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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF David Janssen for the
Master of Arts in English presented May 14, 1993.

Title: Walt Whitman's Poetics of Labor.

APPROVED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

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The purpose of this thesis is to organize and examine Walt Whitman's poetic representations and discussions of laborers and labor issues in order to argue that form a distinct "poetics" of labor in Leaves of Grass. This poetics of labor reveals that Whitman was attempting to enlarge the audience for American poetry by representing American society at work in poetry. Whitman

also used labor as a poetic subject in order to justify the work of the poet in that society. In this sense, Whitman's poetics of labor is comprised of numerous demonstrations of his argument for the labor of poetry because the representation of America at work is contained within the work of the poet.

The organization of this thesis rests upon a distinction between the work of the hands and the work of the mind. This distinction resonates in nineteenth-century American literature, and it is especially important to debates about the status of the writer in a working democratic society. This question figures prominently in the works of Emerson and Thoreau, and a central issue for both of them is whether or not the writer should participate in the work of the hands. Whitman engages in this debate as well, and argues that the poet can participate in all kinds of work through poetic representation. He participates by representing workers in poetry, and in Whitman's argument the poet then becomes a representative of those workers.

A central premise of this thesis is that Whitman's poetry of labor demonstrates an attempt to ensure that America works according to Whitman's interpretation of democracy. This is most apparent in poems where he directly addresses his working audience, and those addresses reveal a specific ideology behind Whitman's poetics of labor. That is, Whitman attempts to level the implicit hierarchical organization of different kinds of work. For instance, in such poems as "Song for Occupations" and "Song of the Broad-Axe," Whitman engages in a conversation with manual laborers in an effort to acknowledge their value and significance to the democratic process. As he celebrates their contribution, he also associates his own work with them, and argues for the usefulness of such poetry to that process as well. In such poems as "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" and "To A Historian," Whitman addresses

those who labor with the mind in order to include them in the dialogue, and also to argue that the majority of that work needs to be revised because its claim for authority perpetuates hierarchical distinctions. Whitman offers poetry as a solution, and argues that it is central to democracy because it “completes” all labor by fusing the work of the community with the work of shaping individual identity that comes from reading and writing poetry.

This thesis draws upon New Historicist methodologies and approaches to Whitman in order to reconstruct the significance of labor in Whitman’s poetics. The poetry which directly addresses laborers and labor issues in Leaves of Grass forms the basis of the argument, but Whitman’s relevant prose is considered in detail as well. In particular, Democratic Vistas is examined for its claims that the “work” of poetry is itself incomplete. “Work” is used here to refer both to the aesthetic object and the effort involved in reading it. In other words, Whitman argues that the work of poetry, like the work of democracy, is a continuous, recursive process.

WALT WHITMAN'S POETICS OF LABOR

by

DAVID JANSSEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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TRANSCENDENTALISM AND COMMERCE:

“SO MANY WALKING MONSTERS”

The relationship between the work of art as an aesthetic object and the labor involved in its production is a distinction that Walt Whitman calls into question in his own poetry. Whitman's poetic “works” on the issue of labor, when taken together, demonstrate an attempt to provide a solution to what he saw as two major obstacles to the formation of a distinctly democratic poetry. First of all, Whitman was concerned with defining what it means to work in a democratic community. Also, he wanted to justify the importance and function of the poet within that community. For Whitman, these two questions could not be answered separately. Instead, he argued that the work of the poet and the work of the community needed to be more closely connected in the sense that they should reflect and compliment each other. The poet's connection to the community consists of representing that community at work, and the community's identification with the poet lies in its readings of the poet's “work,” which entails the recognition that the production of poetry is a work activity that is valuable to that community. This is not to say that such a poet/reader relationship did in fact exist between Whitman and his audience. On the contrary, but the primary motivation of Whitman's interest in issues of labor was an effort to establish such a relationship. Related to that effort was an attempt to argue that reading poetry is a work activity in itself that is essential to the maintenance of a democratic society.

