“ONE OF THE NATION OF MANY NATIONS”: WALT WHITMAN AND MULTICULTURALISM

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Born and raised in New York City, John Teahan began his tenure at Fairmont State College in 1967 as an Instructor of English. He holds degrees from Manhattan College and Columbia University and has done graduate work at West Virginia University. As an active member of the West Virginia Association of College English Teachers, Mr. Teahan has presented several papers at the association’s semi-annual conferences, and in 1989 he served as its president. Selections of his poetry appeared in the inaugural issue of *Perspectives*, and he is currently seeking publication of a short story, “In the Company of Prophets.”

Apart from his interest in writing and literature, Mr. Teahan is an avid theatre fan and has appeared in many Fairmont State College productions. His most recent role was as the Emperor Joseph in the 1991 Masquers’ production of *Amadeus*. 
"One of the Nation of Many Nations”:
Walt Whitman and Multiculturalism

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Academics have often been accused of living in ivory towers, but anyone involved in higher education today would have to be residing in a crypt to be unaware of the controversy over multiculturalism and political correctness that rages at present on certain American campuses. Established weekly magazines such as *Time* have run cover stories on it, the major television networks have provided extensive coverage of it on evening news programs, and issue-oriented shows like PBS’s *MacNeil-Lehrer Report* have aired lively discussions of it and its implications. The scenario presented by the media hardly evokes such utopian and idyllic conventions as “the community of scholars” or “the groves of academe.” One hears of students being punished by campus disciplinary boards for what their members consider unacceptable behavior towards minorities, or of teachers besieged by angry students who brand them mere agents of bigotry and oppression. Nor have the opponents of multiculturalism been silent. They have martialed all the bogey words of modern society to characterize the multiculturalists—from dark references to the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s to apocalyptic comparisons with Big Brother in George Orwell’s *1984*. Ironically, what seems to be generating all this animosity is simply a commitment to promote cultural diversity in higher education and thereby to create a greater sense of community on college and university campuses. And perhaps just as ironic, the often acrimonious controversy has taken on new intensity in 1992. This year marks the centennial of the death of Walt Whitman, one of America’s greatest champions of cultural diversity.

Of course, when he died on March 26, 1892, Whitman had not realized his dream of becoming known to all as the “bard of democracy.” During his lifetime he had gradually built up a band of devoted admirers, but the wide popularity he had yearned for had eluded him. Today, however, the tables seem to be turning. Thus,
as contentious as it is, the controversy over multiculturalism and political correctness is a fortuitous development for Whitman devotees because it points up the poet’s continuing relevance. The debate draws attention to a serious division within our society between the interests of individual citizens and those of the larger communities of which they are units. As well, it sharply focuses on the impact of culture upon the daily operations of the body politic. In her excellent recent study, *Whitman The Political Poet*, Betsy Erkkila has noted that these issues were the very concerns of Whitman in most of his work. According to Erkkila, Whitman’s writings may be seen as “an attempt to manage the disintegrative forces of . . . democracy . . . in the nineteenth century.” (11) Believing like Shelley that poets should be the “legislators of mankind,” Whitman addressed himself to such diverse and contradictory conditioners of identity in American culture as race, gender, class, and degrees of wealth, and he attempted to reshape these as basic ingredients in a harmonious democracy. In his self-proclaimed roles as the nation’s bard, priest, and prophet, Whitman promoted and celebrated the American democratic ideal; and, in his prose and poetry, he provided a mythic prototype of it for generations to come. Thus, as Erkkila has pointed out, Whitman’s writings “may be of value not as pointers to some transcendent spiritual realm but as visionary markers of where we have been, where we are, and where we still might go.” (10)

With this notion in mind of Whitman as a cultural visionary, I would like to examine some passages in his prose and verse for the light they may shed on the current multicultural controversy. I wish to consider how the views of Whitman may afford us a functional paradigm for reacting to the debate in a positive and productive way. First, however, I think it might be helpful to study the present debate a bit more closely, even if only in general terms.

