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The Two Worlds of Whitman ...

... STEVEN MITCHELL

This essay was the prize-winning effort in the recent Walt Whitman Essay Contest sponsored by the English Dept. It is printed here in its entirety.

The first world of Walt Whitman, the world into which came the Leaves of Grass, was composed of many influences, old and new. In order to understand their product, we can briefly examine these influences.

The impact of Calvin on the United States was indirect, yet the stronger for this. Applied Calvinistic thought in the new world resulted in a paradoxical intolerance of other faiths, an over-concern with the conduct of others, and a rigid ethical code. With the approach of the mid-19th century, America began to throw off the constraining Puritan ethics. Puritanism remained an important factor, however, well into the time of Whitman. As a Bohemian young editor, Whitman could scarcely be called a rebel in the Calvinist ranks. Rather, he looked in on the closed circle with the true detachment of the young intellectual. His objections to Calvinism did not stem from questions of dogma; they rose from the fact that strict adherence to this faith must result in an inhibited, hence incomplete, man. To Whitman, life was something to be taken in its totality, nothing could properly be rejected. The meaner aspects of life, the rude people who gave no evidence of being among the Elect, all must be accepted. Whitman, like George Fox, saw in every man a great integrity and a yet greater potential. Think of Whitman then as rejecting Calvinistic thought because of its arbitrary division of mankind, and because its code prevented the full enjoyment of life as he visualized that enjoyment.

Walt Whitman began his formative period during the Jacksonian Era; and, as could be expected, he was a political writer in his first literary years. One might picture him as a callow person, a young man with ability who merely followed the prevalent trends. Jackson had
liberalized American democracy to a revolutionary degree; his contention that any man was qualified to hold any political office appealed to Walt Whitman. Another effect of Jackson on America was something which might be called "Jacksonian Anarchy": That is to say, the liberalization of democracy by an extreme individual emphasis. It was this effect that marked the formulation of Whitman's concept of democracy. Departing from the Jacksonian line, Whitman struck upon the idea that a democracy could not be composed of a group of anarchistic individuals; there must be a common love, a type of spiritual union that would flow across individual lines. By this extension of Jacksonian thought, Whitman tried to retain individual integrity while transcending the whole of the people with some sort of a common spiritual bondage.

Another influence in this first World of Whitman was the last faint glimmer of the French Enlightenment. The Enlightenment enriched, even more, Walt Whitman's ideas on democracy and the real brotherhood of all men. The movement had as its cornerstone a boundless belief in the inherent perfectability of man, its passwords were liberty, equality, and fraternity. America, at the time of its struggle for independence, was well steeped in Enlightened political views. In application under such representative democrats as Jefferson and Jackson, there was a great deal of emphasis on liberty and equality and but little on fraternity. Unlike the Philosophes, Whitman did not rely on the criterion of reason in forming his ideas; his approach to democracy was an emotional one. In replacing the intellectual attitude with the emotional, he found, as he did in Jacksonian thought, the absence of a real brotherhood or common, spiritual community. His re-affirmation of the third member of the golden trio added to his growing concept of democracy; with fraternity given its just place, his views began to assume a wholeness. Whitman now caught a glimpse of the Utopia that so intrigued the Philosophes. The clarity of his democratic concepts had grown with each succeeding influence; he now seemed to realize the potential of democracy in his own dream of the perfect state.

As Walt Whitman looked about him, he saw the faint beginnings of this new democracy. They lacked only the vigor that had become an integral part of his democratic formulations. The virile picture of strong men and women moving west in search of a new life supplied this vigor. The westward movement leveled politically and socially; it emphasized strength and courage and comradeship. Whitman's look westward seemed to be the catalyst that set him into artistic
ferment. His ideas on democracy had not been unified; they lacked the final ingredient of a living physical proof. He saw, in the young, seminal frontier, the affirmation of his views.

Whitman’s task, the great measure of his poetic existence, now took shape. This task was one of humanizing American democracy. Drawing upon his fertile background, Whitman was able to visualize his own expanding views; the individualism of Jefferson and Jackson must be replaced by some sort of spiritual love-union in which men might be brothers. Men were to blend themselves into this union, not by the keen intellectual processes of the Enlightenment, but by some emotional, heart-felt exercise.

In feeling his way through the intellectual atmosphere of the Nineteenth Century in search of his role as the poet of democracy, Whitman shared the democratic faith common to his time. He felt, however, that this faith required some new means of expression; his plunge into free verse and his new, colorful language are best seen in this light. He felt the need, as did Emerson, for an immediacy in poetry, to “chant our own times”. In Walt Whitman’s total acceptance of life lay the perfect vehicle for the sought-for immediacy. Through the lyrical translation of his own impression, he glorifies fur-trappers, boatmen, laborers, and farmers. These are really projections of his own ego, and Walt Whitman is thus placed in the paradoxical position of being so individual as to be universal. He attempts to understand himself (hence all men) by encompassing the whole of objective and general existence in his own subjective and individual experience. So in the early Leaves of Grass, we see not real individuals sung and celebrated, but rather Whitman’s computation of the democratic average.

