

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT  
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

**ABTEILUNG FÜR KULTUR**

**Working Paper No. 111/1998**

**ISSN 0948-9436**

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**Spectacular Anti-Spectacle:  
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Whitman and his Heirs**

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## Spectacular Anti-Spectacle: Ecstasy and Nationality in Whitman and his Heirs

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I begin teaching Whitman by reading the first line of "Song of Myself," "I celebrate myself, and sing myself." Then I ask who in the class has said that about himself or herself in the last week. My basic aim is to make the students aware that Whitman's poetry is probably not expressive in the traditional sense of reporting on feelings. Rather it offers a mode of desire inseparable from the rhetorical energies that sustain it. There may be a self we can celebrate and sing, but it occupies a somewhat different site from the one who negotiates the practical world. Once this difference is established, I can begin to explore questions about how we learn to enter and to value this Whitmanian site. My goal is to convey three claims that link Whitman to modernism (or at least to my version of modernism)<sup>1</sup>: that reading Whitman involves imaginative leaps enabling us to treat constructive energy as opening up various possible experiences which are not usually roles within our practical repertoires; that unless we can treat poetry as the exploration of such sites for experience we will never encounter the kinds of celebrations, and the kinds of selves, it affords at its most eloquent and expansive moments; and, finally, that unless we can take seriously the proleptic "we" invited by the poem and required in its discussion, we will not be able even to discuss meaningfully the values that were most important to Whitman and that now can make substantial differences in how we view our own social commitments.

Here I seek to elaborate that "we" in relation to an audience that has much less stake in indulging the professor than the students do. Yet the concern "we" bring for the motifs of spectacle and nationality affords a context in which this teaching gambit may take on considerable philosophical and methodological resonance. Getting clear on Whitman's relation to spectacle (which for me means Foucauldian spectacle) should help us develop a language for his theatricality, and thinking about the relation between spectacle and nation requires coming to terms with his dream of serving as the representative man in whom a nation might become conscious of what is at stake in its world-historical experiment in democratic values.<sup>2</sup>

I will not focus on how Whitman uses spectacle as an ideological tool. Quite the contrary. For I think fully appreciating Whitman's political ambitions for poems like "Song of Myself" requires understanding how and why Whitman invokes the space of spectacle for a radically anti-spectacular project. The opening line we have been considering is far too overtly casual and fluid and quirky to introduce either of the interpellative tasks basic to political spectacle. Even when Whitman is at his most theatrical, he still refuses to invoke any elaborate symbols and actual rituals that would serve to stabilize existing authority in order to displace other, more local vehicles for imagining social bonds. And while Whitman is certainly pedagogical and eager to establish himself as an authority, there are obvious grounds for insisting that this desired authority is not a disciplinary one nor the means of gaining a hold for dominant discursive practices. Whitman's theater is aimed at liberating certain kinds of self-reflexive pleasures, and his politics depends on modes of conviction that are only possible when those pleasures place us in tension with established practices. (His Lincoln poems are somewhat different because they do focus on an object and hence are seduced to spectacle by the inescapable symbolic qualities of the president, but if this suggestion explains how those poems are exceptions then my basic claims become stronger.)

Whitman is distinctive in large part because it is so difficult to define just how to situate this theatricality. Certainly we cannot simply ally him with the two writerly alternatives that critics now treat as antidotes to the imposition of power through spectacle -- efforts at documentary realism and projects committed to celebrating the local, the marginal, and the different. Although documentary realism may help free us from the blinders that spectacles impose, its commitments to detail and to the observer's stance simply do not allow a self-reflexive expansiveness sufficient for engaging or shaping potentially public passions. Whitman wants a writing capable of fully inhabiting the emotional registers that can be evoked when we reflect on what the national values of the US might involve for an audience, so his art has to address the ways that the idea of nation can produce the kinds of meanings for our actions leading us to sacrifice our immediate interests and even our lives. Conversely, our contemporary cult of the local is so committed to unsettling these social structures that it reserves for itself precious little common ground on which to base large scale social projects redressing the evils that it exposes. Whitman's version of the social requires that poetry be able to bring wording and willing so such a passionate interconnectedness that the work's articulateness generates, sustains, and justifies the most intense and capacious affirmations agents can perform.

I can begin to specify what this anti-spectacular version of excess involves by turning to one further aspect of the line that opens "Song of Myself." David Simpson once observed that we have to go five hundred lines into the poem before we find this opening "I" attached to a personal name (at least in 1855 and in editions from 1881 on) ("Destiny Made Manifest," 179). This "I" in other words is not anchored in specific representations or bound to particular structures of power. Specific references to any one person seem far less important than the range of functions and investments that emerge simply by observing how the pronoun gets situated within aspects of the world. Instead of promoting a particular figure of social power, this purely functional "I" floats freely so that its working can be attached to the self-reflexive activity of both author and readers. There no privileged object, not even a self, that has to be defended against other particulars or that can be used in the endless social work of justifying exclusion and established power. For in Whitman the socializing force is not a condition with symbolic attributes but a subject with powers; or, better, the socializing force is a site of subjectivity that can become a vehicle for self-reflection in a wide range of social contexts. The public is essentially a product of a privacy brought into eloquent awareness of its intricacies as it becomes co-extensive with the world of objects.

Twenty years ago I could have rested now, content with this self-celebrating rhetoric and free to indulge in close reading. But ours are suspicious times, and self-congratulation is rarely not worth suspecting. In particular any attempt now to ally with Whitmanian views of the subject and his dreams of exemplifying a national mode of consciousness must face two very imposing objections. The first objection is theoretical. Any synecdochic grounding for national identity is doubly problematic--in its relying on a single figure that necessarily excludes the range of differences and agonistic tensions constituting the political fabric, and in its overall idealizing of the nation as the locus of collective identification. The second objection then adapts this theoretical perspective to the specific evaluation of Whitman by insisting on important limitations fundamental to his way of seeking representativeness. For he projects as collective what is in fact a single white male perspective, and the projection relies on abstract impersonality insensitive to the temporal and spatial aspects of those contingent loyalties that are in fact fundamental to full subjectivity.

