distinguish finely that in yourself which differences you from other persons essentially and that which unites and makes them one with yourself, also makes you one with them, indissolubly and forever. The unity is the Personality; the difference is the Individuality.” As one later interpreter characterized the difference, “if the first condition of individualism is the centralization of the individual in himself, the first condition of personalism is his decentralization, in order to set him in the open perspectives of personal life.” Taken then as a moral matter, Alcott adds, “We must grow into and become one with the Person dwelling in every breast, and thus come to apprehend the saying ‘I and the Father are one’—that is, perceive that all souls have a Personal identity with God and abide in him.”

In terms we used before, as everything for Whitman is a living organism—a microbiome—everything for Alcott is a person and should be treated equally as such. The end here is “an idealistic Pluralism, an

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876 Alcott, *The Journals*, ???.
878 Alcott, *The Journals*, ???.
eternal Society of many minds, each absolutely real," or as Emerson put it in the American context, “The Union must be ideal in actual individualism.”

**Personalism as Axiology**

The personalist ontology distinguishes itself from other idealisms because in the center is the human being—it is always *actual*, always *applied*, as each of us lives. As the idea developed in the American context, particularly in Boston, it became a philosophy of right-living—an axiology. The Methodist theologian Borden Parker Bowne learned personalism as a metaphysics, as “the doctrine that substantial reality can be conceived only under the personal form and that all else is phenomenal” and “the essential fact to be a community of persons with a Supreme Person at their head while the phenomenal world is only expression and means of communication.” This is in keeping with Peabody’s and Alcott’s personalist understanding of the universe. Like them, Bowne advised that to get to “the moral,” “We pay less attention to the ethics of angels and distant worlds and more to the ethics of living men now and here. . . . Life must be moralized by being brought under the control of moral principles, and morals must be vitalized by being brought into connection with our everyday human life in the world that now is.” For Bowne as for Whitman, “this moral life is not something separate and apart from natural life. It is simply that life itself is lifted to the plane of rational freedom and goodwill and

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is made the expression of personal choice and self-realization.\textsuperscript{883} By everyday processes of enactment, personalism goes beyond abstract ethics in favor of a practice. In words that could have come from Whitman himself, Bowne holds “Not moral correctness, but \textit{vital fullness}, is the deepest aim in life.”\textsuperscript{884}

Therefore, over and above any set of fixed moral rules, personalism promotes so much spontaneity and difference as the human being needs to thrive, fostered by “the development of the great social forms, the educational facilities, the gathered knowledge, the industrial activities, the wise cooperation and organization, and the stored wealth without which humanity cannot progress.”\textsuperscript{885} In this sense, personalism reminds one of German \textit{Bildung}, the deliberate and ongoing “moral growth of persons to the full stature of their humanity, to freedom and responsibility”\textsuperscript{886}—the human being as ever a human becoming. Though we all exist as individuals with individual rights, Bowne’s student Edgar Sheffield Brightman reminded us that personalism recognizes our community as interpersonal, wherein each person “stands in a wide variety of interpersonal relations.”\textsuperscript{887} But here again, the point is that “when these relations are rightly ordered, they enlarge and enhance the person,”\textsuperscript{888} with the “goal of the universe” in full the “development of all persons in the creation and enjoyment of values,” or otherwise put, \textit{“inexhaustible, developing love.”}\textsuperscript{889}