There seem to be three areas of contention: the resistance of multiculturalists to Western culture, their negative interpretation of individualism, and their effort to eradicate what they consider biased perceptions through linguistic reprogramming. The most publicized area of dispute is the one concerning the influence of the intellectual tradition of Western Europe on American higher education. Some multiculturalists maintain that the so-called “Western Canon” serves merely as a propaganda mechanism to promote white male superiority and other inherited social evils. On the other hand, those who support the Western Canon maintain that, if it is
anything at all, it is culturally eclectic. They hold that its most notable contribution has been the creation and development of a society that “reflects the variety of American life,” encouraging all Americans “to belong to more than a single culture, to be both particularists and universalists.” (Brustein, 32; Siegel, 35) Some multiculturalists dismiss this claim as simply illusionary. They consider that to subscribe to the traditional concepts of a Western-dominated society is in effect to commit cultural suicide, permitting oneself to be permanently victimized by racism and sexism.

As for the Western respect for individualism, many multiculturalists regard this as a red flag concept which upon examination reveals the semantic deceit of pro-Western advocates. According to them, “arguments that champion the individual over the group ultimately privilege the individuals belonging to the largest or dominant group.” (Taylor, 35) Furthermore, because they believe that the language of Western civilization is rife with semantic corruption, multiculturalists adopt an absolutist position on the policing of language used on American campuses today. Paradoxically, so resolute have they been in their efforts to eliminate bias from language that they have been accused of exhibiting linguistic intolerance in order to eradicate it.

Thus, although its primary goal of cultural diversity is one which no reasonable person could find fault with, the effort to promote multiculturalism has resulted in disagreements so bitter that the middle ground has been vacated, with none of the disputants disposed to compromise. What began as a lively intellectual inquiry about the cultural relevance of the Western Canon has degenerated and broadened into a bitter political struggle in which administrative, legislative, and judicial empowerment—not only on campuses—is the grand prize.

This adversarial scenario is, of course, nothing new to those of us who follow other current controversies such as those over abortion and capital punishment. The multiculturalist battle is yet another hotly contested issue that demonstrates how litigiousness and lobbyist politics constitute the price paid for a government of law by consensus rather than one by arbitrary proclamation. Yet, in this particular controversy, a more relevant and specific truth is operative. The truth is that the dominant paradigm of American democracy, the melting pot, has in fact proved only marginally effective for the various minority groups which have formed the tributaries of the American mainstream.
The origin of the melting pot paradigm in America can be traced to the eighteenth century French immigrant and social critic Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur. But the most extensive depiction of it is in a play by Israel Zangwill (1864-1926). Produced in 1908, Zangwill’s *The Melting Pot* portrays the experiences of a young Russian Jew, David Quixano, who comes to New York City to advance his career as a musician. Expressing his excitement about his newly adopted country, David declares that “America is God’s Crucible, the great melting pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming.” (Meister, 17) From the moment Zangwill introduced the melting pot symbol into popular culture, the image was a source of disagreement. By some it was regarded with enthusiastic approval; by others, with distaste and dissent. According to Philip Gleason of Notre Dame University, many saw the image as one “touched with the fire of democracy and lighted radiantly with the national vision,” but others warned that any attempt to combine and interrelate specific races and ethnic groups in the “smudge kitchen of a national melting pot” would foster tyranny rather than democracy. (25, 28)

The ambivalence felt by Americans toward the melting pot paradigm caused some to question it as a serviceable model for democracy in the United States. On the one hand, it seemed to affirm the rights of distinct racial and ethnic groups to fully involve themselves in the nation’s political and economic processes and promised them material rewards for their participation. On the other hand, it seemed to demand that in order to enjoy these benefits they must abandon the complex legacy of their racial and ethnic heritages. This was the criticism of Horace M. Kallen of the New School for Social Research. Kallen therefore promoted the alternative concept of cultural pluralism and suggested that the melting pot paradigm be replaced by one of a great orchestra. America, he proposed, should be seen as a nation where the characteristic timbres and tones of each distinct racial and ethnic group co-existed in harmony with the political and economic instruments of the majority. (Meister, 61)

In the 1950s Will Herberg of Drew University attempted to resolve the conflict between adherents of the melting pot paradigm and those of the orchestra. He believed that cultural assimilation in America had progressed to a point where the only significant line of cultural demarcation remained that of religion. Accordingly, the new national synthesis would be a triple melting pot, representing Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. (225) Because Herberg seemed to
equate the absence of religious conflict in America with absence of
ethnic and racial conflict, his triple melting pot image projected
America as an open, tolerant society and helped foster a self-con-
gratulatory national mood. (Meister, xiv)