Let me spell out both charges then take up each in turn, since they create a climate in which Whitman's imaginative ambitions now seem to most critics little more than naive idealism or self-serving obtuseness. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* constructed a framework within which the full apparatus of poststructural critique could eventually be

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exercised on the concept of national identity. . He points out that human beings have to find means of linking “fraternity, power, and time meaningfully together” in the largest practicable units (anth 89). And probably there has to be some way of supplementing the purely instrumental workings of the “state” by some set of imaginary structures that afford agents various kinds of meanings allowing them to make emotional investments in public life. But why has the concept of “nation” become the privileged bearer of these potentials for meaning? And why has spectacle been so central vehicle in sustaining the power and authority of these nation-constructs? Addressing these questions requires dense historical analysis. But the very form of Anderson’s questions also invites from questioners the constructivist mentality elaborated by poststructural theory. Rather than attempt to flesh out the reasons agents gave for such beliefs we have to understand what forces made such representations of collectivity seem appealing, and we have to analyze the instability both caused by and concealed by the particular representational forms.

More important, focussing on this instability and on the disciplinary, reductive power of the basic representations sustaining the idea of a nation requires the analyst to be suspicious of most forms of fealty that the nation seeks from its citizens. Once there is so pronounced a gap between the claim about collective identity and the multiple interests and orientations suppressed or shaped by the generalizing claim, it is difficult not to treat “nation” itself as both substitute and supplement. “Nation” stands in for a range of particulars that it negates or at best sublates, and it produces an additional set of concerns which often blind us to those more intimate, less displaced interests. So criticism seems to have no alternative but to seek ways of exposing the interests and structures of power put in place by these dominant modes of imagining, and then seeking to release the force of the differences repressed by that domination.

This task requires seeking some place of utterance not bound to the fictions of nationhood. For two decades, Frederic Buell points out, we developed these alternative places by cultivating notions of ethnicity and class which afforded identities not representable within the discourse of the nation. But now we have to face the fact that these assertions of identity raise the same problems of representativeness and suppression on other levels, so we are forced to enter a deconstructive phase suspicious of all substantial imaginary identifications (*National Culture and the New Global System*, 177). The ideal citizen becomes inseparable from the ideal critic who can occupy borderlines or margins where there is sufficient traffic among the competing discourses that the possibilities for new political configurations can be cultivated simply within a shared labor of constant translation. For this task our imagined

“home” has to be not within the public discourse of the nation but within what Homi Bhabha calls the “meanwhile” that every national narrative has to deny in order to establish both its singular story and its voices authorized to continue that story. Critics then can enter the nation at those points where the dominant culture sees only the lack of meaning, but also where there emerge perspectives from which its own dominance seems tenuous and unstable (*Nation and Narration*, 297, 313).

In this conceptual atmosphere spectacles endorsed by the nation are not going to command much respect. The more visible the disciplinary work they are asked to do, the more vital the need to deconstruct them. Perhaps the most forceful statement of this ideology takes place in Lauren Berlant on Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*:

Collective identity is equivalent to collective amnesia: patriotism is constituted by the desire to overcome political and historical memory. ... This is why legal spectacle in the novel is accompanied by references, literal and figurative, to birth and rebirth, for these signal the state’s need to sever the relation between persons and their memories. The threatening aspect of personal memory, which I have

called counter-memory, is that it reveals both that the state is not inevitable and it is also at times irrelevant to the needs, desires, practices, and identities of citizens (“The Anatomy of National Fantasy”, 199-200).

The most influential recent Whitman criticism flies the same flag. David Simpson, for example, argues that the ambition for inclusiveness fundamental to Whitman’s quest to be the national poet in fact leads him to avoid any “fruitful recognition of differences” (“Destiny Made Manifest,” 177). Whitman certainly acknowledges slavery and poverty, but he is so eager to inhabit every possible social position and disposition that he refuses to acknowledge those features of these states which might resist his capacity to understand and to represent them:

Whitman’s occupations--traders, mechanics, farmers, and so forth--never interact *with* each other or confront each other. The poetry presents them within a chain of successive signifiers, *next* to each other but never interfering or challenging each other (182).

Thus even on the level of syntax Whitman ignores grammatical subordination, relies on copulatives that place power in the language rather than in agency, and prefers the inclusiveness of metonymy to the indefiniteness of metaphor (190-91).

Why is this omnivorous so debilitating? At one pole the “capacity to remain totally unaware of any difference between self and other marks him out as the voice of manifest

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destiny" (192). At the other it reveals him as less "aware" than writers like Cooper and Irving "of the degree to which the national identity seems likely to consist in an uneasy collection of factions, each competing with the others for recognition and for basic rights" (183). There seem only two options--either "we read *Leaves* as an account of the state of affairs or as an ideal prognosis" (186). And although "the poet himself is hardly clear on this question" (186), neither path will afford him substantial status as anything other than a maker of "the songs of individual selves" (195). Whitman's work is failed spectacle.

Wai Chee Dimock's *Residues of Justice* offers a brilliant analysis of this failure by providing a more concrete and intricate account of what is problematic in Whitmanian universalizing. Adapting communitarian critiques of Kantian theories of justice and obligation, she argues quite convincingly that there are important parallels between Whitman and Kant, since they both repress contingency in order to be able to celebrate the universalizing powers on which the moral life can be established. As we see most clearly in accounts of justice, the appropriate universalizing requires developing some common scale that enables one condition to pay for or compensate for another of quite a different kind. But establishing this commensurability puts at risk the actual "densities and textures of human lives" (9). Conversely, literature can provide a domain of the incommensurate because it seeks to foreground the contingent and the singular. But not in Whitman. Whitman's subject is the subject praised by theories of justice because it allows no contingency, instead assuming that it can produce out of itself equivalents for everything it encounters. Whitman brings impartiality to the very core of what for others is the intimate affective site for partial personal affections. Hence his poetry translates "seriality into simultaneity" (117), so that "nothing is contingently compelling" (118): "it captures for us the openness of space but not the endurance of time, the rhythms of fresh beginnings but not the music of familiar affections, the renewability of syntax but not the sedimentation of meanings" (120). Whitman's is a democratic stance in form only, with an impoverished sense of what might constitute the differences that must negotiate his nation's public spheres.<sup>3</sup>

Because my concern is primarily with how we develop languages of value for talking about Whitman and his heirs, I have to take on these conceptual frameworks directly. First I will try to show that there is a rationale by which it may still make sense to seek and idealize cogent ways of speaking about the U. S. as a nation. Then I will argue that seeking representativeness in relation to that nation is a plausible poetic project, at least when it is



pursued by the distinctive and intellectually sophisticated mode of representativeness that Whitman exemplifies.