Whitman's claims for the labor of poetry makes up the center of a larger

argument that recurs throughout his poetry of labor. That is, Whitman's representations of workers and work form an attempt to reconstruct the relationship of workers to their work on all socioeconomic and political levels. Poetry is central to Whitman's reconstruction because through Whitman's poetry the work of poetry (the object) and the work of poetry (its reconstructive function) converge. The purpose of this study is to uncover and examine Whitman's poetics of labor, which reveals a unique approach to defining the meaning and significance of work in nineteenth-century America. In order to clarify that approach, it is necessary first to distinguish it from other responses to the same issue from Whitman's contemporaries Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

When Emerson wrote in "The American Scholar" that "[t]he Manufacture goes forward at all hours" (29), he was speaking not just of scholarly labor but of the entire process of production in America and of the ways in which that process was perceived by all Americans. Specifically, Emerson argues that "Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments" (28). That subjugation, however, refers not only to the relationship between the scholar and his books, but also to anyone engaged in an act of labor. Emerson sees any such division between the worker and the work as a regressive form of "Manufacture," and such regression is also related to the division of labor itself: "Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all" (25). Thus, Emerson's claim that "Manufacture goes forward at all hours" is not so much a celebration of the prevailing system of production as it is an argument against the prevailing distinctions between kinds of work because the job titles themselves are responsible for fragmenting individual identity, which "is all."

Emerson's perspective on labor issues was shared by virtually all writers

of the American Renaissance. Thoreau and Whitman especially subscribe to and extend this argument, but Melville and Hawthorne were also “interested,” in the Kantian as well as in the intellectual sense, in opening discussion of the relationship between the worker and his or her work, particularly when that discussion pertained to the work of the literary artist. Emerson concentrated on this particular issue in both “The Poet” and “The American Scholar.” In his 1837 address at Cambridge, Emerson argues that the root of this particular problem is located in the prevailing notion that scholarly work is “as unfit for any handiwork or public labor as a penknife for an axe” (29). Emerson’s strategy, which all the major American Renaissance writers employ to a degree, is to try and erase the distinction between “public labor” and literary leisure. The distinction is a problem because if the work of the scholar or the poet is not viewed as work, then any attempt to discuss the larger organization of “real” work in society within that mode of discourse is rendered ineffectual.

Emerson wants to argue that an axe is like a pen, but he also makes the less typical Romantic claim that a pen is like an axe. In other words, all work is poetic, but the production of poetry is work as well, and this would seem to indicate that everyone is a poet. As he writes in “The Poet”: “The schools of poets and philosophers are not more intoxicated with their symbols than the populace with theirs. . . . The people fancy that they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics” (243). However, Emerson also claims that all poets are not created equal because Emerson is calling for a poet who is “representative of man” (240), and who can thus “represent” man’s poetic nature in his work:

The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful; and God has not made some beautiful things, but Beauty is the creator of the universe. Therefore the poet is not any permissive potentate, but is

emperor in his own right. (240)

Emerson does not see any contradiction here between the representative “emperor” and the poets he represents because the work of the representative poet consists of restoring personal sovereignty by reaching man’s poetic “centre.” A successful recovery of that “centre,” Emerson argues, will in turn repair the “divided or social state” which has obscured a “sovereign” relationship between the individual and his labor, and which has instead produced “so many walking monsters” because the whole has been mistaken for the part: “The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship” (26).

Considering the implications of this argument, one must be suspicious of Emerson’s self-deprecatory claim in “The Poet” that he is “not wise enough for a national criticism” (250) because if the poet’s job is to revise the relationship between private self-perception and public labor, then the poet’s work necessarily becomes a political activity, and poetry itself contains within it a political purpose. This implication had a profound effect on Thoreau. The divisive effect of “public labor” is arguably the central issue in Walden because the purpose of Thoreau’s experiment is to resolve the issue by explicitly making a “national criticism” from his own example. As he claims in the opening chapter, “Economy”: “But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost” (327). By refusing to make a distinction between his life and his work, Thoreau was attempting to rectify this “mistake,” and he argues even more ardently than Emerson against a system of labor that is self-divisive:

We belong to the community. It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a man; it is as much the preacher, and the merchant,

and the farmer. Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself. (359)

Thoreau suggests, as does Emerson, that such divisiveness ultimately creates “walking monsters,” and Thoreau insists as well that what makes these fragmented workers frightful is that “this division of labor” is itself a perpetuating, degenerative process that tricks the self into abdicating individual sovereignty.

Thoreau also follows Emerson in his attempt to demonstrate that “Man Thinking” is engaged in an act of “public labor,” and not in a reflective, leisurely retreat. He argues that the “student” and the “farmer” should not be contrasted in terms of their work, and instead claims that these two workers, in a sense, compliment each other because the student “is still at work in his field, and chopping in his woods” (430). Yet, in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Thoreau attacks those who work in the student’s fields for contributing to the notion that reading is not really a form of labor at all: “Men have a respect for scholarship and learning greatly out of proportion to the use they commonly serve. . . . Can there be any greater reproach than an idle learning? Learn to split wood at least. . . . Surely the writer is to address a world of laborers, and such must be his own discipline” (126). The suggestion is that writers, if they are to deserve the “respect” already conferred upon them, need to reconsider what specifically literature is supposed to do in the world. In order to do this, the writer must participate in the world of work; he must “split wood.” Then and only then will he “learn to grasp the pen firmly so, and wield it gracefully, as an axe or a sword” (87).

