WHITMAN'S «DEVELOPMENTAL VISTAS»

When Walt Whitman began writing *Democratic Vistas* in 1867 the country recently had fought a Civil War as it recently has fought a war in Vietman. The Civil War was followed by the scandals of the Grant Administration and the business rapacity of the Gilded Age. We have had Watergate, intelligence, and milk pricing scandals, among others. Like Vietnam, fought ostensibly to protect democracy, the Civil War had been fought in the name of a principle, the equality of all men. Like democracy itself after Vietnam, the principle of equality began to come under question in the late 1860’s. The serfs were freed in Russia in 1861, the American slaves in 1863, and in the year 1867 the English Reform bill extended the vote. The world was being democratized and, as after the Supreme Court decisions and Civil Rights legislation of the 1950s and 1960s, men had gone into the streets to enforce their new rights and to demand others. To some it began to look as if the process of democratization, as it was called, had gone too far.

In England two works appeared on the question: Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*, and Thomas Carlyle’s *Shooting Niagara, And After?* When Arnold’s book appeared in the form of magazine articles in the course of 1867 it was titled «Culture and Authority», with reference to the authority of the state to control disorderly public demonstrations. Although Arnold feared the power of the crowd he offered a moderated opposition to it. Accepting the democratic movement as inevitable he proposed only to modify its tone. He called for «sweetness and light»: that was, high principles and high culture to preserve civilization. Carlyle’s title – his work was a pamphlet – referred to the world’s being swept over a Niagara Falls of democratic reforms and suggested that the result was going to be a crash at the bottom. Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* began as a magazine article titled «Democracy». It was written as a response to *Shooting Niagara*, which had been
widely reprinted in American newspapers. A few months later Whitman broadened his defense of democracy in an essay called «Personalism». Then, when he put together and added to his articles to make Democratic Vistas in 1871 he deleted the passages in which he denounced Carlyle’s «ravings». Carlyle’s pamphlet was not only an attack on reform and democracy. Its assumptions about people and its language both were vicious and racist. It was and is a shocking document. The masses who had been given the vote he called a «swarmery», the freed slaves in America were «niggers». Civilization could be saved only by the «Aristos», his «hero-aristocrats». Whitman wrote that «such a comic-painful hullabaloo and vituperative cat-squalling as [Carlyle’s pamphlet]... I never yet encountered; no, not even in extremest hour of midnight, in whooping Tennessee revival, or Bedlam let loose in crowded, colored Carolina bush-meeting». It is unfortunate that there is available no edition of Democratic Vistas that includes the polemical passages like this one from Whitman’s original essays. Whitman’s democratic response to the great social movement of the day differed from both English responses, the one a reactionary call to aristocracy, the other a conservative call to higher laws. To begin with, as many have remarked, Whitman went further than either Arnold or Carlyle in criticizing democracy. Indeed, he went so far that readers often ask if his book isn’t more of an attack on than a defense of democracy. They do so with good reason, for his passages critical of democracy are surely his most striking. «The people», he writes, «are ungrammatical, untidy, and their sins gaunt and ill bred». This is why literature has neglected them. They are «vast collections of the ignorant, the credulous, the unfit and uncouth, the incapable, and the very low and poor». «It is useless to deny it», he writes further, «Democracy grows rankly up the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all — brings worse and worse invaders — needs newer, larger, stronger, keener compensations and compellers». And when he looks about him he has to conclude: «America has yet morally and aristically originated nothing».

Despite all this Whitman has two answers for Carlyle and other critics of democracy. The first is practical: whether the people are, in Whitman’s words, «good or bad, rights or no rights, the democratic formula is the only safe and preservative one for coming times». The late war had shown the strength of democracy and
the nobility of its people. If it was a question of practicality the 
resourceful conduct of the war was justification enough. Whit-
man's second answer is prophetic. Quite simply, he believes in the 
future of America. Early in the essay he tells us: «I shall use the 
words America and democracy as convertible terms». Later he 
prophesies a democratic creed which, he writes, «as a true child of 
America, will bring joy to its mother, returning to her in her own 
spirit, recruiting myriads of offspring, able, natural, perceptive, 
tolerant, devout believers in her, America... most vast, most for-
midable of historic births... now and here, with wonderful step, 
journeying through time».