Defending the idealizing of national identity need not entail jingoism or even the monstrous activating of differences that poststructural theory leads us to project. It is true that for there to be a "we" there must be a "not us," and casting a light in one place throws shadows elsewhere. And it is true there must be some active principle of differentiation that reinforces for culture what borders do for material space.<sup>4</sup> But the differentiations need not involve the kinds of beliefs that equate difference with hostility or with inferiority. In principle at least, the difference can be treated primarily as some contingent historical feature that has led nations to develop habits and structures distinguishing them from other units and intensifying specific loyalties justified largely by the contingent fact that one was brought up in these traditions and wants to see them fully expressed. One can imagine states functioning as national troops do sometimes under UN commands: some differences have to be acknowledged and seen as important, others can be suppressed, but the agents are careful to prevent any one difference from becoming the basis for principled aggression.

This benign view of cultivating national identities becomes much more feasible if we can postulate national loyalties not based on the mediation of spectacles, since spectacles do tend to codify power by sustaining particular leaders and by giving extraordinary imaginative vitality to metonyms like flags that easily become totalized and abstracted. Anti-spectacular nationalism allows at least two substantial defenses for making identifications on the level of the nation. The first defense concentrates on the forms of responsibility to other persons that such identifications make possible, while the second emphasizes those ways that identifying with the nation affords significant ways pursuing selves we can become.

I think the primary social reason we need concepts of a nation is that no other social unit can take the kinds of responsibilities that enable us to address the needs and sufferings of large classes of people who would slip through any more communitarian version of a welfare net. Having the nation enables us both to show why everyone has claims on the state and to establish the authority to demand the sacrifices necessary to foster that welfare. Our culture tends to find sentimental Ernest Renan's important observation that "a nation is a grand solidarity constituted by the sentiment of sacrifices which one has made and those that one is disposed to make again" ("Qu'est-ce que une nation," 17). For us Renan seems little more than an apologist for universal military service. And his view of sacrifice requires an abstract sense of duty that we distrust: for us what matters is the possibility that concrete relations with others will make us want to help in ways that do not generate the resentment that enforced

sacrifice does. But it may be the case that there is no feasible alternative to such resentment. We simply have to see that the good of the nation demanding sacrifice outweighs the psychological dispositions that the demand may cause. And if we understand the grounds of the appeal to sacrifice we may be able to minimize such resentment.

The grounds that sanction calling for sacrifice are inseparable from the possibilities for justice that the liberal state takes as its basic imperative. For that state can only pursue equality of opportunity and the fostering of conditions conducive to good lives for its citizens if it can make substantial demands on its population that apply on a scale more general than any of the specific values honored by particular communities within the state.

Consider the justification for tax laws or laws about civil rights. And, more important, consider the fact that even when one stresses as Dimock does those incommensurables that justice cannot address, there may be no way to get a society to honor the relevant differences unless we can sustain the senses of obligation produced by identifying with a nation.

The crucial consideration here is the need to develop emotional conditions and practical structures leading a populace to accept responsibilities towards those with whom they have no personal ties. The nation is a concept attempting to give a human solidarity to historically contingent multi-cultural groups by allowing the other as other to still have claims on social resources. More concretely, the nation is a construct that makes it possible to treat anyone's suffering within its boundaries as something to be felt and responded to by all. Smaller units like families and tribes might address that suffering, but they need not because there is no specific connection to those who are neighbors but do not possess the relevant attributes for belonging to the group. Larger units like UN commissions have the same responsibility but the need rarely reaches anyone's imagination or sense of obligation (unless there are immense spectacles). When suffering is registered on a global scale it is all too easy to feel very little hope and even less responsibility. Famine in Ethiopia is a matter for charity; extreme poverty in Appalachia is plausibly a matter for national policy, and hence for treating it as normal to expect sacrifices on an institutional scale because of responsibilities that are simply part of what it means to be a citizen of this nation.

The second defense of investing in the concept of "nation" takes the opposite path. Here the crucial concern is not with the needs of the other but with the possible modes of self-consciousness afforded individual citizens. The most obvious and most powerful reason for caring about nations, at least for caring about democratic and pluralist nations like the US, is the kind of meaning the nation affords for pursuing particular identities that are not available within more narrow tribal or ethnic frameworks. Clearly identifying with the nation is not

appropriate for most aspects of our lives--imagine marrying someone because he or she served the nation in important ways. But to conceive all our possible identities along these intimate lines may be too narrow a view of what persons are and are likely to enjoy.<sup>5</sup> There are in addition a range of specific identities defined by roles we play for the nation, like soldier or voter, and there are a range of imaginary projections that affect our senses of ourselves. In the dominant intellectual climate we rarely notice that the language of contingency actually helps establish what is important in those roles of soldier, voter, tax-payer, etc. For these roles require our acknowledging and taking responsibility for those aspects of our social embedding which provide us material resources and provide practical foundations for social life. Levinas provides an interesting analogue in his rendering of interpersonal situations, within which we makes us see how irreducibly dependent the "I" is on forces enabling it to take certain stances: there is no "I" without a "you" that situates it, and no self-consciousness without an intricate set of expectations and projections in relation to the other. In the political sphere these dependencies are even more imposing, since they range from material resources providing security and mobility to educational resources allowing us the frameworks within which we experience our values. Yet we rarely acknowledge our dependency on them or make that dependency itself a reason for actions and passions. Playing public roles is one small way that we can not only make those acknowledgements but also take responsibility for those dimension of our lives that we do not shape or control but do rely on. Such role-playing produces a theater in which citizens can come to appreciate what they hold in common in relation to contingent differences.<sup>6</sup>

Were this the only set of identifications made possible by the nation, honoring that dimension of our lives would be essentially a matter of repaying debts, with little room for creativity. That is why I hasten to add a second model for these identifications which allows a much wider range of possibilities and a much more substantial theater for establishing distinctive personal qualities. Here my source is not the lugubrious Levinas but the illustrious Whitmanian philosopher Alan Ginsberg? His poem "America" begins with an extended personal complaint about America's failures. In order to contextualize this, the poem has to turn back on itself, attempting to figure out why the poet refuses to give up his obsession with his country. Why does he feel compelled both to rebel and to announce his rebellion to his country with the same expectation of loving chastisement that one often has toward parents? Ironically as the process of address grows even more self-conscious, the poet's identification with his country grows stronger: "It occurs to me that I am America./ I am talking to myself

again.” And then he needs a way of simultaneously accepting that large claim and escaping entrapment within the restricted range of imaginary lives that the country fosters in its people:

America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood?

I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as individual as his automobiles more so they're all different sexes.

America I will sell you strophes \$2,500 a piece \$500 down on your old strophe

America free Tom Mooney ...

America this is quite serious.

America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set.

America is this correct?

I'd better get right down to the job.

It's true I don't want to join the army or turn lathes into precision parts factories, I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway.

