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Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People

Jason Frank

Abstract: This essay argues for Walt Whitman's significance to contemporary democratic theory, neither as a theorist of moral or aesthetic individualism nor as a theorist of communitarian nationalism, but as a theorist of the democratic sublime. Whitman's account of "aesthetic democracy" emphasizes the affective and autopoietic dimensions of political life. For Whitman, popular attachment to democracy requires an aesthetic component, and he aimed to enact the required reconfiguration of popular sensibility through a poetic depiction of the people as themselves a sublimely poetic, world-making power. Through his poetic translation of the vox populi, Whitman hoped to engender a robustly transformative democratic politics. He found the resources for political regeneration in the poetics of everyday citizenship, in the democratic potentials of ordinary life.

We have frequently printed the word democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps . . . 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 . . . remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted.

–Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*¹

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¹Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 984. Subsequent references to Whitman's work will be cited in the text with the following abbreviations:

AP: *An American Primer* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Co., 1904).

C: *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, ed. Horace Traubel. 9 vols. (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1914).

DV: *Democratic Vistas*, in *Poetry and Prose*, 953–1018. (See below.)

E: "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in *Poetry and Prose*, 1331–49. (See below.)

LG: *Leaves of Grass* (multiple editions) in *Poetry and Prose*, 5–145 [1855]; 165–672 [1891–1892]; 677–96 [1860, 1865]. (See below.)

N: *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*. 6 vols. (New York:

F. O. Matthieson called Walt Whitman “the central figure of our literature affirming the democratic faith”; more recently, George Kateb described Whitman as “perhaps the greatest philosopher of the culture of democracy.”² Both assessments seem warranted, and to them I would add another: Whitman is one of America’s greatest theorists of the relationship between aesthetics and democratic politics. In texts like *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Whitman unites these spheres in a conception of “aesthetic democracy.” For Whitman, the popular commitment to democracy requires an aesthetic evaluation, and he aimed to enact the required reconfiguration of popular sensibility through the poetic depiction of the people as themselves a sublimely poetic, world-making power. Whitman’s invocation of the people is, in this sense, sublimely autopoetic rather than autonomic; the people are at once the inexhaustible inspiration and the effect of poetic mediation. Through his poetry, Whitman claimed to sing the multitudinous diversity of the vox populi back to the people themselves, thereby enhancing their latent poetic capacity and aesthetically enabling a radical democratic politics of collective revision.³ As such, Whitman’s conception of aesthetic democracy illuminates three regions of inquiry usually neglected in contemporary democratic theory: the relationship between aesthetics and politics,

New York University Press, 1984).

P: *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996).

R: *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Kenneth M. Price (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

SD: *Specimen Days and Collect* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995).

W: *Walt Whitman’s Workshop: A Collection of Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Clifton Joseph Furness (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964).

²F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 90; George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 240.

³The contrast between autopoetic and autonomic emphasizes the aesthetic over juridical concerns in Whitman’s work, while also emphasizing his creative and transformative conception of democratic politics. As Jacques Rancière’s work has shown, to affirm the poetic dimension of politics is to understand political enactment in terms of a “reconfiguration of the sensible.” In Whitman’s work it is the very perceptual self of “democratic self determination” that is continually reformed and recreated. For a relevant discussion of political poetics see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 12–18. The theme of revisionary poetic politics is obviously related to Whitman’s preoccupation with revising his own body of work in the multiple editions of *Leaves of Grass*. For a discussion that traces this theme through the different editions, see Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

the invariably poetic construction of the people, and the people themselves envisioned as a poetic, world-making power.

This essay pursues these topics by exploring Whitman's reflections on aesthetic democracy and his experimental poetic invocation of the people's voice. The vox populi of Whitman's people, and of the democracy they enact, resides in their constitutive futurity, in the fact that they remain forever a people that is not . . . yet.⁴ Whitman's poetry figures the people as inexhaustibly sublime in that they can be neither captured by representation nor finally embodied by political institutions.⁵ For Whitman, in effect, "the people are always more and less than the people."⁶ The democratic attachments Whitman hoped to engender through his poetry revolve around the vivifying sublimity of this paradox of the people never at one with itself. While in certain respects Whitman's democratic faith resembles the "democratic aestheticism" celebrated in Kateb's influential work on Whitman, I argue that Whitman's is ultimately a more radically democratic vision than Kateb's Emersonian interpretation allows. Whitman's aesthetic democracy does not simply call for "receptivity or responsiveness to as much of the world as possible," but for an embrace of a world always in the process of becoming other than it is.⁷ Whitman offers contemporary democratic theorists a distinct

⁴Slavoj Žižek has explored the significant transformation of the politics of "the people" into the politics of "a people" in *Tarrying With the Negative*. For Žižek, the "sublime enthusiasm" of the people is an "open" but "brief, passing moment," "not yet hegemonized by any positive ideological project." See Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1. I argue here that Whitman hoped to vivify such an open democratic culture through the dissemination of his poetry.

⁵Harold Bloom offers the best general discussion of Emerson's and Whitman's distinct conceptions of the "American Sublime" in "Emerson and Whitman: The American Sublime" from *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 235–66; see also Joseph Kronick, "On the Border of History: Whitman and the American Sublime," in *The American Sublime*, ed. Mary Arensberg (Albany: State University of New York Press), 51–82. I cannot offer an extended discussion of the sublime here, but Kateb provides a useful summary statement: "[T]he sublime refers to such aspects of artworks, nature, and human social phenomenon as the unbounded or boundless; the indefinite, indeterminate, or infinite; the transgressive; the overwhelming or overpowering . . . the awe-inspiring, wondrous, astonishing, or unexpectedly mysterious; and the uncanny." George Kateb, "Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility," in *Patriotism and Other Mistakes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 117–49, 129.

⁶Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 10.

⁷George Kateb, "Aestheticism and Morality," 143. Kateb rightly emphasizes Whitman's attempt to "show that nearly everyone and everything is worthy of aesthetic attitudes and feeling," but Whitman goes beyond this aesthetic affirmation of

understanding of the transformative poetics of citizenship, where the quotidian and embodied dimensions of democratic life, its ethical organization, are essential to democracy's "real gist" and meaning, and its enactment beyond "pen or tongue." The most theoretically provocative and potentially productive dimensions of Whitman's work are found in his departures from the inherited ideological divisions of nineteenth-century American politics, and from the attachments of American political institutions.

I

Whitman's changing attitude toward American politics and political institutions has provoked much scholarly debate. No doubt Whitman evinced a lifelong reverence for the members of the Founding generation, particularly for that "beacon in history," the "matchless WASHINGTON."⁸ In this, Whitman was like many other followers of the "Young America" movement of the 1830s and 1840s, writers who, in newspapers like John L. Sullivan's *Democratic Review* (in which Whitman published frequently), advocated a strongly nationalistic response to European cultural dominance.⁹ Mythologizing the Founders was an assertion of cultural independence; men like Jefferson and Washington stood as powerful unifying symbols in a period when "union" was considered a fragile and vulnerable achievement.

Beyond this widely shared cultural nationalism, Whitman's early political commitments also owed much to the Founding generation's republican legacies. Jefferson's distinctly American civic republicanism was particularly important to Whitman's early political education; the material requirements of independent citizenship, the importance of land availability, and the turn away from the authority of the past, all appear in Whitman's writing, early and late. Indeed, the transformation of Jeffersonian ideology during the presidency of Andrew Jackson—in particular its urbanization—profoundly marked the political climate of Whitman's childhood. As his biographers emphasize, Whitman was born into a family of working-class Jacksonian democrats, and his father was an ardent admirer of Jefferson and Paine.¹⁰ Whitman's early

the "world as it is" to engender a politically enlivening sense of the people's poetic power, their capacity for "formative action."

⁸Whitman's persistent loyalty to the Founding generation is emphasized by Daniel Aaron in his essay "Whitman and the Founding Fathers," *The Mickle Street Review* 10 (1988): 5–12.

⁹For a good account of Whitman's involvement with the "Young America" movement, see David Reynolds' *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 81–82.