Both Emerson and Thoreau demonstrate the Transcendental concern that

the capitalist division of labor was robbing individuals of their own individuality, and directly related to that was the failure of that labor system to create a space for the writing and reading of poetry that was anything more than outside the margins of that system. By attempting to create that space themselves, they were attempting to reconstruct the system in order to eradicate the fragmentation of individual identity, and to suggest that poetry was the ultimate tool for that goal.¹

There are, however, some significant problems with this reconstruction because Emerson and Thoreau essentially disagree on how to achieve it. For instance, as Michael Gilmore points out, Emerson finally rejects Thoreau's solution because in Emerson's view "farming and scholarship are incompatible" (33). For Emerson, the economic system was itself responsible for the divisiveness contributing to the self's loss of poetic "centre," and so the poet is obligated to maintain a boundary between that divisive economy and the unified "empire" of poetry. As he writes in "Wealth": "Art is a jealous mistress, and if a man have a genius for painting, poetry, music, architecture, or philosophy, he makes a bad husband, and an ill provider, and he should be wise in season, and not fetter himself with duties which will embitter his days, and spoil him for his proper work" (554). In Emerson's scheme then, laboring "with one's own hands" (554) and working with one's own mind remain divided, and it is an hierarchical distinction that places the body beneath the mind. Emerson consistently guards this distinction, and in his essay "Thoreau," Emerson states that the "learned" institutions had rejected Thoreau because they "feared the satire of his presence" (1085). Neither does Emerson seem all that comfortable with Thoreau's iconoclastic criticism of those "learned" institutions of the mind.

Thoreau, on the other hand, obviously saw it as a necessity to erase those distinctions and boundaries in order for literature to be able to do anything outside of those institutions. As Gilmore argues, Thoreau's "Labor of the hands is clearly meant to encompass intellectual as well as manual work" (42). Yet, Thoreau was, if anything, even more reluctant to participate in the market economy than Emerson: "Thoreau makes no attempt to disguise the fact that he is unable to emancipate himself completely from exchange relations" (Gilmore, 41), but he also makes no attempt to hide the tension which this inability produces between his agrarian ideal and the economic realities of working with either the axe or the pen. That unavoidable reality is continually being resisted by Thoreau even though he seems to be resigning himself to the futility of resisting such "exchange relations." For instance, in his record of the trip down the Merrimack, he writes, "we found ourselves in the current of commerce once more" (116-17) as he notices that theirs is no longer the only boat on the river. The "canal boats," which are engaged in everyday business, are encroaching upon his escape from them; significantly, this happens on "Monday." Thoreau's attempts to escape always lead him back to that which he was escaping in the first place because the current away from commerce eventually leads back towards it.

In this sense, Thoreau has no choice but to accept the current. Furthermore, his resistance to that current is complicated by his desire to retire into solitude, but during his more social moments he profoundly disagrees with Emerson's separation of the mind and the body. Here, Gilmore argues, Thoreau's social criticism reveals an affinity with Marx's concept of "reification":

By mystifying or obscuring man's involvement in the production of his social reality, reification leads him to apprehend that reality as a "second nature." He perceives the social realm as an immutable

and universal order over which he exerts no control. The result is greatly to diminish the possibility of human freedom.²

The point is that for Thoreau, nature and the “second nature” of commerce are necessarily at odds, and his solution lies in the attempt to conjoin both natures by refusing to distinguish between the labor of the hands and the labor of the mind. The problem of course is that Thoreau’s resistance to the “current of commerce” places the work of the mind in such a limited realm that the actual product of his mind’s work loses the power which his solution demands it possess in the “social realm,” and this is in part why Emerson warns the writer against straying from his “proper work.”