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\textsuperscript{883} Bowne, “Morals and Life,” 80.
\textsuperscript{884} Bowne, “Morals and Life,” 82-83.
\textsuperscript{885} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{886} Erazim Kohák, ‘Personalism: The Next Hundred Years.” \textit{The Personalist Forum} 4, no. 2 (Fall 1988), 48.
\textsuperscript{887} Edgar Sheffield Brightman, \textit{An Introduction to Philosophy} (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1951/1925), 301.
\textsuperscript{888} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{889} Brightman, \textit{An Introduction to Philosophy}, 303. Emphasis added.
\end{flushright}
The only kind of “religion” that can be ascribed to these beliefs is a “religiousness” that recognizes the “mutual otherness of the finite and infinite, in order that the relation of love and obedience may obtain. Both love and religion seek for union, but it is not the union of absorption or fusion, but rather the union of mutual understanding and sympathy, which would disappear if the otherness of the persons were removed.” Like Whitman’s, Bowne’s axiology recognizes a certain oneness that thrives on freedom. This double sense of ethical love found its most conspicuous heir in the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote of his teacher Brightman and other Boston personalists,

It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy—the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism’s insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.

In a larger sense, King’s personalist moral perspective is an “ecological” one, in that it attributes value and dignity to all beings, each of which is taken as representative of the personal, and thus worthy of love. Whitman’s own “sermons” on personalism would be poems, ones “whose every thought or fact should directly or indirectly be or connive at an implicit belief in the wisdom, health, mystery, beauty of every process, every concrete object, every human or other existence, not only consider’d from the point of view of all, but of each. While I can not understand it or argue it out, I fully believe in a clue and

purpose in Nature, entire and several.”\footnote{Whitman, “A Backward Glance,” 729.} Because, for Whitman, “[t]he idea of Democracy to which the young men and young women of these States must habituate and adjust themselves, and grow up to, is actual life in all its minutiae, is not an abstract something in a theory, in the laws, or for election days,”\footnote{Walt Whitman, “Preface to Democratic Vistas,” in \textit{The Complete Prose Works}, VI, ed. Richard Maurice Bucke, et al. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1902/1888), 17.} his mission, as it were, would be “to bring people back from their persistent strayings and sickly abstractions, to the costless average, divine, original concrete.”\footnote{Walt Whitman, “Nature And Democracy—Morality,” in \textit{Specimen Days & Collect} (Philadelphia: Rees Welsh & Co., 1882), 200.}

In this role he finds an ally in William James, who studied with Bowne (not to mention George Santayana and Josiah Royce) under Hermann Lotze at Gottingen in Germany.\footnote{Thomas O. Buford, “Personalism,” \textit{Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy}, 2011. \url{http://www.iep.utm.edu/personal/}.} As Whitman once did with Alcott, James wrote his former classmate in 1908 to celebrate the similarity of their pursuits. The letter offers insight into James’s radical empiricism as a version itself of Whitman’s personalism. He writes to Bowne,

\begin{quote}
It seems to me that you and I are now aiming at exactly the same end, though . . . [though] we often express ourselves so differently. . . . The common foe of both of us is the dogmatist-rationalist-abstractionist. Our common desire is to redeem the concrete personal life . . . from fastidious (and really preposterous) dialectical contradictions, impossibilities, and vetoes. . . . You don’t stop with the abstract syntheses of the intellect, however; you restore concreteness by the “will,” etc.; whereas I keep the full personal concreteness which I find in time and the immediate particulars that fill it.\footnote{William James, quoted in Bowne, \textit{Representative Essays}, 189-190.}
\end{quote}

In the spirit of personalism, perhaps, James concluded the letter, “But the essential thing is not these differences, it is that our emphatic footsteps fall on the same spot. You, starting near the rationalist pole, and boxing the compass, and I traversing the diameter
from the empiricist pole, reach practically very similar positions and attitudes. It seems to me that this is full of promise for the future of philosophy. What both Bowne and James share with Whitman is a persistent focus on “the concrete data of experience in their full completeness.” Each of them believes that “[t]he only fully complete concrete data are, however, the successive moments of our own several personal histories, taken with their subjective personal aspect, as well with their ‘objective’ deliverance or ‘content.’ After the analogy of these moments of experience must all complete reality be conceived.” Thus, even James’s radical empiricism takes the universe as “a collectivism of personal lives (which may be of any grade of complication, and suprahuman, infrahuman as well as human), variously cognitive of each other, variously conative and impulsive, genuinely evolving and changing by effort and trial, and by their interaction and cumulative achievements making up the world.” For any of us living within that world, the universe itself should be “no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here.” Here then is a thoroughgoing humanism that for James could also be “a religion susceptible of reasoned defence, . . . it being essentially a social philosophy, a philosophy of ‘co,’ in which conjunctions do the work.”