¹⁰See, for example, Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 26.

political involvements and his newspaper editorials of the 1830s and 1840s rarely deviated from this Jeffersonian-Jacksonian ideological framework.¹¹

Reading Whitman's later work solely through the lens of these earlier political commitments, however, does not explain Whitman's idiosyncratic use of key terms like "democracy" and "the people" in the writing for which he is best known: *Leaves of Grass*, beginning with the 1855 publication. Unlike Noah Webster, who warned readers against using these words precisely because their advocates "have never defined what they mean by the *people*, or what they mean by *democracy*," Whitman used their polyvocality to his poetic and political advantage.¹² Whitman's distinctive contribution to American political thought is obscured when the politics of his writings are reduced to his early political affiliations and party activism.

The publication of *Leaves* came during a period of widely perceived social and political crisis that coincided with an extraordinary flowering of American literature: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Representative Men*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Walden*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, and *Leaves of Grass* were all published between 1850 and 1855. David Reynolds has convincingly argued that this literary flowering should be understood as a response to the period's social and political turbulence. Whitman's literary response to the political events unfolding around him was twofold: on the one hand, and following other political romantics, he invoked a broadened understanding of literature and poetry for political ends; on the other, he turned away from institutions to an unmediated understanding of the people as the only reliable source of democratic regeneration. Whitman's vision of "aesthetic democracy" emerged from the interconnectedness of this twofold response. The social and political crisis of the 1850s was marked by widespread political corruption, a widening gap between rich and poor, rising immigration and corresponding anti-immigrant feeling, high urban death rates, and a fragmented political system in the wake of the death of the old party system.¹³ Overwhelming all these factors, of course, was the expanding power of Southern slavery. The year 1850 saw the congressional passage of a more forceful Fugitive Slave Law, which sent Southern slave hunters into Northern cities and made those harboring slaves in the North subject to federal prosecution. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, opening the West to the expansion of America's "peculiar institution" and creating border wars between Missouri slaveholders and abolitionist, or free-soil, forces in "Bloody Kansas."

¹¹Jerome Loving emphasizes Whitman's party activism and its influence on his literary work. See Loving, "The Political Roots of *Leaves of Grass*," in *Historical Guide to Walt Whitman*, ed. David Reynolds (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 231–42.

¹²Noah Webster, *The Letters of Noah Webster*, ed. H.M. Warfel (New York: Library Publishers, 1953), 504.

¹³Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 306.

Whitman's reaction to the United States' slow descent into civil war was famously ambivalent. On the issue of slavery, Whitman was a committed "antiextensionist." In the pre-Civil War period, he did not believe in eradicating slavery (which he thought would bring about the dissolution of union), but rather opposed its further extension into the Western Territories. (Lincoln held a similar view.) Whitman's enthusiastic participation in the Free-Soil movement's early stages suggests his antislavery activism was motivated primarily by the Jeffersonian concern that the West remain open to independent white farmers rather than a principled opposition to racial inequality. Moreover, in his editorials from the period, Whitman strongly condemned what he considered the fanaticism of both Northern abolitionists (particularly the Constitution-burning Garrisonians) and southern proponents of slavery or secession. As the crisis grew, Whitman's faith in American political and legal institutions withered, and he sought instead to articulate latent common "intuitions" and poetically "celebrate the inherent" dispositions and sensibilities of the people themselves (*W*, 145).

The text that best signals Whitman's apprehension in the face of growing political crisis is his vitriolic attack on the administration of Franklin Pierce in "The Eighteenth Presidency!" (1856). In a passage that resonates stylistically as a negative counterpart to his celebratory, open-ended democratic lists in *Leaves*, Whitman describes the period's party politicians as

Office-holders, office-seekers, robbers, pimps, exclusives, malignants, conspirators, murderers, fancy-men, post-masters, custom-house clerks, contractors, kept-editors, spaniels well-trained to carry and fetch . . . pimpled men, scarred inside with the vile disorder, gaudy outside with gold chains made from people's money and harlot's money twisted together; crawling, serpentine men, the lousy combings and born freedom sellers of the earth. (*E*, 1337–38)

In passages like this—and this text has many like it—Whitman expressed the period's common suspicion of institutional politics and institutions of all kinds. He also exemplified the tone and temper of much of the writing circulating in mid-nineteenth-century America. Departing from the purported ratio-critical norms of the public sphere, political debate in the period was marked by passionate invective, sentimental appeal, defamation, and the widespread recognition of the political uses of vehemence, disdain, and contempt.¹⁴

Much of this literature was written in the name of reform of one kind or another. The reform movements that characterized the political culture of antebellum America had by the 1850s been radicalized by their evangelical and deeply antiauthoritarian constituencies. "Ultraism" was a term in

¹⁴See Robert Fanuzzi, *Abolition's Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003); and Kimberly Smith, *The Dominion of Voice: Riot, Reason, and Romance in Antebellum Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

common use in the period to designate this radicalized brand of reform politics and to distinguish it from its reasoned, deliberative, largely Unitarian variant.¹⁵ Ultraists believed that individuals could be sanctified while on earth and used this moral perfectionism to argue against the complicity of compromise, institutional mediation, and political deliberation. The resulting animus against mediating institutions was compounded by a fiery renewal of antinomian thought and sensibility in the period. The mediation of language itself was suspect for some of the age's more enthusiastic radical lights, as in John Brown's insistence on "action! action!" But even less revolutionary, more intellectual writers appreciated the impulse. Thoreau, for example, had publicly noted and celebrated precisely this aspect of Brown. "He was not a rhetorician," Thoreau said shortly after Brown's thwarted raid on Harper's Ferry, but "the greatest of preachers." "He did not set up even a political graven image between him and his God."¹⁶ Emerson, too, noted the "fertile forms of antinomianism" that thrived in antebellum America, allowing for a "keener scrutiny of institutions and domestic life."¹⁷

Whitman was accused of participating in this antinomian reaction to what both he and Emerson characterized as the "fossilism" of inherited institutions. As he wrote in the first edition of *Leaves* (1855), "Unscrew the locks from the doors!/ Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" (LG, 50) In the "Calamus" section of the second edition of *Leaves* (1862), Whitman responded to those who criticized this anti-institutionalist or antinomian aspect of the first volume, evident in both its content and in its abandonment of inherited poetic forms (about which, more below):

I HEAR it was charged against me that I sought to destroy institutions,
But really I am neither for nor against institutions,
(What indeed have I in common with them? or what with the destruction
of them?) (LG, 281)

Whitman's indifference to institutions led, at times, to a reiteration of the period's common invocation of the force and power of immediacy: "We want no reforms," Whitman wrote, "no institutions, no parties—We want a living principle as nature has, under which nothing can go wrong" (W, 62). Like Emerson, Whitman would be "ashamed to think how easily we

¹⁵This distinction is extensively elaborated in Sean Wilentz's influential study of working class politics in antebellum America. See Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). A detailed account of the centrality of reform movements to antebellum political culture is provided in Ronald Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

¹⁶Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" in *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), 31–48, 37.

¹⁷Emerson, "New England Reformers," in *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 361–79, 363.

capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions."¹⁸ For Whitman, however, overcoming the weight of these inherited institutions came not only from a spiritualized invocation of "nature," or the self-reliant individual (however removed from individualism or sovereign mastery the Emersonian individual, properly understood, might be), but from a direct turn to "the people" in whose name these putatively democratic institutions ruled. In the 1850s' crisis of social and political institutions, Whitman glimpsed new possibilities for fulfilling their hindered democratic prospects, a promise of democratic regeneration through the aesthetic transformation of everyday life.

The crisis of the 1850s was understood by many of the era's writers as a crisis of both politics and meaning—a crisis in representation broadly understood.¹⁹ Responding to unfolding events in "Bloody Kansas," for example, Emerson wrote that "language has lost its meaning in the universal cant. *Representative government* is really misrepresentative . . . *Manifest Destiny, Democracy, Freedom*, fine names for an ugly thing They call it chivalry and freedom; I call it the stealing of all the earnings of a poor man and his little girl and boy."²⁰ Whitman wrote *Leaves* to address both levels of this representational crisis, but in doing so he did not aim to turn away from the corruption and complicity of politics altogether (as some have argued Thoreau did at Walden Pond). Instead, he looked to the latent resources of democratic life, particularly as manifest in America's growing cities, to restore the poetic vitality of both politics and language. While on the surface America's political institutions seemed compromised and diminishing of individuality (a point frequently reiterated in the writing of Emerson and Thoreau), Whitman believed political engagement and encounter carried a deeper significance, one "descending below laws . . . [and] social routines," (*W*, 145), and overlooked by widespread ultraist condemnations of politics.