America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel. (Collected Poems, 146-8)

There is no doubt that Ginsberg feels wounded by the very nation that he wants to celebrate. But that is the aspect of contingency that he has to reconcile with the possibility of acknowledging the forces that have formed him. In fact his sense of betrayal proves inseparable from ideals cultivated by that very nation, so he has to realize that even his pain is part of his identifying with his nation. Perhaps the greater the sense of pathos, the greater the desire to speak for the US, even to become America.<sup>7</sup>

One could elaborate that thesis politically by arguing that perhaps only by keeping the American dream alive can one effectively involve large publics in direct labors of resistance to the US's failures to live up to those dreams. Or one could just observe how this poem comes to enact a complex identity as self-reflexively American poet seeking a particular way of responding to those failures. Putting his queer shoulder to the wheel marvelously insists at once on his wounds, on his difference from the mainstream, on his continuing faith that there remains a larger level of identifications where treating oneself as actively bound to the country is necessary if one is to feel fully one's powers as an individual, and on the public role of poetry in accomplishing all those tasks because it can so quickly bring together diverse levels of identification while demonstrating investment in specific identifications. This poem earns a right to the poet's strangeness by its ironic straightforwardness in accepting a national identity. And by accepting that identity it manages to revive the very idea that there could be a plausible dream of writing as if there were a nation to address.<sup>8</sup>

Making the same case for Whitman is more difficult because his ironies are not so foregrounded and hence his identification with the nation not so intricately balanced, or hedged. But his critics will come to our aid. For if we can respond to such sharp criticisms, we can bring out the depth and complexity of Whitman's efforts to make poetry the basis for elaborating a public identity on anti-spectacle grounds. And we can show how that poetry directly addresses both aspects of nationhood for which I have been arguing--the need to go beyond communitarian versions of what constitutes the collective and the opportunity to explore possible identifications through one's understanding of the nation that offer distinctive and powerful senses of who the self can become.

In order to develop this case I need first to propose a rough distinction I am not quite sure how to make. We have to have terms for two different kinds of identifications--those that we take on simply as means of investing our lives with imaginary values and those that we consciously manipulate as heuristic instruments or projections enabling us to develop or extend certain powers or situations. Clearly most particular acts of identification will involve both poles, but there remain substantially different consequences when it seems plausible to emphasize one over the other. Let me call the first mode of identification imaginary, since it depends on the internal spectacle fundamental to Lacanian analysis. A person comes to identify with a particular image because of the relation which this image establishes with some third party whose fantasized desire it mediates and secures. Dimock's Whitman can serve as an example because in her story he is so seduced by the dream of public identity, of a public willing to take him as a representative, that he becomes dependent on that one image and loses sight of all the contingent personal dimensions needed to bind such speculation to the actual world. But there is also a Whitman whom we might prefer to consider as dealing with imaginative rather than imaginary modes of identification. This Whitman is not content with the specular qualities that his projections bring into play. Imaginative identification is something understood as a potential for work and for responsibility, as we saw in Ginsberg's vision of himself as an American. In such cases emphasis is placed on the self-reflexive framework within which the agent can interpret his or her relation to the image and stage a specific purposive application of the imaginary situation. It then becomes possible for the agent to pursue modes of satisfaction not limited to the approval specularly grounded in the imagined desire of these third persons. Satisfaction can also take the form of representing actions as worthy of approval because of the specific qualities that the agent exhibits in

performing and interpreting the actions--that is how one puts one's queer shoulder to the wheel.

This distinction between imaginary and imaginative correlates with the distinction suggested before between the weight that spectacle puts on the object giving a shape to desire and the weight that anti-spectacle puts on the subject seeking to make articulate its relation to the desires manifest in its projections. Now I want to put these distinctions to work in order to gain some distance for Whitman from the two criticisms that I summarized. Consider first the two options that Simpson posits for Whitman--either he must be read as providing an account of his historical situation or we must offer an ideal prognosis of how to transform that situation. Both of these options insist that what matters in poetry is its capacity to look outward and either to come to terms with history or to provide alternative paths through a present morass. But Whitman's focus seems to me much more on states that the subject can occupy. He does not want to take some ideological position that will be justified by those whose views it reflects (who then can provide a reflection of him). Rather he wants to articulate a relation to the self that may clarify for an audience how it can find a common sense of national purpose precisely by looking at what is involved in the intense attachments by which its differences become manifest. Whitman's concern is simply not primarily in interpreting history or in developing practical alternatives but in how an audience can come to imagine what is at stake in the very conditions by which history is made and judged.

Dimock helps me make this claim somewhat less abstract and general because she could be said to accept the case I have just been making, only to show that Whitman's problem resides in his idea of how subjects take up these stakes. In her account Whitman can develop this formal subject so clearly because for him there is nothing else to the political subject: all possibilities remain open because no specific contingent ties shape the subject's sense of himself. And certainly she is right that Whitman is not interested in empirical differences among contingent subjects. But to insist that Whitman is problematic because he does not represent such states of subjective investment is to fall into a realism not substantially different from Simpson's. Perhaps a poetic rendering of the ideal of American citizenship requires exploring another level of subjective life. Perhaps rather than worrying only about the facts of contingency we also need to imagine what these various subjects might have in common as they pursue those contingencies. Perhaps if one can break through the specular images binding us to those contingencies, one can articulate shareable psychological structures by which we each pursue our different investments? Indeed if we cannot find a level of self-reflection where we discover something that we have in common because of how we care about different

contingent relations, there is little possibility that we can have any emotional bonds at all to those whose specific contingencies do not match our own. Without this common relation to difference we can have a state but not a nation, and we can have laws but not a shareable investment in why we might honor those laws and supplement their lacks. We can have agonistic politics, but not even the possibility of any deep level of consensus about how we engage in those agons.

Let me now try to spell out what is distinctive about the level of imaginative activity that Whitman seeks through his “omnivorous” and omnipresent “I.” First I think we have to grant him the fundamental perfectionist dualism that is the precondition for his grand monistic fantasies:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,  
And you must not be abased to the other.” (“Song of Myself,” sect 5).<sup>9</sup>

For here we see the need in his poetry to engage two basic structures of identification. One requires aligning the contingent historical agent who addresses the soul with the powers that the soul seems capable of exercising; the other involves exploring how this sense of active soul can be used to forge bonds with other people in ways that enable them to reach beyond their immediate empirical interests as historical agents. To keep these structures of identification visible Whitman has to build into his own work simultaneous movements into that history and beyond the history to what Marianne Moore called “ecstatic occasions,” those sites where the pressures of history can be bracketed sufficiently to allow historical agents to enter those radical modes of awareness worthy of being called a soul.<sup>10</sup> In Whitman, as in Moore and in Crane and in W.C. Williams, these occasions do not so much give access to distinctive worlds as to distinctive powers in relation to a common historical setting--hence the importance of a dualist model for access to these powers: one can remain absorbed within the local while maintaining a mode of engagement that applies as well to other locales.