In seeing the universe as a “Thou” rather than an “It,” William James anticipates the terminology of Martin Buber, the theologian who unfolded the religious implications

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897 Ibid.
899 Ibid.
900 Ibid.
902 Ibid.
of personalism. In Buber’s religious ideal, like Whitman’s, “one’s fellow man” is perceived “as a whole, as a unity, and as unique—even if his wholeness, unity, and uniqueness are only partly developed, as is usually the case.” Buber’s advocacy in the Twentieth Century contradicted what he saw and we see “in our time by almost everything that is commonly understood as specifically modern. In our time there predominates an analytical, reductive, and deriving look between man and man.” Modernism assumed an atomistic structure of the universe and of man, each of which could thus be essentially defined, taken apart, and recomposed in scientific formulae or general concepts. What was “the mystery between man and man, . . . once the source of the stillest enthusiasms,” is, in modern times, “leveled down.” What should be restored is the ultimate personal relation—love. Buber identified the strength of love he and King sought, not in typical heterosexual relationships, but in certain “groups in history which included highly intensive and intimate relations between two of their members—as, for instance, in the homosexual relations among the Japanese Samurai or among Doric warriors.” In each of these communities, this kind of love was “countenanced for the sake of the stricter cohesion of the group.” This is the very love for which Whitman not only calls, but himself lives out in his concrete, personal life.

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904 Ibid.
905 Ibid.
906 Ibid.
907 Ibid.
Whitman on Love

In Whitman’s ideal America, he assures us “Be not dishearten’d—affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet.”908 What will tie together free, isolated individuals, the Me’s and Not-me’s, is a deep “Adhesiveness or Love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all.”909 By the turn of the next century, he predicted, the many will be seen as One in “Intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man to man,” which, though hard to define, seemed to Whitman “to promise, when thoroughly developed, cultivated and recognized in manners and Literature, the most substantial hope and safety of the future of These States.”910 In fact, the “general prevalence of that fervid comradeship, the adhesive love, at least rivaling the amative love hitherto possessing imaginative literature, if not going beyond it,)” would be for Whitman the national spirit he sought to “counterbalance and offset of our materialistic and vulgar American Democracy.”911 Just as Whitman identified the One and many, the material and ideal, he finds that democracy itself “infers such loving comradeship, as its most inevitable twin or counterpart, without which it will be incomplete, in vain, and incapable of perpetuating itself.”912

Whitman’s names for this deep love—comradeship, adhesiveness, friendship—were all in his time terms conspicuously inconspicuous terms for homosexual love, “the passionate attachment of man to man.” We do not need Kenneth Burke to point out the

911 Ibid.
912 Ibid.
"many passages in his poems bear witness with astoundingly frank symbolism” to Whitman’s own sexuality, but what we do learn from Burke is that “adhesiveness” itself is a term Whitman borrowed from nineteenth-century phrenology.913 Orson Squire Fowler, in his 1840 “Elemental Phrenology” gave an account of the faculty “Adhesiveness” as “Friendship; sociability; fondness for society; susceptibility of forming attachments; inclination to love, and desire to be loved; propensity to associate together in families and neighborhoods. Adapted to man’s capability of aiding and receiving assistance from his fellows, and to mutual happiness, by means of reciprocal affection.”914 However, in its distorted forms, or “Abuses,” Fowler warned of “too great fondness for company, indiscriminately; grieving excessively at the loss of friends, etc.”915 Another phrenologist of the time cautioned that “Excessive Friendship has brought disgrace and ruin upon many an otherwise good character. It causes its possessor to seek company simply for the sake of being in it, whereby their time is wasted and they become a natural prey to the dishonest, tricky, unscrupulous, and vicious, who may take advantage of and link them into all sorts of obligatory concerns ruinous to their pockets and their morals.”916 In many ways, Whitman’s promotion of homosexual love faced the same social and moral opposition that we are only now in the Twenty-first Century beginning to overcome. “Many will say it is a dream, and will not follow my inferences,”