Admitting the "vile" and "incompetent" people sometimes put forward in a democracy, Whitman nevertheless wrote that "shams, etc. will always be

¹⁸Emerson, "Self-Reliance" in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 175–204, 179.

¹⁹Describing this dual crisis in post-Revolutionary America, Thomas Gustafson writes: "[T]he problem of representation was not just a matter of political representation but also of linguistic representation. Indeed, the quest for proper representation in the Revolutionary era [and after] was at once a quest to restore and maintain a meaningful correspondence between political representatives and their constituents and a quest to restore a meaningful correspondence between words and their representative ideas." Gustafson, *Representative Words Politics, Literature, and the American Language, 1776–1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 199. Whitman also recognized the interconnectedness of this crisis, but he saw such simply restorative acts of representation as insufficient to his democratic vision. See below pp. 426–427.

²⁰Emerson, *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–1904), vol. 6, 259–60.

the show, like ocean's scum; enough, if waters deep and clear make up the rest. Enough that while the piled embroidery shoddy gaud and fraud spreads to the superficial eye, the hidden warp and weft are genuine and will wear forever" (*DV*, 978). Like Thoreau and Emerson, Whitman recognized the "threatening evils" of political democracy—all three were particularly troubled by democracy's averaging forces and "statistical" propensities—but Whitman also found resources to combat these evils, not only in fathomless, spiritualized "nature," but in the very "roar of cities and the broil of politics" that Emerson's essay "Nature" posits as a dangerous or distracting artifice.²¹ "To attack the turbulence and destructiveness of the Democratic spirit," Whitman wrote, "is an old story But with the noble Democratic spirit—even accompanied by its freaks and its excesses—no people can ever become enslaved."²²

Whitman believed spaces of political contest—in his words, the "arenas" or "gymnasiums" of freedom—were the necessary forums for creating the assertively independent citizens required for a regenerative democracy of everyday life, for the transformative poetics of everyday citizenship, understood as a lived practice rather than a juridical category. Political contest was not simply subject to overarching moral purpose for Whitman. He figured the political not as an instrumentalized realm serving competing ends, nor as a debased or diminishing distraction from the stylized cultivation of the self. His high evaluation of political engagement and contention—his estimation of its "restorative" capacities—clearly distinguishes Whitman from both his Emersonian and ultraist contemporaries. It also gives passages like the following their resounding noninstrumentalist resonance: "A brave delight, fit for freedom's athletes, fills these arenas, and fully satisfies, out of the action in them, irrespective of success" (*DV*, 976). The action that Whitman believes these forums for democratic citizenship engender is explicitly agonistic: "I think agitation is the most important factor of all," Whitman writes, "the most deeply important. To stir, to question, to suspect, to examine, to denounce!" (*C*, IV, 30) "Vive, the attack—the perennial assault!" (*DV*, 976) *Leaves* at once speaks for and elicits a self capable of flourishing amidst the democratic agonism called for in several of Whitman's texts. As he writes in "By Blue Ontario's Shore," for example: "[H]e only suits these States whose manners favor the audacity and sublime turbulence of the States" (*LG*, 481).

Democratic contest and agonism was for Whitman productive of the kind of self-reliant individuality that Thoreau and Emerson thought prior to politics, and also undercut or diminished by politics. Whitman's independent, democratic self is an effect of a milling space of political discord and democratic contest. Kateb has shown how Whitman envisioned a democratic

²¹Emerson, "Nature," in *Selected Essays*, 35–82, 52.

²²Taken from Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 103.

culture capable of sustaining and enabling a robust and stylized “aesthetic individuality,” but he mischaracterizes the relationship between them. The tension Kateb identifies between a highly individualistic antinomianism and collective civic-mindedness is, indeed, present throughout Whitman’s work, but Whitman’s embrace of a radical democratic politics works to suspend the opposition between them. Take, for example, a passage from *Democratic Vistas* that Kateb also quotes, in part: “Bibles may convey, and priests expound, but it is exclusively for the noiseless operation of the isolated Self, to enter the pure ether of veneration, reach the divine levels, and commune with the unutterable” (*DV*, 989). The antinomianism of this passage—“commune with the unutterable”—is clearly reminiscent of Emerson’s early essays and even carries with it the trace of theological controversy. But then, the very next line—“To practically enter into politics is an important part of American personalism” (*DV*, 989)—reasserts Whitman’s embrace of political action as constitutive of the self.

The practical and affective organization of democratic life below the level of institutions and laws was Whitman’s primary concern after 1855 and is essential to his vision of aesthetic democracy and to the poetics of citizenship that it enacts. While this position was elaborated in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves, Democratic Vistas* stated it best:

For not only is it not enough that the new blood, new frame of democracy shall be vivified and held together merely by political means, superficial suffrage, legislation, etc., but it is clear to me that unless it goes deeper, gets at least as firm and warm a hold in men’s hearts, emotions and belief, as, in their days, feudalism or ecclesiasticism, and inaugurates its own perennial sources, welling from the center forever, its strengths will be defective, its growth doubtful, and its main charm wanting (*DV*, 959).

According to Whitman, American democracy’s crisis of the 1850s could not be resolved by reorganizing political institutions, but only by addressing what Kateb has insightfully termed a particular “stylization of life,” “a distinctive set of appearances, habits, rituals, dress, ceremonies, folk traditions and historical memories.” However, while Kateb sees this concern as “secondary at best,” and fears its nationalistic or collectivist tendencies, it was here that the promise of aesthetic interventions into democratic life became most evident to Whitman; on this explicitly aesthetic terrain, contemporary democratic theorists may have the most to learn from Whitman.²³

II

As newspaper editor for the *Brooklyn Eagle* and the *Aurora*, Whitman already appreciated the political power of words to shape political action and educate

²³Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 240.

citizens. He was a committed participant in what historian Richard Brown has characterized as America's evolving "discourse of the informed citizen," which identified education and the free circulation of information in an open public sphere as the primary basis for securing independent citizenship and the stability of free government.²⁴ Whitman participated in this discourse, but he also critiqued it, particularly in his literary contributions, as they came to be valued as an extension of his editorial and journalistic efforts. As Betsy Erkkila has written, "[T]he publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 was not an escape from politics but a continuation of politics by other means."²⁵ It was a continuation, however, that also marked a transformation in Whitman's conceptualization of politics. Whitman's work was no longer engaged principally in contending over particular issues or clarifying ideological positions; instead, Whitman addressed the overall condition of the polity as what he called a "passionate body," elaborating the "electric" or "resonant" interconnections between the utter singularity of the self and the multitudinous and contending voices of democratic politics.²⁶

Art intended, Whitman wrote, "to serve the people," and when it failed to do so it was "false to its promises" (C, IV, 4). The preface to the first edition of *Leaves* (1855) reads as a kind of manifesto on the interconnections between aesthetics and democratic politics, an account elaborated in more detail later in *Democratic Vistas* (1871). Whitman believed grasping this interconnection was crucial to understanding his poetry. Those "who insist on viewing my poetry," he wrote, as "literary performance," or as "aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism" (P, 671) invariably fail to understand it. Whitman disdained the growing tendency of literature to "magnify & intensify its own technism" and to "isolate itself from general & vulgar life, & to make a caste or order" (N, 1603). Opposing such tendencies in the first edition of *Leaves*, Whitman opened aesthetics to democratic politics and democratic politics to aesthetics. Experimentally departing from both the "technism" of poetic form (most obviously the inherited conventions of lyric poetry) and the formalism of political institutions, Whitman hoped to stage an unmediated, challenging encounter with his audience. He attempted to overcome poetically the representational limitation of the written text that

²⁴See Richard Brown, *The Strength of the People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650–1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), especially 119–53.