Whitman’s fascination with the “I”-“you” structure stems in part from this dualism. For this focus enables him to constantly track the ways that the “I” comes to reach beyond itself because of the modes of intensity allowing it to experience its own powers. At the core of this structure, then, is a need to deny the gathering powers that spectacle offers because if when it generates something like ecstasy spectacle threatens to consume self-consciousness within whatever forces the scene mediates. The following passage from “Song of Myself” makes strikingly clear how such resistance can set in motion an internal yet potentially public expansiveness of spirit:



Do you take it I would astonish?

Does the daylight astonish? does the early redstart twittering  
through the woods?

Do I astonish more than they?

This hour I tell things in confidence,

I might not tell everybody but I will tell you. ("Song of Myself" Sec 19)

At first all the lyric energy goes towards domesticating astonishment so that modifications in audience awareness derive entirely from nature rather than from any theatrical production. Then Whitman immediately builds on this naturalizing. Telling things in confidence seems initially no different from the redstart's "twittering." But without denying this similarity Whitman also expands it into another register. The poet can build that twittering into a semantic world secured as a nature by the offering of confidences. Ironically it is precisely because this utterance is so naturalized, so much part of a common world, that it can also bear a change in levels of awareness within which persons take on a sense of common intimacies possibly beyond what ideology imposes upon them. Intimate confidence is continuous with this twittering but also a raising of it to another level.

This passage is not content merely to refer to this other level. It literally provides the attentive reader the self-reflexive experience of shifting levels of awareness in ways that deepen their sense of what can constitute social bonds. On one level it is simply a joke to say in an impersonal mode like a written poem that "I might not tell everybody but I will tell you." The line plays on the fact that "you" is a shifter indistinguishable in its singular and plural forms. But the line also offers a telling illustration of how confidences can build relations. For although his sharing a confidence does not astonish, it does completely alter a world, as daylight does. The one who can register the confidence, the "you" who can first see the joke then grasp its deeper implications, comes to occupy a distinctive plane where fusions between the pronoun positions seem to establish something like Moore's ecstatic occasion. Spectacle is negated in order to establish an intimacy that depends on linking what is said to how one learns to listen.

The next section of the poem expands this moment of intimacy. At first the questioning modulates into documentary concerns, but that soon gives way to abstract self-reflection ascribing social roles to the bonding that the poem thinks it has accomplished:

Who goes there? Hankering, gross, mystical, nude;

How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?



What is a man anyhow? What am I? What are you?

All I mark as my own your shall offset it with your own,

Else it were time lost listening to me.

Whitman moves very quickly from the body to the individual to the generic question "what is a man" to more concrete questions where one can at least begin to address the issue of what a man is. Joining the "I" and the "you" defines being a man in terms of complex relations between independence and self-reflexive interdependence. Whatever the poet proposes, the audience must "find out for yourself" whether there is any value in what "I" might perform (sect 46). But such assertions are themselves also acts of sympathy on the part of the "I," since the very act of understanding the audience's need for independence binds the author to that audience. And the possible allusion to Franklin's obsession with practical uses of time extends that sympathy into aspects of what might be a national character.

The one precondition for such bonds is that the agents be able simultaneously to register their empirical situation and to bracket their characteristic ways of dealing with such situations. Whitman's poems are not occasions for testing objective descriptions or carrying on standard social commerce. Nor are they occasions of Foucauldian spectacle, since the theatrics involved are primarily self-reflexive rather than embodied in a compelling surrogate action or object. However one takes spectacle, its antithesis has to be a dialogical process in which stressing differences provides the fundamental vehicle by which to locate what can be characterized as soul. Here this process requires bracketing identifications with specific images so that one can appreciate what is involved in one's participation within a complex set of functions pulling at once in two directions--further into the listening and further out to seek how that moment of sameness can be fulfilled in the assertion of differences.

Once the complexity of identifications is established, we can proceed to the most important aspects of Whitmanian poetic citizenship. Identification opens onto community because it locates a shareable "soul" in the very modes of investment by which we engage ourselves in different, often incompatible specific life paths. But simply recognizing the possibility of such identifications is not sufficient. Whitman wants to make the recognition the basis for a shared intensity of willing that very structure of common interests. To accomplish that he has to capture what seems most intimate in our attachments to the world, then extend that intimacy so that is carried as passion into the public sphere by the

poet's eloquence. Poems become the soul's body, and soul as Whitman understands it cannot exist except as self-celebration, since the soul simply is imaginative activity aware of its own capacity to intensify the moment. Then because the activity is shared in the process of reading, the poem becomes not just a recognition of commonness in difference but a willing in difference of that commonness:

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?  
 I follow you whoever you are from the present hour,  
 My words itch at your ears until you understand them.

I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up the time while I  
 wait for a boat,

(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you,  
 Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd. (Sec 47)

Body becomes the locus of that commonness, but a body so inhabited that it comes to self-reflexive appreciation of its capacities to care about its actions. Therefore Whitman can claim a sense of ecstasy is closely linked to the most intimate aspects of self-consciousness. Here the ecstatic occasion takes place as a process of moving from a range of questions tied to the concrete world into a moment where answering becomes possible--not because some truth emerges but because a particular charged condition of speaking seems to satisfy the soul's in its expansive reach.

Such ecstatic moments have their dark side. Whitman cannot but idealize death because imagining it affords the most intense conditions within which we can combine the totally singular, a person's unshareable concern for one's own particular death, and the inescapably universal, the fact that each of us in our different ways perhaps must share that structure of concern in order to be human. So the world of the sleepers has to haunt Whitman's imagination, threatening his activism with the seductive *frisson* of yielding to what we might call an anti-dialectical mode of ecstatic consciousness. Yet once we characterize the problem we can also come to appreciate how Whitman manages to grant this impulse without yielding entirely to it. And appreciating that prepares us to understand how Whitman goes about refusing to let even his demand for affirmation thicken into the spectacular. His poetry grants no complete resting places, not even for identifications with death. Rather he turns what we have been calling the dialogical aspect of his work into a form of internal dialectic within which various encompassing attitudes are explored and modified.