913 Burke, On Human Nature, 265. Michael Lynch reminds us that “At the same time that medicalization was developing, Americans were making phrenology the basis for a wide range of social and political reforms. Education, prison administration, diet, personal hygiene—wherever the impulse to improve, it was likely to have links with Fowlerian phrenology” (Michael Lynch, ‘‘Here Is Adhesiveness’: From Friendship to Homosexuality’’ Victorian Studies 29, no. 1 (Autumn, 1985), 89).
915 Ibid.
Whitman openly admitted, but perhaps looking ahead a century, he “confidently expect[s] a time when there will be seen, running like a half-hid warp through all the myriad audible and visible worldly interests of America, threads of manly friendship, fond and loving, pure and sweet, strong and life-long, carried to degrees hitherto unknown.”  

Undeterred by social criticism of his own sexuality, he reveals,

Something more may be added—for, while I am about it, I would make a full confession. I also sent out “Leaves of Grass” to arouse and set flowing in men’s women’s hearts, young and old, endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever. To this terrible, irrepressible yearning, (surely more or less down underneath in most human souls)—this universal democratic comradeship—this old, eternal, yet ever-new interchange of adhesiveness, so fitly emblematic of America—I have given in that book, undisguisedly, declaredly, the openest expression.  

If only we could all experience the depth of love that does not see even gender as a necessary (social) category. In particular, Whitman points our attention to “the special meaning of the “Calamus” cluster of “Leaves of Grass,” (and more or less running through the book, and cropping out in “Drum-Taps,”)” a cluster of poems where Whitman is his most open. These he imbues with political significance, for “In my opinion,” he continues, “it is by a fervent, accepted development of comradeship, the beautiful and sane affection of man for man, latent in all the young fellows, north and south, east and west—it is by this, I say, and by what goes directly and indirectly along with it, that the United States of the future, (I cannot too often repeat,) are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, anneal’d into a living union.”  

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919 Ibid.
920 Ibid.
pure, unadulterated love of the sort he depicts in these poems, and by extension his own life, is the solution to the democratic paradox of the One and many—it is what will tie these parts and species together. In “For You O Democracy,” Whitman composes a song where he projects this deep love throughout the states, with such verses as “I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks,” followed by the chorus, “By the love of comrades/By the manly love of comrades.” It is not simply, as one later commentator puts it, that “virtually every strand of Whitman’s utopian thought devolves upon, and is anchored by, an unwavering belief in the capacity of strangers to recognize, desire, and be intimate with one another,” although, admits Whitman, one will find “this feature, intentionally palpable in a few lines”—that “[f]rom another point of view Leaves of Grass is avowedly the song of Sex and Amativeness, and even Animality.”

In general, though, these poems are Whitman’s strongest indication of hope for the future, one where the “meanings that do not usually go along with those words . . . will duly emerge; and . . . [will] be lifted into a different light and atmosphere.” As another recent commentator put it, “For Whitman homosexuals do not constitute a small group that requires equal rights; instead homosexuality is seen as the fundamental condition of a democratic society.” As impossible as that seems to even imagine today—as “[d]ifficult as it will be, it has become, in my opinion,” urged Whitman, “imperative to achieve a shifted attitude from superior men and women towards the thought and fact of

924 Ibid.
925 Ibid.
926 Martin, “Walt Whitman's Different Lights,” 47.
sexuality as an element in character, personality, the emotions, . . . like the clef of a
symphony. At last analogy the lines I allude to, and the spirit in which they are spoken,
permeate all *Leaves of Grass*, and the work must stand or fall with them, as the human
body and soul must remain as an entirety.” 927 The body of America will thrive on the soul
of pure, noncategorical, free and open love. Both are necessary, ontologically and
axiologically.