²⁵Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 92.

²⁶Donald E. Pease argues that the "doctrine of the body electric" was Whitman's democratic translation of the early modern discourse of the King's Two Bodies. Through this "doctrine" Whitman "develops a correspondence between an individual's inner impulses and the democratic masses." See his "Walt Whitman and the Vox Populi of the American Masses," in *Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writing in Cultural Contexts* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 108–57, 110.

connects and separates the poet from his public. Consider, for example, this famous passage from the "Song of Occupations":

Come closer to me,
 Push close my lovers and take the best I possess, [. . .]
 I was chilled with the cold type and cylinder and wet paper between us.
 (LG, 89)

Whitman likened his attempt to move or "touch" the reader poetically with the power of oratory and the spoken word in antebellum political culture. Discussing the power of oratory in the period, Emerson wrote that the orator's word should not be distinguished from action. "It is the electricity of action. It is action, as the general's word of command or chart of battle is action." Because oratory was closely associated with the crowds that often populate Whitman's poetry, however, some writers associated it with democratic unreason and the dangers of popular tyranny. Thoreau, for instance, took a more suspicious view of oratorical power when he wrote that the "orator yields to the inspiration of the transient occasion, and speaks to the mob before him, to those who can *hear* him; but the writer . . . who would be distracted by the event and the crowd which inspire the orator, speaks to the intellect and the heart of mankind, to all in any age who can *understand* him."²⁷ Whitman, in contrast, wanted the reader to hear his songs as much as understand them; he regularly situates himself within the clamor of the crowd rather than aspiring to rise above it. In his *American Primer* Whitman wrote that the ideal writer should be able to do with words "any thing, that man or woman or the natural powers can do" (AP, 598). Whitman wanted his words to touch his readers and move them toward democratic rejuvenation.

The connections Whitman sought to establish with the reader, and to disseminate in the political culture of the time, were explicitly affective and erotic.²⁸ As Whitman wrote in the "Calamus" section of *Leaves of Grass*, he wanted readers to thrust him beneath their clothing, "to feel the throbs of their heart, to rest upon their hips" (LG, 271). Examining passages such as these, Allen Grossman has argued that Whitman's overriding concern in his

²⁷Emerson, "Eloquence," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol 8, 111–21, 115. Thoreau, *Walden*, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Walden; or, Life in the Woods. The Maine Woods. Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985), 325–587, 404.

²⁸The erotic dimensions of Whitman's understanding of politics and the political dimensions of his understanding of Eros have been explored by Michael Moon in *Disseminating Whitman*. Whitman's "body politics," Moon writes, "is designed to reconstitute the readers' very subjectivity in relation not only to the author's but to their own and everyone else's bodily existence . . . Whitman revises readerly subjectivity in the direction of a heightened, transforming sense of the constructedness and hence the dense politicality of all bodily experiences, erotic and otherwise" (4).

poetry and its public orientation was with an “infinite distributability of affectionate presence.” Whitman hoped to press in upon his readers as the surging crowds of Manhattan pressed in upon themselves and him, but—and this is again in contrast to Emerson and Thoreau—he envisioned this proliferation of contact as stimulating difference rather than diminishing the individual. The urban crowds among which Whitman so often positions himself in his writings are his model carriers of “presence” and, as such, the markers of a representational limit. Grossman argues that Whitman’s intention to rid transactions of “all representational mediation” is the reason for his interest in “phrenology, his dislike of political parties, poetic diction, mythology, and so on.”²⁹

Whitman’s attempts to overcome political and written mediation in his poetry also illuminate the peculiar way that he invokes democracy in his writing. Instead of arguing for the legitimacy of democratic politics in the American setting, the goal of Whitman’s work was to provoke and disseminate a democratic sensibility that shaped the experiences of individuals below the cognitive level of conviction or even persuasion. “I and mine,” he writes, “do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes. We convince by our presence” (*LG*, 303; see also pp. 421–422 below). The idea that one could “convince” by presence rather than argument relied on a vision of the “social and political” world as conserved not by “legislation, police, treaties, [or] dread of punishment,” but by what Whitman called the “latent intuitional sense” (*DV*, 1013). By directing his poetic work to this infrasensible level of democratic life and practice, or to what Ralph Ellison would later call its “lower frequencies,” Whitman hoped to invigorate individual and political capacities, to further engender and enhance the individual and collective self-enactments he thought exemplary of American democracy.³⁰ His poems were to “arouse reason,” but also to “suggest, give freedom, strength, muscle, candor” (*N*, 1563). “Your very flesh,” he wrote in *Leaves*, “shall be a great poem and have the riches and fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body” (*LG*, 11). Through dissemination of his poetic translation of the vox populi, the autopoetic power Whitman

²⁹Allen Grossman, “The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln: An Inquiry Toward the Relationship of Art and Policy,” in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1982–1983*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 183–208, 208.

³⁰I take “infrasensible” from William Connolly’s explorations of these topics. See his *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Ellison invokes democracy’s “lower frequencies” in the final line of *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

associates with democracy would become a part of the (electric) organization of the body (politic) itself.

Whitman's turn away from established channels of institutionalized politics in favor of aesthetic intervention into political life at the micropolitical level³¹ has led some commentators to accuse him of abandoning faith in democratic politics altogether. One version of this argument suggests that Whitman's turn to aesthetics corresponds to a turn toward a "spiritual democracy," or an attempt by an elite class of poet-legislators "to overcome the practice of politics as a collective decision-making process."³² In this reading, Whitman's reference to "democratic despots" in *Democratic Vistas* is understood as an all-too-literal reference to a despotic poetic class rather than to the self-enacting or autopoetic aspect of democratic politics itself. Others have more plausibly argued that an often unrecognized "dark side" taints Whitman's putatively democratic politics, his loathing of corrupt institutions "seep[ing] through to a disdain for the people themselves."³³ According to this interpretation, Whitman exhibits the familiar conflict of left-wing intellectuals who want to celebrate the common man, while often showing disdain for actually existing people. Both readings attribute to Whitman a "Romantic" or "Rousseauian" longing for authentic and unalienated existence, a longing they then place at the heart of Whitman's critique of actually existing democracy.

Such arguments neglect Whitman's political and stylistic departures from earlier forms of political romanticism, departures which shape his claim to be a democratic poet. For Whitman, not only was poetry a kind of democratic action, but democratic action should itself be understood as a kind of poetry. Whitman's poetry presented a "vulgar" or "promiscuous" democratic people to themselves as sublime and worthy of inspiring aesthetic appreciation and emulation rather than embarrassment or disgust.³⁴ He did so not to further

³¹Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 208–31.

³²Jessie Goldhammer, "Walt Whitman: Democracy's Janus-Faced Poet," *Critical Sense* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 37–67, 62.

³³Richard Ellis, *The Dark Side of the Left: Illiberal Egalitarianism in America* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1998), 73.

³⁴Martha Nussbaum emphasizes this aspect of Whitman's thought, arguing that he "attempts to create a democratic counter-cosmos, in which hierarchies of souls are replaced by the democratic body of the United States." See "Democratic Desire: Walt Whitman," in her *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 645–78, 656. I disagree with Nussbaum, however, when she writes that Whitman's poetry aimed to diminish the public's disgust at their own promiscuous embodiment only because it was a "barrier to the full equality and mutual respect of all citizens." Whitman's poetics of citizenship aimed at a transformative political praxis that cannot be reduced to the familiar

enhance Americans' habitual self-regard, but to invigorate the generous, autopoetic potentials already latent in the people themselves. The highly individualized Romantic vision of the poet-legislator—best captured by Percy Bysshe Shelley's rapturous account of poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the World"—attracted Whitman, but he ultimately rejected this vision, along with the lyric poetry associated with it, as didactic, elitist, and antidemocratic.³⁵ Whitman is poorly read as "first, last and nothing else but a lyric poet, self-centered, individualistic, in the tradition of the great individualistic Romantic writers and poets."³⁶ The heroic vision of the poet did appeal to Whitman in its idealism and in the emphasis it placed on the world-making capacity of words. Emerson's essay "The Poet," which Whitman greatly admired, captured this capacity through its invocation of the poet as "the sayer, the namer . . . He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre."³⁷ However, Whitman ultimately resisted this unitary, undemocratic vision of the poet/author/authority; his designation as the paradigmatic democratic poet emerges from his resistance to this familiar Romantic conception.