This second, prophetic answer to Carlyle, though couched in 
Whitman's peculiar, singing prose, is a distinctly American one. 
In fact, the form and the idea of Democratic Vistas go back to the 
first American writings, the Jeremiad sermons of the Puritan di-
vines. In these, Americans and America were excoriated for their 
backslidings and shortcomings. But then with a Whitman-like leap, 
the ministers promised salvation through the divinely appointed 
future of this same America. No Englishman could go so far in 
condemning England, or so far in elevating it.

There is an additional resemblance between the Puritan divines 
and Whitman. It is that both pose the question of American de-
tiny in terms of a watching Europe and especially a watching Eng-
land. The Puritans had ecclesiastical disputes with the mother 
country that seemed to depend not simply on the strength of 
their arguments but on the success or failure of their entire under-
taking. In a similar way Whitman, answering the Englishman, 
Carlyle, rests his case not so much on his practical arguments for 
democracy as on the promise of a future that will impress the 
world. At one point as he was putting his essays together to make 
them into a book, he provided his text with a number of re-
vealing sub-titles that he eventually dropped. One of these was: 
«Our Lesson to Europe».

In the American prophetic tradition this lesson was never very 
clear. Nor is it in Democratic Vistas. Whitman tells where the 
glorious future lies — in America — and who will be its agents — 
the Americans — but not exactly what that future will be like. 
The closest he takes us to a glimpse of it is in his vague prediction 
of a string of independent homesteads inhabited by happy, inde-
pendent families stretching westward across the continent.
But his real subject lay not with results but with causes: with the spirit that would realize the dream. This spirit was to come from the arts, and especially from literature. What was the prophecy? Whitman looked forward to a new kind of literature by a new kind of writer. This literature would lead to the development of a better kind of man and hence a better society in America. The new writer was Whitman's literatus: someone never clearly described to us except as the author of the new works. Not surprisingly, when we come closest to a description of him he sounds pretty much like Walt Whitman. Or, more accurately, the literatus sounds like Whitman as he wished he could appear. «Part of the test of a great literatus», he writes, «shall be the absence in him of the idea of the covert, the lurid, the maleficent... The great literatus will be known... by his cheerful simplicity, his adherence to natural standards, his limitless faith in God, his reverence, and by the absence in him of doubt, ennui, burlesque, persiflage, or any strained and temporary fashion».

As for what the literatus would write, that too sounds like what Whitman hoped to do, luckily not what he did: the writings of the literatus were to be positive, uplifting, healthy, inspiring. One critic, Richard Chase, has written that as prophecy Democratic Vistas was realized chiefly in the worst poems of Whitman and in the machine-made epics of Stephen Vincent Benét. This would have to stand as the last word on prophecy had Whitman not gone further, in a most surprising passage. Here he tells us that his great literatus not only should be healthy and spiritually uplifting, but that, «In the future of these States must arise poets immenser far, and make great poems of death». And further on, «Some great coming literatus... will... compose the great poem of death». Here we are entitled to think of Whitman's brooding «When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed» instead of his uplifting «O Captain, My Captain». But more important, here is a prophecy that does anticipate the best works that came after Democratic Vistas.