Whitman’s computation came to life with the Civil War. Whereas before his songs of exuberant democracy had been really of himself, he now saw men—the long lines of gray and blue. The Civil War marked a turning point in Walt Whitman; he no longer sang of Whitman, American democrat, but of faith in the Idea of democracy itself. The sight of men torn by horror and sickness, pain and fear caused him to re-evaluate and to examine the Idea that provoked the entrance into the war. The result, as seen in “Drum Taps”, is an affirmation of the spirit and ideal of democracy in America. Thus the immediate result of the War was a sort of maturation, a growing up of the democratic idea which characterizes the rest of Whitman’s work. If the Civil War can be set down as the maturation point in the career of Walt Whitman, it must also mark the beginning of a conflict.
The exuberant and often unscrupulous financial speculation following the Civil War marked the beginning of the second World of Whitman. The formulation of Whitman’s poetic program had taken many years. Political interests, abolition, the many interests of his early period were abandoned as his scope and purpose broadened. The westward movement had given life to his dream, and the Civil War gave it a purpose that set the pattern for his later work. In the second World of Whitman, the glittering decades following the War were of primary importance. The sensitive, impressionistic mind of Whitman, so newly filled with his finally resolved democratic concepts, was nearly overhelmed with the wave of materialism in the Gilded Age. Railroads and oil, canals and land, everyone wanted his portion and more. The savage question of Reconstruction raged through the land. “Acrid the temper of the parties, vital the pending questions.” The Fiskes, the Goulds, and the Black Fridays insulted his very soul. The treatment of the South as a conquered land was a terrible blow to a spirit fed on a belief in progress and brotherly love. A new individualism, “continually enlarging”, threatened to put aside the general love Whitman envisioned. This same individualism boded a return to the Jacksonian anarchism he had so carefully avoided. Here then are the factors that contributed to the disillusionment of Walt Whitman. He had envisioned the Civil War as the force that would transcend the old individual and sectional interest; the Union was to have been its symbol. The result of the war, much to Whitman’s pain and disgust, was not the solution of America’s problems but the onset of a whole new band of difficulties. Because of the bitter experience of the war and its aftermath, he could not be optimistic about the immediate solution of the new difficulties. The young, flourishing democratic tree described in the early Leaves of Grass was now ivied with hypocrisy and greed.

The carefully constructed democratic dream now had to be looked at anew; most apparent to Walt Whitman was the abysmal failure of America in the present democratic adventure. His confidence shattered by the Black Fridays of the Gilded Age, Whitman was now struck with the problem that had bothered the deeper thinkers of the Enlightenment; could an inexperienced people be given, en masse, a freedom that could destroy them? Could a people placed in a democratic situation refrain from the excesses manifest in the post-war years? A re-appraisal of the old task and the formulation of a new were Whitman’s answers to these questions. As his first realization of democracy’s potential, the early Leaves of Grass, bubbled with a
bright joie de vivre; “Drum Taps,” reflecting a mature faith in the Idea of democracy, flowed in a more stately fashion. His first task, humanizing American democracy, was accomplished by the lyric portrayal of his own sense impressions. This broadened in scope as he sensed a deeper feeling of togetherness during the war. His new task was of a dual nature; he realistically portrayed America’s democratic failures, and prophetically announced his hopes for the future. It was a caustic and embittered Whitman who told of the sad state of America in the post-war era.

“Oh the President with pale face asking secretly to himself, What will the people say at last?
Of the frivolous Judge—of the corrupt Congressman, Governor, Mayor—of such as these standing helpless and exposed,
Of the mumbling and screaming priest, (soon, soon deserted,) America had failed in the present, but Walt Whitman could not give up his dream. Moving away from the sense of immediacy in the first editions of Leaves of Grass, he projected his vision far ahead in time. In 1876, Whitman said “—that the fruition of democracy on aught like a grand scale resides altogether in the future”. He attempted to retain the older ideals, but realized that their time was not at hand. The Heavenly City of the Enlightenment could still be seen, it was only made smaller by distance. Toward the end of his career, Whitman seemed to wonder even about his long defended ideals. In 1888, at a dinner table conversation he said “I seem to be reaching for a new politics—for a new economy. —I don’t quite know what, but for something.”

In attempting to analyze Walt Whitman’s projected democracy, one is impressed with the terrible price these projections must have cost him. He was forced to renounce the democracy of his own time, the same democracy he had sung so loudly in the early Leaves. At the same time, the Idea had grown too large to be abandoned—it must simply be put off until another day far in the future.

“Oh broken resolutions, you racking angers, you smother’d ennuis!
Ah think not you finally triumph, my real self has yet to come forth,
It shall yet march forth o’ermastering, ’till all lies beneath me.
It shall yet stand up the soldier of ultimate victory.”
Walt Whitman considered much the same problem as did Dostoyev-
sky in his story of the Grand Inquisitor. Whitman witnessed the excesses of democracy and concluded that the people were not ready for real freedom. Dostoyevsky maintained that they actually did not want freedom. People, he said, were willing to trade liberty for security through domination. Whitman faced this problem by saying the fulfillment of democracy should not be confined to the few present years. The prophetic tenor of the later editions of *Leaves of Grass* might be viewed, not as the hope of a poet for future generations, but as the only possible answer a man of Whitman's temperament could have had for the failure of his own time. In support of this idea, consider that each phase of Whitman's work was “right” for the time. The first exuberant phase rose out of the soul of a poet newly convinced that in the common man lay the building blocks for an ideal democracy. He sings of himself here because he feels he is every man. Before the Civil War, Whitman had represented the multitudes through his extreme consciousness of self. Beginning with “Drum Taps”, he saw with clarity the immense tangle of this human multitude. After a transitional reaction of honest disappointment at the post bellum excesses, Whitman arrived at a sober appreciation of the relentless problems of democracy. The hasty rebel had come safely through the collapse of his first World into a second. Whitman's second World demanded of him a revolutionary's strength to keep faith in what he now recognized would have to be an evolutionary triumph for his democratic convictions.