Whitman's most sustained confrontation with this Romantic vision is found in his writings on Thomas Carlyle. For Whitman, Carlyle's work best exemplified the antidemocratic temptation of modern times, and his response to Carlyle clearly articulates his own contrary vision of the form giving or autopoetic power of the people themselves. Whitman agreed with Carlyle that theirs was a time of crisis and fundamental uncertainty: would it be "enoblement," Carlyle asked, or would it be "death?" Where Carlyle saw the greatest danger, however, Whitman saw promise and opportunity. Carlyle's disdain for the democratic masses, which he characterized as "swarmery" ("the gathering of men in swarms," from the German *Schwarmerei* and associated with the English term "enthusiasm"),³⁸ was dismissed by Whitman as a symptom of dyspepsia or the improper digestion of the spirit of the age.³⁹ Both

formalism of reciprocity or mutual respect, but also cannot be simply opposed to it. Also see Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 117.

³⁵Taken from M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973), 384.

³⁶C. L. R. James, *American Civilization* (New York: Blackwell, 1993), 51.

³⁷Emerson, "The Poet," in *Essays: First and Second Series*, 217–38, 219.

³⁸Thomas Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara: And After?" *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* vol. 7 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894 [1867]), 200–41, 202. For a related discussion of the politics of "enthusiasm," see my "'Besides Our Selves': An Essay on Enthusiastic Politics and Civil Subjectivity," *Public Culture* 17, no. 3: 371–92.

³⁹"One may include among the lessons of his life—even though that stretch'd to amazing length—how behind the tally of genius and morals stands the stomach, and gives a sort of casting vote." Whitman "On the Death of Thomas Carlyle," in *Specimen Days and Collect*, 168–69. 168.

writers were suspicious of quantitative or utilitarian visions of democracy, those which embraced the principle that the "Count of Heads" was "to be the Divine Court of Appeal on every question and interest of mankind."⁴⁰ But Whitman had faith in the ability of the people themselves to resist their statistical reduction to so many "dreams or dots" (*LG*, 9). In "Shooting Niagara"—the essay to which Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* responds—Carlyle warned his "Aristo" readers to avoid the impracticality of literature. He did this in part because his own attempts to unify aesthetics and politics (in *Chartism*, for example) had proven woefully ineffective.⁴¹ No longer clinging to hopes for a heroic "literatus" (Whitman's term), or poet, Carlyle in *Shooting Niagara* longed for a new aristocratic union of title and nature. Carlyle expressed a wish that "the entire population" could "be thoroughly drilled," and called on the throne to provide such a system, thereby taking a stand against the "dirt, disorder, nomadism, disobedience, folly and confusion" of democracy.⁴² Whitman's poetry, in contrast, created a sublime "image-making work" of this very same democratic spectacle.

Whitman understood Carlyle's nostalgic longing for the heroic individual's reappearance as a futile though understandable temptation, which forced him to ask how democracy itself could produce the greatness of character usually associated with aristocratic culture, and not invariably diminish or threaten individual singularity. "My utmost pretension," Whitman wrote in *Specimen Days*, "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" (*SD*, 916). "Democracy," "America," and "the Modern," were, for Whitman, "convertible terms." His invocation of Hegel—implicit here, explicit elsewhere—guided Whitman further away from heroic individualists like Carlyle, not only to an understanding of the movement of ideas and spirit, but also to embracing the insufficiency of the individual and the importance of the constitutive aspects of human relations. Recent appreciations of Whitman's aesthetic individualism have underemphasized this aspect of his thought.⁴³

⁴⁰Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara," 200.

⁴¹For a discussion of Carlyle's attempts to speak for the masses, see John Plotz, "Crowd Power: Chartism, Carlyle, and the Victorian Public Sphere," *Representations* 70 (Spring 2000): 87–114, 90.

⁴²Carlyle, "Shooting Niagara," 235.

⁴³In addition to the Kateb work already cited, see Morton Schoolman's rewarding chapters on Whitman in *Reason and Horror: Critical Theory, Democracy, and Aesthetic Individuality* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 185–250.

In Hegel, Whitman found the insight that truth is not in “any one party, or any one form of government,” but in the “just relations of objects to each other” (*SD*, 920). The struggles between objects—the dialectic—reveal truth, Whitman writes, in the “endless process of Creative thought.” This line of thinking brings Whitman to a question central to his own autopoietic understanding of democracy. “What is the fusing explanation and tie,” Whitman asks, “what relationship between the (radical democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit, &c, on the one side, and the (conservative) Not Me, the whole material objective universe and laws, with what is behind them in time and space, on the other side?” (*SD*, 919) Whitman took the opposition here between his “(radical democratic) Me” and the intransigent “conservative” existence of the material world from his admiring encounter with German idealism. But why is the “Me” characterized by Whitman as “radical democratic” rather than, as we might expect, “free,” for example, or “moral?” If Romantic writers tended to see the poet as the text’s sole originator and author/authority, Whitman works again and again to decenter this relationship. Even the poetic “Me” or “I” is not one for Whitman, but many; it is democratic in its very plurality and in its “nomadism.” As Whitman famously asks in *Leaves*, “Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then . . . I contradict myself;/ I am large . . . I contain multitudes” (*LG*, 87). Kateb has suggested that such moments in Whitman’s work point to an inexhaustible inner reservoir of potentiality, and Kateb convincingly emphasizes the gap between the conscious (one might say representational) limitations of Whitman’s “self” and the depths of his secularized understanding of “soul.” For Kateb, this is the basis of Whitman’s ethics, for “to admit one’s compositeness and ultimate unknowability is to open oneself to a kinship to others which is defined by receptivity and responsiveness to them.”⁴⁴

This abiding sense of inner strangeness that we recognize in others, and which leads us to be receptive of their singularity, is crucial to Kateb’s identification of an Emersonian perfectionist ideal in Whitman’s work. But for Whitman the inner strangeness his “(radical democratic) Me” encounters results not from the primary ineffability of solitude, but from the sublime potentialities of relational democratic life itself. The inexhaustible resources of potentiality that Kateb finds in Whitman’s “democratic personality” do not lie first in the inner strangeness that then opens to the receptivity of another; instead, this inner strangeness or uncanniness is better understood as a product of democratic encounter, as an effect of the multivoiced constitution of the democratic self. Whitman’s account of the interconnection between democratic politics and democratic language richly explores this sublime effect of democracy (it production of a multitudinous democratic self), and Whitman hopes to further enact this effect by ventriloquizing the myriad and changing voices that constitutes the *vox populi*. Arguably, the very attempt to capture poetically the sublimely polyphonic voice of the people—to serve as an aesthetic

⁴⁴Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 252.

mediator for the people themselves—turns Whitman against lyric poetry and drives his poetic experimentalism.⁴⁵

On the topic of polyvocality and the multitudinous self, Whitman has a striking affinity with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who is similarly concerned with the socially embedded forms of speech that occupy different and overlapping regions of a given language. Bakhtin calls this complex social background of meaningful speech production “heteroglossia.” For Whitman, a key distinction of the *American* language, which emerges from and helps (re)enact American democracy, was precisely such luxuriant proliferation of speech idioms. Whitman writes that

the immense diversity of race, temperament, character—the copious stream of humanity constantly flowing hither—must reappear in free rich growths of speech The opulence of race-elements is in the theory of America. Land of the Ensemble, to her consenting currents flow, and the ethnology of the States draws the grand outline of that hospitality and reception that must mark the new politics, sociology, literature, and religion. (*N*, 1661)

The “theory of America,” from which Whitman hopes to draw the orienting ethos of “hospitality” and “reception,” emerges from its “immense diversity of race, temperament, character” and the “free rich growths of speech” that emanate from this diversity. Whitman’s emphasis here is on a popular voice that always exceeds itself, that can never be coordinated into a final articulated unity or expression, and that is invariably experimental. “I consider *Leaves of Grass* and its theory,” Whitman wrote in “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” “to be experimental as, in the deepest sense, I consider our American republic itself to be” (*P*, 657). What Whitman claims in passages like this, he formally enacts in the bold poetic experimentalism of *Leaves*, a text which, according to one critic, effectively “shunned all familiar marks of poetry of the time.”⁴⁶ Whitman’s innovations in poetic form are related to his attempts to render the sublime cacophony of democratic speech poetically. According to Allen Grossman, Whitman abandoned “poetic language” in favor of a “conjunctive principle” manifest in the “sequence of end-stopped, nonequivalent, but equipollent lines” that characterize *Leaves*’ abandonment of a “centralizing hypotactic grammar.” This “grammar” is replaced in Whitman’s poetry by what Grossman characterizes as “an unprecedented trope of inclusion.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵By asserting the close interconnection between Whitman’s radically democratic politics and his formal poetic innovations, I depart from critics who have attempted to isolate the one from the other. For a good discussion of this tendency in the critical literature, see Peter J. Bellis, “Against Representation: The 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*,” *Centennial Review* 43, no. 1 (Winter 1999), 71–94.