§ *E pluribus unum*: A Guess at the Riddle

Whitman the Enfolder

On behalf of non-gendered love, as we might say today, Whitman recommends
that “the invisible root out of which the poetry deepest in, and dearest to, humanity
grows, is Friendship,” though to that point in time, the idea had been either hidden or
categorized as a medical anomaly. For him, however, “we have adhered too long to petty
limits, and . . . the time has come to *enfold the world.*” 928 When this attachment of man to
man becomes universally, or at least generally accepted, we will all experience what
Whitman already does, when he tells us, “The armies of those I love engirth me, and I
engirth them.” 929 Universal love of this nature would apply to each and all, because “[t]he
universal and fluid soul impounds within itself not only all the good characters and
heroes but the distorted characters, murderers, thieves.” 930 This is easy for the Whitman

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who ascribes to himself, the “Leading characteristics—To unite all sects, parties, States, lawyers, disputants, young men, women (universology)—To be one whom all look toward with attention, respect, love.”\(^{931}\) For many, it is simply too much—to believe that Whitman or anyone could announce with sincerity, “I have all lives, all effects, all hidden invisibly in myself. They proceed from me.”\(^{932}\) No practical thinker or speaker would or could claim with a straight face, “With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.”\(^{933}\)

We remember his description of himself as “containing multitudes,” and while inconceivable for most, he does give voice to many species of Americans. By one commentator’s count, Whitman has been dubbed

the gay poet, the poet of manliness, the woman poet, the black poet, the postcolonial poet, the poet of workers, the poet of the city, the poet of organicism, the poet of transcendence, the poet of individualism, the poet of connectedness, the poet of citizenship, the poet of outsidership, the war poet, the poet of sensuousness, the poet of the body, the poet of life, the poet of death, the poet of America, and, of course, the poet of democracy.\(^{934}\)

However, when he boasts, “I am an acme of things accomplished and I an encloser of things to be,” he identifies himself in the same poem as “Walt Whitman, an American,” and in a later version, “Walt Whitman, a kosmos.”\(^{935}\) He urges that \textit{all of us}, as Americans, are qualified by an identity containing multitudes. As much as Whitman is “stucco'd,” so are we all composite in nature. In his ontology, he assures us, “every atom

\(^{932}\) Whitman, \textit{Notebooks}, I, 239.
\(^{933}\) Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 35.
belonging to me as good belongs to you.””936 In fact, for any of his readers, “It is you talking just as much as myself,/I act as the tongue of you,/Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd.””937 All along, his motivation is clear: “I celebrate myself to celebrate you: I say the same word for every man and woman alive.””938

Whitman offers in his own personality what democratic theorist George Kateb calls a truly “democratic individuality,” one where each of us recognizes the “countless number of potentialities in me, in my soul.””939 Like Whitman, any one of us is “always indefinitely more than we actually are. I am potentially all personalities and we equally are infinite potentialities.””940 With this image of my own personality as multi-faceted, I cannot help but relish the differences I find in any other self, as any one I meet will also be “an immense and largely untapped reservoir of potentiality.””941 What this requires of each of us is imagination. Already able, each of us has to be willing to imagine how his or her own identity, “given altered circumstances, might incorporate the identity of anyone in the culture, from the most marginalized to the most exalted and powerful””942 within our own bodies, and more importantly, that they will be doing the same of me. Whitman’s “Idiocrasy of Universalism” is on one level a name for his ideal nation, but now it becomes a characteristic of the human being. All things for him, we remember, are microbiomes, and what is possible and dignified in the nation is possible and dignified in