Like Whitman, later American writers often have succeeded in gaining reputations as robust, outdoor spirits while writing elegiac poems of death such as he predicted. Robert Frost and Ernest Hemingway come most easily to mind. But why should the theme of death be so important? Lionel Trilling suggested that it is implicit in the nature of American literature, a profound, allego-
rical record of attempts to come in contact with the great truths of nature and the great crises of life: birth, love, death. Some years after making this formulation, Trilling pointed out that Robert Frost was a «terrifying poet», a «tragic poet» who «makes plain the terrible things of human life». He quickly was attacked for making such an unamerican statement. But Saul Bellow puts it well when he writes in *Humboldt's Gift*: «the main question, as Walt Whitman had pointed out, was the death question». Another, less obvious poet who realized Whitman’s prophecy is T. S. Eliot. For «The Wasteland» is the great poem of death by an American in the 20th Century. Unlikely as it may seem, «The Wasteland» conforms in essential respects to Whitman’s requirements for a new American literature. Like Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, it is concerned with spiritual decline, especially as that decline is revealed in the salons and in the degenerate tastes of cities, both of which Whitman excoriates at length. Whitman’s description of the new poems that his literatus would write sounds precisely like a description of «The Wasteland»: «the religious tone, the consciousness of mystery, the recognition of... the unknown, of Deity over and under all, and of the divine purpose». A good deal more could be said on the subject of the influence of *Democratic Vistas*. Bronson Alcott, the transcendentalist, philosopher, and teacher who was the father of Louisa May Alcott, for example, read the second published essay that was to become *Democratic Vistas* with great excitement. He adopted its title, «Personalism», as henceforward the name of his philosophy. It was no wonder that he did so, for Whitman in this case had but given a name to the American reverence for the individual in his unique identity. William James also was influenced by *Democratic Vistas*, as was John Dewey. In sum, for the America of up until a few years ago Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* was prophetic. And it had its influence.

Whitman’s accuracy as a prophet is less obvious, for his great literatus, unless it was himself, never materialized. But Whitman wrote that literature and the literatus would change America by creating «national, original, archetypes»: «the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men of the country». Literature, in other words, would create the American character. And, when he came to describe what he had in mind as one such model of behavior, here is what Whitman came down to: «intense
and loving comradeship, [and] the personal attachment of man to man... [This] seems to promise... the most substantial hope and safety of the future of these States».

Now, in this passage on comradeship, Whitman gave an accurate prophecy of what was to become a major theme in American literature. In Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Ernest Hemingway, to name the outstanding examples, the mystique of male comradeship is the essential thing. Not only this, but the peculiar power of these authors has lain in the influence they have exerted through the archetypes of comradely behavior which they invented. Hemingway is a great American figure not only for his aesthetic-literary achievement, which to Whitman would have been secondary, but for his influencing the behavior of at least two generations of Americans — both men and women. Whitman undoubtedly put his finger on it when he made the creating of archetypes the main business of American literature. Being a young nation, made up of immigrants, we have not known how to behave. The outcome in the cases of those who learned how to do so from Hemingway would have surprised Whitman. But the process was just as he predicted it.

But what about today? Our archetypes no longer come from literature but from movies and television. Even if we were inclined to heed our literati they no longer take upon themselves the Whitmanian prophetic burden. As for democracy and the future, few now call as he did, for more and more democratization until we shall have overcome our problems. As in Whitman’s time, our conservatives would like to halt the levelling process. But unlike his time, if our radicals call for more democratization (and I am not sure that this is the case), then they do so not in the name of America and its ideals but in a spirit of disgust with America.

If an analogy can be drawn between 1976 and 1867 it must be with Carlyle and Arnold’s 1867 in England, not Whitman’s in America. No matter how idealistically Whitman opposed the expanding forces of the Gilded Age, he showed its influence in his own expansive hopes. In England, by contrast, an economic depression was accompanied by fear that coal reserves, presumed to be the basis of England’s power, were about to run out. That atmosphere, like the one created by our own recession with its accompaniment of fears about oil, made confident appeal to the future emotionally impossible.
Whitman satisfies us, then, in his predictions for American democracy and American literature. He was right to look forward both to greater democratization (the women’s vote, for example), and to greater American triumphs (industrial growth and prosperity). But as we look from 1976 to the future we can adopt only his critique of democracy, not his solutions. Lacking his confidence in history we no longer are able to resolve our questions with impassioned evocations of America, and certainly not with appeals to literature. Perhaps we still can take inspiration from Whitman’s confidence in America, but surely we will have to express ourselves very differently from him as we do so. Our challenge is to find a way of affirming the American tradition that will neither embarrass us in expressing it, nor further alienate our opponents when they listen to it. When we can do that, the democratic vista will open again.