⁴⁶Kenneth M. Price, *Whitman and Tradition: The Poet in His Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 53.

⁴⁷Grossman, “Poetics of Union,” 193–95.

Whitman believed that the received traditions of European lyric poetry sought to avoid precisely this inclusive heteroglossic dimension of language. Like Bakhtin, Whitman believed that the lyrical poetic form evinced an undemocratically unitary theory of the subject as expressed by speech. To combat this conception of self, Whitman initiated his radically innovative “democratic” changes within poetic discourse and form. (Bakhtin famously gave up on studying “discourse in poetry” altogether and turned instead to the novel.) For both writers, an implicit and faulty understanding of the relationship between language and the self stood behind lyric poetry’s aspirations and its attempt to cleanse language of heteroglot associations. It was not the poetry, in other words, but the assumptions about subjectivity behind the poetry that both writers found politically suspect. As Bakhtin writes,

In poetic genres, artistic consciousness—understood as a unity of all the author’s semantic and expressive intentions—fully realizes itself within its own language; in them alone is such consciousness fully immanent, expressing itself in it directly and without mediation, without conditions and without distance. The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were, “without quotation marks”), that is as a pure and direct expression of his own intention.⁴⁸

Like Bakhtin, Whitman was acutely aware that speakers never come to language “without quotation marks,” that in using language they acknowledge indebtedness to others and that one cannot assume a “complete single-personed hegemony over [one’s]own language.”⁴⁹ Neither postulated “a simple and unmediated relationship of the speaker to his unitary and singular ‘own’ language.”⁵⁰ Poetic language as conceptualized in the lyric mode had posited the individual as the fount of meaning, where Whitman and Bakhtin instead urged that the individual be grasped as an effect of the heteroglot currents of language itself.⁵¹ As we saw above, this means the “inner strangeness” one might encounter when “accounting with the unutterable” comes from an encounter with one or many internal others. “A person has no interior sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another.”⁵² This description resonates with Whitman’s “(radical democratic) Me,” irreducibly populated with a vast multitude of competing voices, or

⁴⁸Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422, 285.

⁴⁹Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 297.

⁵⁰Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 269.

⁵¹Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 288.

⁵²Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 287.

as Whitman noted in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," "A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me" (LG, 392).

This constitutively relational understanding of the self is what the influential interpretations of Whitman as a distinct but grateful Emersonian tend to neglect.⁵³ Kateb, for example, finds Whitman's frequent references to "the love of comrades" and, above all, to "adhesiveness" particularly discomfiting, and he rightly notes the ugly nativism that sometimes marks Whitman's work (particularly the writings on the Civil War). Kateb worries that Whitman's account of adhesiveness "threatens to suffocate the very individualism of personality which Whitman is trying to promote" with "an all-enfolding merger."⁵⁴ Thus, for Kateb "Whitman's final lesson is solitude, not the adventures of human connectedness."⁵⁵ He asks us to choose between two Whitmans: the aesthetic individualist or the communitarian nationalist. The radical democratic Whitman shows this to be a false choice.

It is important to note that when Whitman invokes "adhesiveness" and the "love of comrades," he distinguishes them from isolating and mediating phenomenon. There is "individualism, which isolates," but also "another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties, and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all" (DV, 973). Whitman asserts his hope that his work dedicated to "ma femme" democracy will be able to "make divine magnetic lands/ With the love of comrades,/ With the life-long love of comrades" (LG, 272). "Adhesiveness" and "magnetism," odd terms to contemporary ears, were associated in antebellum America with the popular discourses of phrenology and mesmerism. Both discourses asserted that what bound individuals was infrasensible communication rather than common cognitive or representational commitments. Adhesiveness, Whitman reminds readers, cannot be found in "sounded and resounded words, chattering words, echoes, dead words" (LG, 274). For Whitman the importance of this infrasensible connection was crucial in a time when "the terrible doubt of appearances" became a cultural obsession and familiar bonds of trust and solidarity seemed threatened by both the growth of impersonal market forces and a politics of distance and dissimulation, it comprised the "latent intuitional sense" that *Leaves* attempted to tap.

Whitman hoped his work could serve as a response to the political and epistemological crisis of looming civil war insofar as it could promote the

⁵³Kateb has little to say about language's role in constituting the self in Whitman's work, which I will turn to again below. Stephen White perceptively explains Kateb's general avoidance of such in *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 35. Jay Grossman offers a persuasive account of the differences between Emerson and Whitman in his *Reconstituting the American Renaissance: Emerson, Whitman, and the Politics of Representation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵⁴Kateb, *Inner Ocean*, 259.

⁵⁵Kateb, *Inner Ocean*, 266.

magnetic, or electric, flows of shared sentiment and affirmation between people (but, again, without reducing people to a common mind or substance). In "Calamus," Whitman responds to the "terrible doubt of appearances" in this way:

I cannot answer the question of appearances or that of
 Identity beyond the grave,
 But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,
 He ahold of my hand has completely satisfied me. (LG, 274–75)

In this "love of man for his comrade," this "attraction of friend to friend," Whitman locates "the base of all metaphysics." If the specter of radical doubt, the impulse of skepticism, or its political corollary in corrosive mistrust cannot be philosophically refuted with confidence, Whitman hoped it might at least be tempered with comradely affection. Whitman's response to skepticism is not a renewed quest for certitude. Instead, it is found in the ordinary gesture of holding a hand; skepticism is here assuaged by copresence. Clearly, Whitman wanted his poetry itself to become something like that reassuring hand. This response to skepticism resides in the relations between people, in their being-*in-common* rather than being common.⁵⁶ Whitman is, therefore, misread as a theorist of socialization, or as simply offering his poetry as a vehicle of social cohesion.⁵⁷ Mere social unification or national identification is foreign to Whitman's invocation of the inexhaustible plenitude of democratic life, to the people's "measureless wealth of power and capacity, their vast artistic contrasts of lights and shades," and to his aesthetic revaluation of American democracy's vulgar asymmetries and promiscuous inconsistencies into the register of the unrepresentable sublime. The "sublimest part of political history," Whitman wrote, "is currently issuing from the American people" (DV, 978).

III

Whitman's claim in *Leaves* that "[t]he Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the most poetical nature" and that "the United States are essentially the greatest poem" (LG, 5) would have sounded perverse in the mid-nineteenth century. Tocqueville's remarks, two decades earlier in *Democracy in America*, that America "pays less attention to literature than any other civilized country," or that only the writing of journalists could be described as "truly American," were characteristic of the European evaluation. It was the predominant image to which nineteenth-century American literature's declaration of cultural independence

⁵⁶See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. P. Connor, L. Garbus, M. Holland, S. Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 57–58.