940 Kateb, The Inner Ocean, 247.
941 Kateb, The Inner Ocean, 249.
942 Folsom, introduction, xx.
the individual. Now a personal axiology, Whitman asks us to “outgrow one’s identity as a
natural being and to become an integral personality that can include qualities and
possibilities of other people’s experiences.”\textsuperscript{943} We have to see past our inhibitions to
idealism when Whitman says of his personality

And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.
I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuff’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff’d with the stuff that
is fine,
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the
largest the same,
A Southerner soon as a Northerner, . . . . \textsuperscript{944}

If we take his example, he promises each of us can become the same ideal, the various
person. The daily functioning of democracy itself will thrive, if only each of us would

Stop this day and night with me, and you shall possess the origin of all poems;
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun—(there are millions of suns left;)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes
of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books;
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me
You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself.\textsuperscript{945}

\textbf{Being Circumferentially: Democracy and Eclecticism}

In an age of specialization, what Whitman calls for remains an ideal. Our focus is
usually on species of general projects, parts of whole missions. So immersed are we, that
few realize the that what we produce—in science, industry, ethics, and politics, for

\textsuperscript{943} Mikhail Epstein, \textit{After the Future} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 305-306.
Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{944} Whitman, “Song of Myself.” 20.
\textsuperscript{945} Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 2.
example—are, as Kenneth Burke puts it, “by the very logic of its form, a partial treatment. A portion of the dialectic having been ‘monographically’ selected,”⁹⁴⁶ most nevertheless take “the area ‘spotlighted’” as “covering it all.” If we were willing with Whitman to take our lives as various (as much as we take them as whole), we would realize that the differences between us were not polar or even opposing, but equally vital parts of a whole. This would require the realization, with Buber, that to resolve the American paradox of One and many, “it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. . . . Here the genuine third alternative is indicated, the knowledge of which will help to bring about the genuine person again and to establish genuine community.”⁹⁴⁷ In this ideal, there are no others, no sides, no dialectic. Instead, perspective is a matter of circular scope (see Figure 5-1), of widening the aperture of our vision, of expanding our chosen circumference (see Figure 5-2).

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⁹⁴⁶ Burke, A Grammar, 89-90.
To the extent that we open ourselves to more and wider (only ostensibly taxonomic) differences, we come to appreciate the value of each as a part toward both our own and the nation’s vitality. For Burke this means that with Whitman the autodidact, “we must keep trying anything and everything, improvising, borrowing from others,
developing from others, . . . using the incentive to new wanderings, returning from these excursions to schematize again.”

As Whitman demonstrates, and this dissertation has shown, this requires the understanding that social ontology is always personal. To those who find that understanding strange, Quine suggests that the phenomenon is rarely noticed: “One’s ontology is basic to the conceptual scheme by which he interprets all experiences, even the most commonplace ones. Judged within some particular conceptual scheme—and how else is judgment possible?—an ontological statement goes without saying, standing in need of no separate justification at all. Put more existentially, as Simone de Beauvoir does,

Metaphysics is, first of all, not a system; one does not “do” metaphysics as one “does” mathematics or physics. In reality, “to do” metaphysics is “to be” metaphysical; it is to realize oneself in the metaphysical attitude, which consists in positing oneself in one’s totality before the totality of the world. Every human event possesses a metaphysical signification beyond its psychological and social elements, since through each event, man is always entirely engaged in the entire world; and surely there is no one to whom this meaning has not been disclosed at some time in his life.

An understanding that “a working metaphysics is required for each of us simply to get around in the world” empowers the person to recognize in every other person a new, possibly better, world.