Heightened by such developments as the election of the
country’s first Catholic president in 1960 and the passage of exten-
sive civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, the social and cultural
optimism generated by the triple melting pot theory enjoyed favor
until the mid-1960s. At that time the Black Power and Native
American movements grew militant, challenging the credibility of
the triple melting pot as a plausible paradigm for encouraging the
assimilation of ethnic and racial minorities. Rejecting both the melt-
ing pot and cultural pluralism as Eurocentric irrelevancies and
choosing instead the path of cultural separatism, the proponents of
Black Power and Native Americanism argued that separatism need
not be isolationist and self-defeating. Instead, they held that their
initiatives could advance the causes of assimilation and civil rights
for minority groups. Separatist strategies of consciousness-raising
and political activism proved so effective that they were soon emu-
lated by new groups that wished to wage a battle for minority rights
along gender lines—that is, the feminists and the supporters of gay
liberation. Even some of the white ethnic populations that had
already assimilated into the mainstream availed themselves of sepa-
ratist strategies in order to promote recognition of their cultural
heritages. (Meister, xv-xvii)

Since the mid-sixties, then, a major shift has occurred in the
way minorities are regarded, and regard themselves, in their rela-
tionship to the mainstream culture. As Richard Meister notes in
Race and Ethnicity in America, those who viewed the nation in terms
of the triple melting pot saw it as moving inevitably towards a
homogeneous society. Racial and ethnic differentiation was seen as
a problem soon to be resolved. The children of European immi-
grants were completing their assimilation and those of African,
Asian, Hispanic, and Native American heritage were not far behind.
(xv) What exists today is of course something entirely different
from the tranquil homogeneity envisioned only a short time ago.
An upsurge in racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness has oc-
curred. We exist today not within what some have termed a
pleasing and harmonious “American Mosaic” but instead as a frac-
tious and uneasy confederation of minority groups, many of which
view the mainstream culture as failing to deliver on its promise of
social equality and economic prosperity. In fact, they perceive the
American mainstream as posing a threat to the diverse cultural ethoses they represent.

Against this background of distrust and enmity and of flawed paradigms of democracy, I turn now to Walt Whitman. It is no overstatement to say that Whitman was totally absorbed in defining the ideal nature of the American body politic. His most explicit demonstration of this concern is found in prose works such as the various prefaces to *Leaves of Grass*, issued in 1855 and after, and the extensive essay, *Democratic Vistas*, which appeared in 1871. Many of his poems also reflect this all-absorbing theme; they can be seen as both intense meditations on being an American and also exuberant celebrations of that identity. “One’s-Self I Sing,” the first of several short pieces that initiate *Leaves of Grass*, serves as a useful point of departure as we examine Whitman’s conception of American society and his own relationship to it:

*One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person,*  
*Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.*

*Of physiology from top to toe I sing,*  
*Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,*  
*I say the Form complete is worthier far,*  
*The Female equally with the Male I sing.*

*Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,*  
*Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine,*  
*The Modern Man I sing.* (LG, 1)

Even a casual reading of this poem reveals the marked contrasts suggested in its diction: the phrase “simple separate person” is juxtaposed with “En-masse,” “Female” with “Male,” “freest action” with “laws divine,” and the individual or private “I” with the generic and public self of “The Modern Man.” Yet, if sets of words
and phrases that indicate polarity are present, locutions suggesting inclusiveness and unity—"physiology from top to toe," "the Form Complete"—turn up as well. In fact, the tone of the work as a whole is of robust and energetic wholeness. But there is a more subtle reason for the unity one senses in this brief poem. Seemingly without effort, Whitman integrates in it three very different entities: the divine or spiritual laws of the universe, the physical presence of a particular inhabitant of that universe, and finally, the social construct which unites this inhabitant and his peers with their historical ancestors—that is, democracy. In a mere nine lines, Whitman achieves a kind of Platonic synthesis, joining the worlds of the spiritual and the natural, then merging these with the world of artifact or man-made reality.