⁵⁷This argument is made by Samuel H. Beer. In "Liberty and Union: Walt Whitman's Idea of the Nation," *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (August 1984): 361–86.

responded.⁵⁸ Tocqueville expressed a common view when he wrote that “Aristocracy, by keeping society fixed, favors the stability and endurance of positive religions as well as political institutions . . . [and that] in this respect aristocracy favors poetry.”⁵⁹ In a phrase that could have been Whitman’s own, however, Tocqueville also gestured to new literary possibilities in democracy; “[D]emocracy shuts the past to poetry,” Tocqueville wrote, “but opens the future.”⁶⁰

Whitman clearly identified American poetry with the future, but he significantly expanded his conception of the poetic to encompass individual and collective actions or performances. It was not simply that the American people provided rich material for poetry; they *were* poetry. Whitman addressed his work to the autopoietic nature of the people themselves. In America, Whitman writes, “the performance, disdaining the trivial, unapproach’d in the tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings, and the push of its perspective, spreads with crampless and flowing breadth, and showers its prolific and splendid extravagance” (*LG*, 5). Americans’ “sublime” and “poetic” nature is related to this audacious collective performance, to democracy’s “crampless and flowing breadth,” which Whitman distinguishes from the solidity and “fossilism” of aristocratic political and literary institutions.⁶¹ If other states in other times “indicate themselves in their deputies”—in their representatives—the “genius” of Whitman’s America is “not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors, or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspaper inventors—but always most in the common people” (*LG*, 5). The “poetical nature” of “the common people” corresponds to what Whitman describes as their capacity for “formative action,” (*DV*, 993) action self-generated and transformative of the “fossilism” of received institutions. This capacity Whitman associates with the people generally, but, as he reminds his readers, “the people have only emerged in America” (*P*, 1087).

Like many of his contemporaries, Whitman was captivated by the idea that human beings made their own history, while also being products of that history. Marx’s famous observation in the third of his “Theses on Feuerbach”—“men are products of their circumstances and changed

⁵⁸See Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America, 1837–1861* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

⁵⁹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. G. Lawrence (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 483.

⁶⁰Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 485.

⁶¹In an insightful aphorism from *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche similarly describes “really democratic” ages as those where individuals replace faith in fixed social hierarchies with faith in their own performative capacities: “everybody experiments with himself, improvises, makes new experiments, enjoys his experiments; and all nature ceases and becomes art.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 303.

upbringing," but also the very force required to "change circumstances"⁶²—resonates at several points in Whitman's work. While it is overstated to suggest that Whitman's democratic citizens "are free to act and create without historical restriction,"⁶³ it is true that Whitman primarily envisions the people as a creative, autopoietic power. Democracy, Whitman suggests, justifies itself through the works it creates.

For Whitman language itself—"greater than buildings or ships or religions or paintings or music" (*LG*, 144)—was a crucial marker of the radical autopoietic power of the common people. Whitman understands language as an incarnation of "man's unconscious passionate creative energy," born of "passionate yearning" (*N*, 1626–28). For Whitman, language is not born of description or definition, or of an innate desire to know and take control of the world, but rather of a creative desire. This desire is, moreover, democratic, born of a kind of sublime democratic spontaneity. "Language," Whitman writes, "is not an abstract construction of the learn'd, or of dictionary makers, but it is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has bases broad and low, close to the ground. Its final decisions are made by the masses" (*P*, 1190). The democracy of language, its origin in the creative potentiality of the people, in the low and the ordinary, is one of the principal reasons that Whitman placed so much importance on slang. "Profoundly consider'd," Whitman wrote, slang "is the lawless germinal element, below all words and sentences, and behind all poetry" (*P*, 1189). Like his hero Jefferson, Whitman was a "friend of Neology," and like Tocqueville, Whitman believed that "the continual restlessness of democracy" was related to "endless changes of language."⁶⁴ The spontaneous creation and re-creation of language seems to Whitman most unhindered in a democracy, and it is clearly an important part of what makes the vox populi so "poetic" for him. It also traces the kind of democratic, as opposed to didactic or legislative, relationship Whitman hoped to establish with his public. While Whitman did not aim simply to impose a democratic vision on his public, to assume the position of the sovereign-poet-legislator, he did work to elicit poetically the very democratic public that seemingly spoke through him. He sought to elicit an audience that could hear their own democratic voice in the songs of their poet.

Unlike some of his closest contemporaries (Michael Gilmore has singled out Hawthorne and Emerson), Whitman did not fear abandoning his words to the interpretive flux of a democratic public; he did not seek final control over his words and their significations.⁶⁵ The message of the great poets

⁶²Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 143–45, 144.

⁶³Goldhammer, "Democracy's Janus-Faced Poet," 41.

⁶⁴Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 478–82.

⁶⁵Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

“to each man and woman” was “come to us on equal terms,” because “what we enclose you enclose. What we enjoy, you may enjoy” (LG, 15). “Song of Myself” famously begins with the seeming egoism of “I celebrate myself,/ and what I assume you shall assume.” But Whitman continues: “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (LG, 27). In this assertion of common belonging, but not of a common substance—Kateb describes it as the recognition of common potentiality—a dialogical relationship and an agonistic, if not antagonistic, interaction ensue. Whitman does not transmit the information of his text into a passive mind—“we must not be sacks and stomachs,” as Emerson wrote⁶⁶—nor does he impose upon it a prophetic vision. Instead, Whitman envisions the author and the reader struggling over the meanings conveyed.

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand
 ... nor look through the eyes of the dead
 ... nor feed on the specters in books,
 You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take
 Things from me,
 You shall learn to listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. (LG, 28)

Just as the institutions of democratic contest provide arenas for forming robust individuality, so does literature (albeit only of a certain kind) provoke the reader’s own democratic and poetic potential. As already argued, the circulation of Whitman’s poetry aimed to affect readers on multiple levels of sensibility and disposition—so that they appreciate the democracy from which they spring as no longer disfigured but sublime—but never passively. Whitman envisions this process as a physical contest, mentioning the “gymnasiums” of “freedom’s athletes” in confronting these texts and then describing practices of critical reading itself as a “gymnast’s struggle.” “The reader,” Whitman writes, “is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay—the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or framework” (DV, 1016–17). The dialogic and physically transformative struggle to make a language one’s own, to interact with the affective and representational hints and clues of a text, serves Whitman in *Democratic Vistas* as both an analogy and as a practice of political education.

As a poet engaging with, and situated within, this surging poetic and democratic power of the people, Whitman does not attempt a usurpation of popular voice, nor does he simply play the role of ventriloquist. Rather than speaking for the people, Whitman aims to speak to and among them: “A call in the midst of the crowd,/ My own voice, orotund sweeping and final” (LG, 75). He notes his “dejection and amazement” that “few or none” have yet “really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work

⁶⁶Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8.

for them, or absorbed the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies which are theirs—and which, thus, in highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated, unexpressed" (*DV*, 978). Whitman notes that "literature, strictly speaking, has never recognized the people" (*DV*, 968). His pursuit of a poetic "image-making work" aimed to provide democracy with multiple images for imitation and adaptation—images taken from the sublime resources of the people themselves. The people in "their measureless wealth of latent power and capacity, their vast, artistic contrast of lights and shades" provide Whitman with his material. He is not imposing it upon them (heteronomically), but performing an aesthetic translation of what is already immanent to their democratic practices. "He strangely transmutes them,/ They are not vile any more . . . they hardly know themselves, they are so grown" (*LG*, 131). "The people are ungrammatical" and "untidy," but Whitman's work does not aim to clean them up or subject them to the laws of grammar (or codified rules of justice). Unlike Carlyle, for example, who aimed to provide a voice for the mute force of Chartism's popular crowds, Whitman's invocation of the people speaks from and among them. Like William Hazlitt—who opens his essay "What is the People?" with the quick response "And who are you to ask that question?"⁶⁷—Whitman refuses the division between himself and the people. As Larzer Ziff perceptively notes, Whitman makes the "democratic audience the author of the poems of its poet."⁶⁸ In this paradoxical claim to provide an aesthetic translation of the people's independent, but not self-identical, and sublime voice, the people are figured at once as the inexhaustible inspiration and the effect of poetic mediation. Whitman's work reveals the vox populi not to be a predetermined unity, or a national expression, but instead a provisional effect or claim.⁶⁹

If Whitman's project was not merely to give aesthetic expression to the inarticulate yet preexisting sovereign voice of the people, neither was it simply to represent the people accurately. Poetry for Whitman should not aim merely to represent accurately an independent reality, but to enact a new reality. Again,

⁶⁷Hazlitt, "What is the People?" in *Selected Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 2–28, 3.