In this way, developing a truly democratic moral ideal will always be a project in personality—Whitman would have each of us say with him, “I have no chair, nor church,

948 Burke, A Rhetoric, 265.
no philosophy”\textsuperscript{952} but all of them. There is no limit to what we can incorporate in our own lives. Pragmatist John Dewey agrees, that “[t]o gain an integrated individuality, each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. But there is no fence about this garden: it is no sharply marked-off enclosure. Our garden is the world, in the angle at which it touches our own manner of being.”\textsuperscript{953}

Each of the thinkers just cited recommends the historically maligned idea of eclecticism, whereby the purposive selections we all make every day are recognized as valid forms of knowledge-making. Long ago cast in the epistemological dustbin, eclecticism nevertheless saw one of its heydays in another noteworthy republic. Cicero, magnanimous as he is thought to be, was proud to be “under no confinement from obligations to any particular sect, but [to] gather from all of them whatever strikes you most as having the appearance of probability.”\textsuperscript{954} As Cicero practiced it, eclecticism meant “tak[ing] in everything, leaving them unsupported by the authority of any particular person, to be judged of by others, according to their weight,” toward the end of “examin[ing], if we can, the particular opinions of the others, that so this excellent decision, if I may so call it, in favor of a happy life, may be agreeable to the opinions and discipline of all.”\textsuperscript{955} By taking up the same practice in our own several lives, we not only further the cause of “equity, moderation, impartiality, wisdom . . . of being just towards all systems, and the dupe of none of them” from an intellectual perspective.”\textsuperscript{956} We also

\textsuperscript{952} Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 75.
\textsuperscript{953} Dewey, Individualism Old and New, 121-122.
\textsuperscript{955} Ibid.
enact Whitman’s idea of an entirely impartial America. As Victor Cousin saw it, eclecticism was a movement against the same tyrannical and Feudal tendencies Whitman sought to eliminate. For Cousin, “Exclusive doctrines are in philosophy what parties are in the State. Eclecticism tends to substitute for their violent and irregular action a firm and moderate direction, which shall call every force into operation, but shall sacrifice to none the interests of order, or the public good.”

Instead, Whitman urges all of us admit as much and as often as possible new perspectives, constantly expanding the circumference of our personal ontologies in the process. In this, he anticipates Ernest Cassirer’s admonition that

[i]n the performance of this task we cannot neglect any possible source of information. We must examine all the available empirical evidence, and utilize all the methods of introspection, biological observation, and historical inquiry.” In contrast to the end sought by ideology critique, “These older methods are not to be eliminated but referred to a new intellectual *center*, and hence seen from a new angle.

With the same attitude that Victor Cousin discovered that the authority of these different systems proceeded from the fact that they all contain something which is true and good; I suspected that in reality they were not all so completely at war with each other as they pretended; I was convinced by degrees that, on certain conditions, they could all go very well with each other; and I proposed to them a treaty of peace on the basis of mutual

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offers the following definition of eclecticism as an epistemological method: “This procedure — to reject no system and to accept none entirely, to neglect this element and to take that, to select in all what appears to be true and good, and consequently everlasting — this, in a single word, is ECLECTICISM.” Diderot, in the *Encyclopedia*, adds a personal, experiential element. For him, “The eclectic is a philosopher who, trampling underfoot prejudice, tradition, antiquity, general agreement, authority—in a word, everything that controls the minds of the common herd—dares to think for himself, return to the dearest general principles, examines them, discusses them, admits nothing that is not based on the testimony of his experience and his reason; and from all the philosophies he has analyzed without respect and bias he makes for himself a particular and domestic one which belongs to him. . . . The Eclectics are . . . the only ones who have remained in the state of nature, where everything belonged to everyone” (Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, Vol. V, (Paris, 1756). Emphasis added.