This dialectic is not Hegelian. But it certainly has enough shifting of perspectives and moments of complex gathering to make it clear why it is not sufficient to rest with the emphasis on syncretism and simultaneity that governs Dimock's and Simpson's accounts of his work. Certainly there is a great deal of the syncretic in Whitman. However while pure simultaneity seems an ideal condition of presence, it is also a seduction into the more enduring simultaneity of the grave. So we find Whitman constantly shifting the levels of investment and scope within his work by calling attention to how one might assume and modify overall stances towards the syncretic details. This stance towards stances cannot see itself as part of a specific teleological progression. Rather it consists in a constant adjustment and modification and expansion or compression of two basic forces. One emerges in the perfectionist tension between the practical desires of the empirical self and its capacity to feel itself as soul, the other force sustains the competing pulls independence and interdependence that we have been tracing. Each set of forces easily solidifies. A person's empirical situation can easily become a somewhat narrow source of projections on to the "you," or the imagined "you" can either become too insistent on what makes it different or it can collapse too easily into the versions of shared identity that the poet offers. No one position is "right." The important concern is that poetry be sufficiently mobile and intimate to track this movement in ways that keep author and readers aware of the varieties of intensity and of connection as they emerge--not just for their own sake but also because the basis for overall identifications as citizens of a democracy is precisely one's awareness of sharing such fluidity.

For a brief example of this dialectic at work consider Whitman's "We Two, How Long We Were Fooled." The poem begins with "we" recognizing that they had been fooled for a long time. Whitman does not tell us why they were fooled. It does not matter. At stake is not particular beliefs but the condition of the believers and the possibility now of making investments in this "we," with the permissions that it confers. On discovering that they have been fooled, "we, two" first return to nature, not to any one specific form but to nature's multiplicity. There a host of identifications become available, beautifully balanced in terms of the kinds of actions that the identifications allow and of the varying perspectives that the spirit gets to occupy:

We are oaks, we grow in openings side by side,

We browse, we are two among the wild herds spontaneous as any, ...

We prowl fang'd and four-footed in the woods, we spring on prey,

We are two clouds forenoons and afternoons driving overhead,

We are seas mingling, we are two of those cheerful waves rolling over each other

and interwetting each other,

We are what the atmosphere is, transparent, receptive, pervious, impervious, (108)

As details proliferate a remarkable effect begins to take hold, one that calls attention to the transformative powers of pure attention. These details do not become symbolic, but their entire sequence comes to seem no longer simply something objective, over against the perceiving mind. Everything seems charged with metaphoric implications precisely because the mind can so totally identify with what it engages as it moves. This effect is most obvious in the celebration of interwetting because of the obvious sexual overtones. But the quasi-metaphoricity or literalness suffused with metaphoricity is most resonant in the last line's literal identification with the atmosphere. For here the poems seem both to name and to include the sense of inclusiveness that also characterizes its feeling for the freedom it experiences. We are what the atmosphere is because we are lucid mediators of what is there to be seen, and we are the atmosphere because our activity literally contains within a composing care everything that it registers.

The concluding lines then make one further leap beyond spectacle as the poem tries to name the effect of feeling itself as this atmosphere, and hence as it gives this "we" an astonishingly concrete abstract substance:

We have circled and circled till we have arrived home again, we two

We have voided all but freedom and all but our own joy.

Discovering that "we" have been fooled did not result in finding some straight line by which to proceed. Rather it meant altering the attitude taken in relation to multiplicity and change. By accepting circling, by yielding to impulse but maintaining full attention to detail and to the effects of detail, the "we" intensify their bond. In fact they seem to take on a new mode of existence because this state makes it possible not merely to appreciate what joy is but to feel oneself identified with something like its abstract purity as an emotion. There is no teleology here, but there is a remarkable building of substance out of spirit so that spirit can relocate itself within a wordable world that retains its physicality as entirely compatible with freedom.

But what has all this spectacular anti-spectacle to do with nation? For Whitman if it has something to do with freedom it has something to do with the US. More specifically, to be an American meant for Whitman having access to a poetics in which it did not suffice for the personal to be political; rather it was to realize how the political was justified in the depths of the personal. The poet's "I" freed to its greatest possible expansiveness by its imagination of its country becomes a living concrete emblem for social relations that can not only make

democracy work but also allow it a form that can be celebrated and hence given emotional resonance for a population. Preserving this democracy (and hence celebrating this democracy because there is no basic difference between the acts of preserving and of celebration) then requires developing two basic self-reflexive powers for its agents--a capacity to understand in one's own experience what makes one identical to those pursuing quite different ends, and a capacity to be sufficiently attentive to those differences to treasure the conditions that make them possible. The first power is primarily epistemic: it depends on how we direct our attention and draw conclusions. The second is primarily affective: it depends on those differences being able to so occupy our will that we fully align ourselves with the overall national identity necessary to preserve and promulgate them.

My own stage is now set for engaging Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." While this poem does not explicitly proclaim his ambition to be the national poet, it does offer Whitman's most fully dialectical performance of the self-reflexive processes that for him are fundamental to cultivating democratic social sensibilities. Engaging this dialectic demands a somewhat tedious close-reading of the text's twists and turns. But I will try to simplify the process by assuming that the reader will consult a text of the poem, so I can simply focus on the specific passages necessary for my analysis.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" begins with faces and ends with souls. At first the faces are figurative, as the tide, then the sun rising over the commute, take on a human form, only to yield then to actual human presences. By the poem's conclusion, the specificity of the sun gives way to a pervasive summer warmth making the entire harbor seem to participate in one overall perfection, with each relation furnishing its "parts toward the soul" (165). Similarly the poem moves from an intricate shifting between space and time, this crowd and crowds in the future, to an expansiveness that seems to contain both time and space within it: all particulars serve as anchors for the qualities of soul that emerge as the poet reflects on how the range of identifications involved modifies his understanding of that soul.

Initially the relevant details all depend on a specifically situated point of view. By the second section the poet begins the work of identification that will get him to appreciate the structures fundamental to any point of view capable of processing the same intensities. Because all the travelers seem to be playing out a drama that extends beyond their particular moment in time, he finds it possible to develop a strange intimacy with the parts they play. These people are not simply travelers; they are embodiments of what this particular journey will continue to make available. That realization then creates a sense of being so anchored in

time that the poet can enter a third section where he can drop the stance of viewer in order to explore more intimate lines of connection. Now the "I" begins to use its own subjectivity as the means for moving from what people see to an identification with how that seeing modifies their sense of themselves:

It avails not, time nor place--distance avails not,  
 I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so  
                   many generations hence,  
 Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt  
 Just as any one of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd, ... (160)

And now Whitman can repeat the litany from section 2, but from the point of view not of someone watching the scene but of someone entering an ecstatic state in which the boundaries of subjectivity seem absurdly reductive.