⁶⁸Larzer Ziff, "Whitman and the Crowd," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (June 1984): 579–91, 586.

⁶⁹In this, Whitman's understanding of the people corresponds to work in contemporary democratic theory that emphasizes the people as an effect of political or rhetorical claims made in their name. Ernesto Laclau's recent emphasis on "the people" as catachresis is particularly illuminating in this regard, as is F. R. Ankersmit's insistence on the (dis)figuration entailed by any form of popular political representation. See Ernesto Laclau, "The 'People' and the Discursive Production of Emptiness," in *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 67–128; F. R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

there are passages that seem to conflict with this conclusion, as when Whitman writes in *Leaves* that the poet “swears to his art, I will not be meddling What I tell I tell for precisely what it is What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (*LG*, 14). Whitman claims in *Leaves* that “everything is literally photographed. Nothing is poeticized” (*N*, 1524). Such passages have led some to characterize Whitman as an “observer and reporter,” even an empirical social scientist.⁷⁰ Whitman did try to capture (and identify with) the vast ensemble of American democracy in his open-ended lists and through his commitment to literature’s under-represented. (“Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion, A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,/ Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest,” *LG*, 204.) However, Whitman ultimately aspired to more than the mimetic realism of the photographic model; his resistance to “poeticizing” should not be confused with resistance to aesthetic translation *tout court*. In the categories of Romantic poetic representation famously described by M. H. Abrams, Whitman resisted both the mirror and the lamp.⁷¹ Always in touch with his era’s broader aesthetic movements, Whitman initially felt a deep affinity with the quest for mimetic realism that characterized much of antebellum painting, but like these painters he also longed for an ineffable truth that could not be captured by pursuing the ideal of the daguerreotype. According to David Reynolds, Whitman ultimately reviled this school’s social complacency and its fetishization of the actual.⁷² Whitman’s vivid portrayals of “interminable swarms of alert, turbulent, good-natured [and not so good-natured], independent citizens” are well known (*DV*, 978), but he also warns poets not to be captivated by the “study of the picture of things” (*N*, 1569). He urged readers to “confront the growing excess and arrogance of realism” (*DV*, 1009). This poetic capacity forms another important link between aesthetics and politics. If Whitman posits a surging creativity as central to his understanding of democracy and embraces the vitality of the people over formal political institutions and law, that people is for Whitman forever without unified will or subjectivity. The people invoked by Whitman do not aim at the realization of a common essence or at the construction of such an essence, but are only realized through their continual political reinvention out of a collective reservoir of sublime potentiality.

The people’s refusal of final legibility, their resistance to serving as an ordinary and articulate principle, is due largely to what Whitman considers

⁷⁰Samuel Beers emphasizes this aspect of Whitman’s work so as to take him “seriously as a social scientist.” See Beers, “Liberty and Union,” 363.

⁷¹M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁷²Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, 286.

their constitutive futurity, the suppression of the existent that Whitman associates with “the growing excess and arrogance of realism” in the America of his time (*DV*, 1009). This futurity underlies the people’s worldly reality itself, their “main significance” (which Whitman opposed to the paradoxical “abstraction” of “realism”):

I count with such absolute certainty on the great future of the United States—different from, though founded on, the past—that I have always invoked that future, and surrounded myself with it, before or while singing my songs. (As ever, all tends to followings—America, too, is a prophecy. What, even of the best and most successful, would be justified by itself alone? By the present, or the material ostent alone? Of men or States, few realize how much they live in the future. That, rising like pinnacles, gives its main significance to all You and I are doing today.) (*P*, 1035)

This is quite a remarkable parenthetical aside. The future gives significance to the present in that it guides and orients contemporary action, inhabiting that action and giving it meaning. Ernst Bloch, in his work on *The Principle of Hope*, called this phenomenon “the Not-Yet-Conscious,” which “fulfills the meaning of all men and the horizon of all being.”⁷³ In drawing readers’ attention to how the present is saturated with not only the past, but the future, how contemporary actors inhabit a gap between them, Whitman claimed to be even more “realistic” than narrow purveyors of “realism.” Whitman believed that democracy itself engenders this experience in its citizens, a sense, to paraphrase Paine, that we have it in our power to begin the world anew. Whitman hoped to further enhance this sense of democratic capacity in his work, resisting the countervailing tendency to treat democratic life as somehow finished and always already accomplished.

Conclusion

While these concerns may seem a far remove from the prevailing concerns of contemporary democratic theory, some illuminating continuities remain, which a brief concluding comparison with John Rawls’s familiar theory of reflective equilibrium can reveal. Rawls’s influential effort to construct a moral viewpoint from which questions of right can be impartially adjudicated builds on the moral orientations implicit in an existing liberal society’s practices. While the later Rawls conceded the historicity of these practices, he, nonetheless, insisted on the existence of articulate, formal principles that could be derived from the practical orientations, habits, and dispositions of the “background culture.”⁷⁴ The Rawlsian democratic theorist must construct

⁷³Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. N. Plaice, S. Plaice, and P. Knight. 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), vol. 1, 5–6.

⁷⁴John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1993), 14.

from these practices a coherent set of implied theoretical principles that can then orient the polity on questions of “basic justice.” While critics have sometimes accused Rawls of offering “gifts to the demos” (Sheldon Wolin), or of illegitimately circumscribing citizens’ ability to “reignite the radical democratic embers of the original position in the civic life of their society” (Jürgen Habermas), one of his central claims is that the constructed principles of justice are implicit within the society’s practices, and, therefore, do not violate the people’s legislative autonomy or capacity for democratic self-determination.⁷⁵ Rawls’s constructivist project translates ethical practice into moral principle. “Reflective equilibrium” is then the process by which a polity reflectively tests itself against its underlying principles of justice, thus becoming more in line with these principles, and, therefore, more just (although Rawls importantly sees this as an ongoing, open-ended process).⁷⁶ The reformative power of this democratic theory resides in its ability to compel (or, more generously, inspire) the polity to affirm and then act in accordance with its own implicit principles of justice.

Whitman imagined his poetry to operate in a remarkably analogous way, an analogy that may be based in his own familiarity with German Idealism. For Whitman, however, poetry’s reformative power resided in the aesthetic transformation of a polity confronted with its own practices poetically rendered, rather than the moral transformation of a society confronted with the principles of justice implicit to its ethical practice. Whitman translates quotidian, democratic practices into poetry, offers a poetic transcription of the polyvocality of the vox populi, thereby offering the body politic an aesthetically transformed depiction of itself as sublime potentiality, which further enhances its latent autopoetic power. Whitman’s aesthetic re-presentation of the vox populi does not articulate a law to be obeyed as much as a capacity to be enacted; the people’s capacity for regeneration itself becomes the affective source of their political bond. Whitman’s poetry urges democratic citizens to take pleasure in the sublimity of their quotidian democratic life, to appreciate their unrefined and unfinished state—their autopoetic and “formative power”—rather than feeling paralyzing “gaggery and guilt.” In one of the anonymous reviews Whitman wrote of *Leaves*, he suggested that through that work “the interior American republic shall also be declared free and independent” (R, 8). The “proof” of the poet’s relation to the people he sings is not through the dynamics of recognition but “that the country *absorbs* him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (LG, 26; my emphasis), and the “touch” of the poet tells only in “action”

⁷⁵Sheldon Wolin, “The Liberal/Democratic Divide: On Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*,” *Political Theory* (February, 1996): 97–119; Jürgen Habermas, “Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls’ *Political Liberalism*,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 3: 109–31.

⁷⁶John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 97.

(*LG*, 22), in the further enactment of an as yet unfulfilled democratic history. While some have recently turned to Whitman to revitalize a sense of national pride or American mission,⁷⁷ he might be more productively invoked for his aesthetic understanding of democratic politics and for his provocation that we self-proclaimed democrats do not yet know what it is we have inherited.

⁷⁷Most notably, Richard Rorty, "American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey," in *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3–38.