957 Ibid.

concessions.\footnote{Cousin, “On the Destiny,” 56.}

Whitman would have us “dilate” our vision and give every one the honor of a fair hearing—to see in every species the dignity of a whole life. Spread widely, democracy as a decision-making would flourish. With Hannah Arendt, Whitman believes, “The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.”\footnote{Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in \textit{Between Past and Future} (New York: Penguin, 2006), 241.} Whitman’s democracy, too, is a thoroughly personal matter. It requires that each one see every one as “neither an object nor a subject (an other subject) but the expression of a possible world.”\footnote{Gilles Deleuze, “On Philosophy,” in \textit{Negotiations}, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005/2000), 147. Deleuze gives as an example, “Someone with a toothache, and a Japanese man walking in the road, express possible worlds. Then they start talking: someone tells me about Japan. It might even be the Japanese man who tells me about Japan, he might even be speaking Japanese: language thus confers reality on the possible world as such, the reality of the possible as something possible (if I go to Japan, on the other hand, then it’s no longer something possible)” (p. 147).} It requires that we see every one as representative, as America, as a synecdoche. More than that, it requires our taking their place, if only in imagination. What Hoyt Hopewell Hudson calls “sympathetic understanding,” affords us the opportunities in our democracy to “appreciate the existence of other objects and persons,” as much as “an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own.”\footnote{Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, \textit{Educating Liberally} (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1945), 72.} Both he and Whitman anticipate Wayne Booth’s rhetoric of assent, whereby our initial position toward others is not skepticism, but acceptance, not hierarchical, but circumferential and expanding.

In the end, Whitman’s project will be rightly categorized as another Idealism. His
will be taken as the sometimes mad ravings of a hyperbolic, arrogant poet. Eclecticism requires eccentricity. For someone like John Stuart Mill, however, the stakes are high. In his mind, “That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time. I have said that it is important to give the freest scope possible to uncustomary things, in order that it may in time appear which of these are fit to be converted into customs.”

The time of which Mill speaks is our own. Whitman feared and Burke tried to explain what we see today as hegemony and antagonism. Today as in Buber’s 1960s, the “human world” is as never before, split into two camps, each of which understands the other as the embodiment of falsehood and itself as the embodiment of truth ... Each side has assumed monopoly of the sunlight and has plunged its antagonist into night, and each side demands that you decide between day and night. ... He is convinced that his side is in order, the other side fundamentally out of order, that he is concerned with the recognition and realization of the right, his opponent with the masking of his selfish interest. Expressed in modern terminology, he believes that he has ideas, his opponent only ideologies.

Whitman’s contribution to the health of democracy is to help us do away altogether with competitive ideologies, toward the single Idea of human flourishing in all its myriad forms. It is a project without end, for ending it means settling, favoring, dominating.

Whitman advises us in these moments to do as he: “I said to my soul When we become the enfolders of all these orbs, and open to the life, and delight and knowledge of every thing in them, or of them, shall we be filled and satisfied? and the answer was No, when we fetch that height, we shall not be filled and satisfied but shall look as high beyond.” When Whitman sets out to “entirely reconstruct Society,” we find his

965 Whitman, Notebooks, I, 60.
ontological ambition grandiose and misguided. Now we understand his reconstruction to be as much about his ideal personality as his ideal nation. Like him, we can contain multitudes, and probably see each other as equally a “Kosmos,”

Who includes diversity and is Nature,
Who is the amplitude of the earth, and the coarseness and sexuality of the earth, and the great charity of the earth, and the equilibrium also,
Who has not look'd forth from the windows the eyes for nothing, or whose brain held audience with messengers for nothing,
Who contains believers and disbelievers, who is the most majestic lover,
Who holds duly his or her triune proportion of realism, spiritualism, and of the aesthetic or intellectual,
Who having consider'd the body finds all its organs and parts good,
Who, out of the theory of the earth and of his or her body understands by subtle analogies all other theories,
The theory of a city, a poem, and of the large politics of these States;
Who believes not only in our globe with its sun and moon, but in other globes with their suns and moons,
Who, constructing the house of himself or herself, not for a day but for all time, sees races, eras, dates, generations,
The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable together.\footnote{Walt Whitman, “Kosmos,” \textit{Two Rivulets} (1860), 106.}

If Whitman is our most representative American poet, here then is our American poem, and the best illustration, perhaps, of the American motto, \textit{E pluribus unum}, which may just mean, \textit{from many personalities, one whole democratic person}.
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