At this point the poem has two options. It could simply conclude with the abstract restatement of this level of collective identification that section four provides, or it could change the level of questioning so that the subjective locus of sympathy no longer suffices to gather all the relevant energies. Obviously Whitman takes the second option, but in a strange and strained manner which then makes the dialectical ambition seem all the more necessary because there is at stake here something painful that the poet cannot quite handle. At first the fifth section tries to maintain an abstract philosophical stance. It posits the question "what is then between us," so that Whitman can no longer be content to flesh out identifications--he has to interpret what makes them possible. But the best he can do in this metaphysical mode is use the questioning to force attention back on the body, on the most material and intimate grounds for mutual knowledge. That soon appears a dead end: this metaphysicalizing dodges more than it captures, and the body gets reduced to a screen on which alien forces leave signs of their working.

Therefore the poet has to shift to psychological inquiry into what seems a common locus of pain and mystery linking the poet to his interlocutors. And having eluded all the positive litanies, the question requires a very different, darker mode of introspection, with its promise of new forms of intimate connection:

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,  
 The dark threw its patches down upon me also,  
 The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious, ...  
 Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,  
 I am he who knew what it was to be evil,

I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,

Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd ... (162-3)

This is not great poetry. Whitman wants us to believe in this dark bond even though, or perhaps because, he cannot adequately characterize it. But this section does prepare the way for great poetry by allowing Whitman first to claim a deeper level of intimacy than even the ecstatic could provide, then to return to the landscape in ways that charge all the material details with an astonishing affective lucidity enabling the scene to seem at once fundamentally material and profoundly spiritual in its aura of articulate yet unspeakable extensions of spirit. After section seven's simple opening, "Closer yet I approach you," the opening of section eight provides the full Whitmanian orchestra:

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd

Manhattan?

River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood tide?

The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay boat in the twilight, and the  
belated lighter?

What gods can exceed these that clasp me by hand, and with voices I love  
call me promptly and loudly by my nighest name as I approach?

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks  
into my face?

Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?

What I promised without mentioning have you not accepted?

What the study could not teach--what the preaching could not accomplish  
is accomplish'd, is it not? (163-4)

The risk here is enormous. The poem tells us that we understand, but it cannot tell us what we understand. That it has to show us. And it has to convince us not only that we understand but that we understand understanding in such a way that we are satisfied with this mode of human connection. If Whitman succeeds, he does so because of two dialectical features of this passage. The first is what he does with spectacle. After many catalogues here we are asked simply to look at an unfolding scene, not to dart our attention every which way. Then what we see does not follow the traditional way of religious or political spectacle. There is no reaching out to symbol or back to some authority made visible by the mode of appearance. Rather simple appearance is asked to carry a great deal of weight. What we see

has to make sense of the gods who come to take him by the hand--not so that he can interpret the scene but so that he will let it unfold in all its fusing power.

So we see meaning born that we cannot grasp intellectually, yet we feel ourselves expanding under the influence of the sense of potential for meaning that seems to pervade the situation. Second, the mode of questioning manages to be so insistently and fluidly self-reflexive that the movement from question to question takes the place of any answer. In effect we are asked to agree that a fusion has taken place charging both the "I" and the "you" with a shared sense of understanding what is going on in the scene. The questions suffice to unpack the celebratory "we understand." We only know what we understand by coming to agree that we cannot interpret the understanding or restate it. We understand mutual understanding as a willingness to let the questions satisfy because of how they lead us back to and summarize what made the fusion possible. Because meaning is distinguished from efforts to thematize, this poem in effect builds the force of anti-spectacle directly into what it so spectacularly makes materially present.

Section 8 ends on a strange temporal note. The question about what gets accomplished literally refers to the past but spiritually opens all sorts of possibilities for futures that might emerge from this relation between understanding and acceptance. Section nine brilliantly fulfills that promise in surprising ways. It runs through a list of imperatives that beggars Wordsworth's ways of building poems so that they culminate in acts of will:

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide and ebb with the ebb-tide!

Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves! ...

Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and answers!

Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution! ...

Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me by my highest  
name!

Live, old life! play that part that looks back on the actor or actress!

Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it! (164)

The stakes in rivalling Wordsworth are high here. The unspoken understanding celebrated at the end of section eight cannot quite suffice for Whitmanian citizenship, no matter how rich. Understanding must elicit acts of will, and those acts must create another level of bonding that can in turn take the form of a higher understanding yet--in this case an articulable understanding of what it really means to attach soul to those faces and to the Whitmanian way of letting those faces be. But to appreciate fully the role that will plays here one has to go back to the pressure on it that emerged in the neediness explored by section six.



The contrast enables us to realize that now the process of return allows consciousness to reinhabit both the wording of that need (in the figure of "highest name") and the overall feeling of distance from all those who seemed merely to be playing parts.

Landscape once again becomes the spectacular grounding for the depth of affirmative feeling now able to transform the earlier pain.. Here the scene can embody the very intensity of will that it elicits, as if both nature and society at their most ecstatic became single collective bodies :

Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all downcast eyes  
have time to take it from you!

Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any son's head in  
the sunlit water! (165)

Place becomes so charged with significance that the intensities open into a distinctively psychological space that is for Whitman also a vital site for social consciousness--not one characterized by specific agendas but only by a sense of involvement in the need to develop agendas. Landscape becomes inseparable from the range of "you"s who inhabit it. And that habitation is not abstract; it consists in the enactment of differences allowing the manifestation of souls the same materiality and presence as the landscape possesses. Poetry complements the visual spectacle by embodying a single readerly consciousness giving the various differences within the scene a shareable substance in a pure present tense:

We use you and do not cast you aside--we plant you permanently within us,  
We fathom you not--we love you--there is perfection in you also,  
You furnish your parts towards eternity,  
Great or small, you furnish your parts towards the soul. (165)

I do not think it a denial of Whitman's commitments to see this poem, and much of Whitman's social poetry, as capable of surviving the exceptionalism on which it was founded. Whether or not that exceptionalism was justified in the mid-nineteenth century, before the cultural forces took hold that led Whitman to the despondency of his *Democratic Vistas*, it clearly cannot now suffice as a model for America's roles in international politics. Yet there may be a Whitmanian way in which a version of that exceptionalism remains important for our increasingly post-national world. For if America was and is exceptional, it was and is so only because it bases political values on a very specific figure of the legislative subject: the US subject, or, better, the US subject position can be characterized as a particular perspective on the legislative power characterizing subjectivity. The US democratic subject cannot be

reduced to a set of rights emerging within history. It is at once too concrete and too abstract to be derived from history, so that it requires as its fundamental formulation the elemental abstraction provided by the Constitution. Such subjectivity is in large part a construct--not because it has no actual referent but because the referent is so common and therefore difficult to value that we need the construct as our way of focussing attention on its specific attributes. And so decoupled from history, this mode of subjectivity remains available to all who make the appropriate identifications. Through such identifications agents not only see, they also feel how what makes us different also makes us fundamentally the same. This exceptionalist version of US citizenship then manages to be the one form of nationalism that logically leads beyond nationalism to more expansive identifications with any political unit that can espouse commitments to that universal legislative subject position.