The national paradigm of inclusiveness, which Whitman only implies here but develops more explicitly in other works, is deeply spiritual in its origins. It suggests the presence of a unifying cosmic force that circulates through the universe and harmoniously interconnects all phenomena within it—from astronomical and atmospheric occurrences to cultural and political events. According to those who posit the existence of this cosmic force, the universe is in a constant state of harmony and equilibrium because of its presence. All elements, no matter how disparate, interact with and complement each other. Polarity, division, and hierarchy are in this view the illusions of those who, for one selfish reason or another, are too myopic to perceive the grand cosmic flow. The philosophical theory I have so briefly summarized is, of course, known as Transcendentalism, and certainly it is an important conceptual component in Whitman’s paradigm for America. After reading the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the chief architect of the Transcendental movement in America, duly recognized a soul mate. In a letter to Whitman on July 25, 1855, he declared *Leaves of Grass* to be “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.” And he added, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start.” *(LG, 732)*

Part of this “long foreground” included, of course, Whitman’s detailed familiarity with Emerson’s theories. In fact, as Justin Kaplan notes in his acclaimed biography, *Walt Whitman: A Life,* “Whitman acquired a formidable literary culture, ancient and modern,” as the book reviewer for *The Brooklyn Eagle* during the 1840s and was familiar not only with Emerson but with Thomas Carlyle, “Emerson’s own master and conduit to German philosophy.” *(128, 171). How-
ever, the development of Whitman’s thought also includes more direct and experiential sources than his on-the-job literary gleanings. Both Kaplan and Erkkila point out that his childhood education involved exposure to the Quaker spiritualism of Elias Hicks and others. Long before he encountered Emerson, that is, the poet was intimately aware of the transcendental “inner light” of the Quaker mystic. Beyond this, Kaplan and Erkkila note that Whitman’s father was strongly committed to the rationalist and republican ideals of America’s founding fathers. Kaplan recounts some telling details in this regard:

Walt Whitman Sr. was born on July 14, 1789, the day the Parisians stormed the Bastille, and he believed in resisting much, obeying little. He named three of his six sons after heroes of the Republic, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson, and he trained them as radical Democrats, on the side of the farmer, the laborer, the small tradesman, and “the people”—the banks and “the interests” were the enemy. He read books and journals of a dissenting cast and numbered among his heroes and acquaintances the patriot, pamphleteer, and antisuperstitionist Thomas Paine. (56-57)

Thus, as Erkkila aptly phrases it, “the inner light of religious spiritualism and the outer light of the revolutionary enlightenment—the doctrines of the soul and the doctrines of the republic” are dominant luminaries of Whitman’s thought, irradiating his poems and prose. (116) To students of history and literature, Transcendentalism and the Enlightenment are two entirely different cognitive philosophies, the former emphasizing intuition and imagination, the latter rationality and empiricism in the pursuit of truth. But for Whitman these views of the psychic process were simply variations on the inclusive theme of “the one and the many.” As such, the two epistemologies complemented rather than opposed each other. If Transcendental theory could discern harmony and balance in the motley world of Nature, then Enlightenment theory could affirm harmony and balance in its man-made parallel, the government of the United States.

This reconcilement of “opposed” philosophies brings us to a crucial difference between Emerson and Whitman. Whereas Emerson only concerned himself with the principle of organic unity as this concept applied to the world of Nature, Whitman was concerned not only with its application to Nature but also to the body politic.
In Emerson’s poem “Fable,” a squirrel declares to the mountain that “all sorts of things and weather/ Must be taken in together/ To make up a year and a sphere.” (389) Serving as Emerson’s surrogate, the squirrel in his awareness of organic unity is limited to physical matters only. By contrast, in *Song of Myself* Whitman’s lyric narrator recognizes the political and social implications of organic unity. He describes the grass as not only “the produced babe of the vegetation” but also “a uniform hieroglyphic . . . Growing among black folks as among white.” (LG, 33-34, ll. 99-108)

It was in *Democratic Vistas* that Whitman most explicitly merged Transcendental and Enlightenment theory. One of his main objectives in this work was to depict democracy as the ideal form of government because of its capacity simultaneously to satisfy mankind’s communal instinct, its desire for social equality, and also to accommodate its need for personal freedom and individual achievement. In reconciling these two different drives in man, Whitman fused the mystic’s sense of cosmic flow with the rationalist ideals of the founding fathers:

And, topping democracy, this most alluring record, that it alone can bind, and ever seeks to bind, all nations, all men of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family. It is the old, yet ever modern dream of earth . . . . Not that half only individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties, and aggregates, making the races comrades and fraternizing all. (DVS, 397)