I can close by offering a brief example of how a Whitmanian perspective might make a practical political difference. During recent discussions of ethnicity in America there has been a great deal of interest in accepting the slogan that the US has "a common culture which is multicultural" (*New National Culture*, '173).<sup>11</sup> Indeed it is hard not to want to accept that formulation of American exceptionalism. But there is far too much ambiguity in the phrase "common culture" to allow one to feel at ease in yielding to that desire. Whitman can help us both analyze the problem and develop a vision of commonness that will bear a good deal more intensity of will than we can get from this bureaucratically seductive formula. Whitman's dualist psychology calls attention to an immense gulf between the descriptive implications of "common culture which is multi-cultural" and the ideal, affective implications of the term. I take the first, descriptive assertion to be obviously true--there are a lot of cultures within the US. But the descriptive assertion is useless unless one can move easily from the description to an evaluation by which one actually identifies with that commonness. Only then would be able to secure the force that the slogan seeks--that one takes an affirmation of that multiculturalism as fundamental to what it means to assume the identity of US citizen.

Yet in much of the US there is no identification with this ideal dimension. Because it does not fully recognize the dual meanings or the depth of refusal of the ideal one, the report's slogan seems hollow, seems an effort to evade anxiety rather than to confront real tensions. Whitman cannot resolve those tensions. But he can call our attention to what might lead us not only to recognize the tensions even with the phrase "common" but also to find a path by which the two meanings might be linked. Whitmanian dialectic is a process of finding within the description of the common fact of a multicultural society what might ground our also coming to feel and to will the forms of human solidarity that might make it possible for us to

cultivate those differences. Were Whitman really read as a national poet, the commission might have realized that our common culture is not multi-culturalism per se but the shared ideal of attempting to recognize what is involved for all of us in each person's filiations with particular cultural ideals.

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<sup>1</sup> *My Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* provides the background for this claim. Now I add that while critics all acknowledge the modernist poets' interest in Whitman, they are prone to share Pound's insistence that for the moderns it had become a time for carving. Consequently critics ignore how much of a challenge the modernists felt from the version of subjective agency that Whitman could establish as a representative "I" but that for them could only be constructed by relying on the transpersonal qualities of their medium. In support of this claim I have written an essay on W.C. Williams, "The Local, the National, and the Transnational in Williams' Poetry."

<sup>2</sup> Whitman's fullest statements of his ambitions take place in his "Backward Glance over Travel'd Roads," especially in *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 572-4. At the 1988 EAAS conference Shira Wolowosky's "Walt Whitman: the Poet as President" gave a superb historical account of what representation meant to Whitman as a political thinker. And Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* offers a compelling historical account of how Whitman went about producing that representativeness. Folsom also has a strong sense that I want to build upon of Whitman understanding his various arenas of concern as important not simply because of what they allowed him to say but because of the stances they allowed the writing to elaborate (176-7).

<sup>3</sup> The one democratic stance now acceptable to "advanced criticism" is the role of cosmopolite, since that role enables one to accept the play of differences while resisting any specific national authority in the name of more general ideals of civilization and cultivation. But this distance from the nation exacts a substantial cost. Because the cosmopolite identifies only with an ideal, an ideal with no concrete embodiment, it may ultimately offer little more than a public version of the liberal ironist who has to substitute distanced acknowledgement for particular commitments. Cosmopolites like Edward Said base their values on fundamental intellectual traditions, but they cannot explain why the society should honor these free intellectuals since their values do not require sacrifices to the nation whose resources they need in order to sustain their post-national fealties.

<sup>4</sup> These last two sentences echo first Philip Schlesinger, "Europeanness: A New Political Battlefield," p. 321, and Walker Connor, "A Nation is a Nation, is a State, is an Ethnic Group, ...," p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Critics like Berleant who distrust all abstract aspects of collective identity may in fact be playing out one pervasive American identity, the Huck Finn syndrome that celebrates as the good life the freedom to cut most of the abstract ties binding agents to the social order. For an excellent critique of what he calls "cultural radicalism" that is based on its continuing absorption in American individualism see Winfried Fluck, "Literature, Liberalism, and the Current Cultural Radicalism."

<sup>6</sup> One can make the same point less melodramatically by calling attention to the fact that social scientists have long been fascinated by certain public acts like voting and even paying taxes fairly because there is no rational interest story that will explain why we do so. But perhaps we do so largely because of the opportunity such occasions give us to accept identities within which there is acknowledgment of our dependencies along with the simultaneous affirmation that we want to identify with others to whom we are bound by those shared dependencies.

<sup>7</sup> For an interesting historical example of the song "America the Beautiful" used as both a symbol of the US's social failures and of the still invocable ideals that might bring relief from those failures see Robert James Branham, "'Of Thee I Sing': Contesting America."

<sup>8</sup> There is an important corollary to this sense of having a nation to address. For then one can begin to use private psychology as itself affected by the national identifications and hence use shame as a public weapon. One might even argue that without the sense of shame at being an American felt by those who opposed the war in Viet Nam but did so in terms of American

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principles, the war might still be going on, since the government had found ways to restrict casualties to mostly minority soldiers.

<sup>9</sup> Whitman's perfectionism has much in common with the Emersonian one developed by Stanley Cavell in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. But Whitman is distinctive in stressing the basic structure of perfectionist self-surpassing while not worrying much about rhetorics for representing specific ideals of perfection.

<sup>10</sup> "O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,  
O I say now these are the soul" ("A Woman Waits for Me")

<sup>11</sup> I take this slogan from Frederic Buell's carefully reasoned critique of exceptionalist melting-pot versions of US history in his *National Culture and the New Global System*, where he cites a report by the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee "One Nation, Many Peoples: a Declaration of Cultural Interdependence."

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