So much contributed, to be conn’d well, to help prepare and brace our edifice, our plann’d Idea—we still proceed to give it in another of its aspects—perhaps the main, the high facade of all. For to democracy, the leveler, the unyielding principle of the average, is surely joined another principle, equally unyielding, closely tracking the first, indispensable to it, opposite (as the sexes are opposite), and whose existence, confronting and ever modifying the other . . . supplies to these grand cosmic politics of ours . . . the counterpart and offset . . . . This second principle is individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself—identity—personalism. Whatever the name, its acceptance and thorough infusion through the organizations of political commonality now shooting Aurora-like about the world, are of utmost importance, as the principle itself is needed for very life’s sake. It forms, in a sort, or is to form, the compensating balance-wheel of the successful
working machinery of aggregate America. (DVS, 407)

Whitman writes of the “old yet ever modern dream of earth,” the binding and adhesive force of love that “fuses, ties, and aggregates,” and also of the centripetal force of “personalism,” the compensating “balance wheel of the successful working machinery of aggregate America.” If his conception of democracy is one-half social harmony and one-half individualism, the language he uses to convey his “grand cosmic politics” is one-half transcendentalist and one-half rationalist. His images of the earth and the balance wheel are particularly interesting, the former suggesting the eternal cosmic flow and the latter, with its reference to the mechanism of a watch, evoking the Newtonian simile of the universe as a great clock.

To use one of his favorite words, then, Whitman’s paradigm of American democracy is an “orbicular” one, consisting of several concentric conceptual layers or spirals. It involves the process of man individually intuiting the harmony and balance of the universe and then, through the use of his analytical reason, developing a political structure which reflects that harmony and balance. Unlike the melting pot paradigm, Whitman’s paradigm is centered on the instincts of the individual citizen rather than on a set of institutionalized values and concepts imposed from without. It presents government as an extension of mankind’s natural inclination towards personal freedom and social equality, and it places great faith in ability of everyone to move appropriately between the poles of individual and communal interest. This is what Whitman means when he writes in Democratic Vistas that “the mission of government is not . . . authority alone . . . but to train communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves.” (DVS, 395)

Walt Whitman’s simple but powerful faith in the judiciousness of the American people in their social interchanges seems lacking in those among us nowadays who keep alive the controversy over multiculturalism and political correctness. It is wrong for some multiculturalists to declare that students are entirely the product of their race, gender, or class. It is equally wrong for some of their adversaries to assume that anyone who questions the conventional wisdom and myths of the “American Way” is an anarchist in the making.

It would be interesting to witness Whitman’s reaction to the current multiculturalist controversy if, by some miracle, he were given the opportunity to return to America exactly one century
after his death. Considering his penchant for reconciling polarities, I believe he would be energized rather than appalled by what he saw. He would set about immediately to “translate [the controversy] into a new tongue.” (LG, 48, l. 424) For those embattled over the question of relevancy and oppression in the teaching of the Western Canon, he would observe disparagingly that “The models of our literature, as we get it from other lands . . . have had their births in courts and bask’d and grown in castle sunshine . . . .” (DVS, 404) But he would also describe the “foreign” works of Homer, Plato, Aeschylus, Juvenal and other classic authors as precious cargo containing “All the best experience of humanity . . . freighted to us here.” (DVS, 422) And perhaps, viewing the entire question of the Western Canon in a fresh new light, he would add that “Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does.” (DVS, 444-45) He would remind those who continue to wrangle over which words are “politically correct” that “what really balances [and] conserves the social and political world is not so much legislation and police . . . as the latent eternal intuitional sense in humanity of fairness and decorum”; so that, in short, “control and oversight by self-suppliance is sine qua non to democracy.” (DVS, 440)

At the very center of Whitman’s paradigm, then, are his belief in the moral decency of all Americans and his trust in their innate ability to be their own arbiters of what is proper and fair in their mutual dealings. If Whitman were with us today, he would urge all those involved in the multiculturalist controversy to put aside their political pressure tactics and return to the town meeting form of American democracy. He would look askance at such prescriptive documents as “Duke’s Vision,” published by Duke University, which “installs multiculturalism as the school’s official ideology . . . though in fact it was written by the office of the dean of student affairs and was never put before the faculty for its approval.” (Siegel, 34) At the very least, he would ridicule such organizations as the National Association of Scholars, an anti-multiculturalist lobby group supported mainly by conservative foundations. (Adler, 49) He would serve notice to all the disputants that “We have had ducking and deprecating about enough” (LG, 49, l. 429) Finally, he would urge them all to convene in open forum, working together on the principle that each person has dignity within himself or herself, being in his words “One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same.” (LG, 44, l. 334)
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