Even though Emerson seems to admire the good intentions in Thoreau’s goal, he argues that such an endeavor will necessarily fail because the activity of “Man Thinking” will be diminished as a result of an interference by the body’s labor. This is exactly why he thought that the experiment at Brook Farm did not succeed.³ Emerson felt comfortable with this argument because he did not perceive such division of labor to be a problem for the individual nor for the community. Emerson differs further from Thoreau by his lack of distinction between nature and the social realm of commerce. In his essay “Nature,” Emerson’s section on “Commodity” is intended to demonstrate that commerce is a function of nature, not working against it but subordinated to it. The “mercenary benefit is one which has respect to a further good. A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work” (4). Emerson’s argument suggests that Thoreau is confusing the solution with the problem because the current of nature, or the mind, and the current of commerce, or the hands, are already working together toward the ultimate goal of individual sovereignty. Emerson just wants to ensure that the “proper” hierarchy between the mind and the body

is recognized as the essential path toward transcendence: "Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result" (3). Commodity, if employed toward that "result," is but the lowest part of the process of a reconciliation with what he calls "the eternal One" (206) in his essay "The Over-Soul." Emerson wants to persuade his audience that the material results of "Man Thinking," his poetry and philosophy, are the essential commodities involved in that in that reconciliation.

A fundamental difference of opinion concerning the writer's work and that work's function in a capitalist culture emerges in the criticism of Emerson and Thoreau. They share the common goal of joining individual spirituality with the material world of the community, and for both, literature plays the central role in that transcendent marriage. They both agree that the writer is a cultural leader in the achievement of that process, but their approach to that achievement is significantly different, almost antithetical.

Fredric Jameson's discussion of the process of "mediation" in relation to literary analysis provides a useful framework around which to view this antithesis more clearly because Jameson demonstrates that the language of literature and the language of commodity are necessarily related:

Mediation is the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between, say, the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base. . . . Thus, state power is seen as the mere expression of the economic system that underlies it, as is the juridical apparatus in a somewhat different way; culture is seen as the expression of the underlying political, juridical, and economic instances, and so forth. Starting from this point, the analysis of mediations aims to demonstrate what is not evident in the appearance of things, but rather in their underlying reality, namely that the same essence is at work in the specific languages of culture as in the organization of the relations of production.⁴

When placed within the context of Emerson and Thoreau, Jameson's definition helps to reveal that both were involved with formulating a particular relationship between "state power" and "culture" as that power is itself related to literary production, and both were concerned with "mediating" the two insofar as they wanted to reconstruct the place of poetry within that socioeconomic system. The fundamental difference between the two, however, lies in a disagreement over what Jameson calls "the same essence." The issue of what is meant by "proper work" for both is central to that disagreement. For instance, in "Wealth," Emerson suggests that "the specific languages of culture" are different from "the organization of the relations of production" because one is subsumed within the other:

The true thrift is always to spend on the higher plane; to invest and invest, with keener avarice, that he may spend in spiritual creation; and not in augmenting animal existence. Nor is the man enriched, in repeating the old experiments of animal sensation, nor unless through new powers and ascending pleasures, he knows himself by the actual experience of higher good, to be already on the way to the highest. (1010)

Emerson insists on a distinction between the "spiritual" and the "animal" which is most definitely not of the same essence due to its hierarchical arrangement. By contrast, Thoreau makes it clear even in the first sentence of Walden that "animal" and "spiritual" production are not to be so distinguished. Thoreau argues that neither of these modes is "higher," but there is an implicit sense in which he places the body above the spirit because the production of his book is dependent upon the production of the house. He may have needed to build the house in order to write the book, but there would have been no book in the first place without the house. For Thoreau, the work of the hands is a prerequisite to the work of the mind:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from my neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there for two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again. (325)

Thoreau rejects Emerson's call to "spend on the higher plane" because he refuses to make the hierarchical distinction between "the labor of [his] hands" and "the writing of the following pages," and his refusal to do so is reflected in his attempt to represent the "animal" work that he did during that time in the "spiritual" work of his narrative.

Thoreau and Emerson thus become locked in a stalemate of opposing viewpoints concerning the writer's identification with "the relations of production" within the existing socioeconomic structure. Emerson wants the poet to move poetic production to a "higher plane", which is to say that he wants to keep it distinct from the lower plane of other kinds of production, but that distinction only helps to maintain the distance between the poet and the people who still "fancy they hate poetry." Thoreau's alternative would seem to resolve the latter problem, except that his movement away from the current of commerce precludes his ability to reach those people, as does his insistence on maintaining the status of "sojourner." Thoreau's concept of community does not seem large enough, and this becomes a problem if his labor as a writer is going to participate in any significant way beyond Walden Pond. In distinct ways then, both writers have placed restraints, though certainly not intentionally, upon the writer's ability to "mediate" between poetic or philosophic discourse and "the economic system that underlies it."

Walt Whitman provides a unique alternative to this issue because he was

acutely aware that poetry could and should play such a mediating role. Indeed, Whitman's poetics displays a much needed synthesis between the oppositional viewpoints of Emerson and Thoreau. While that synthesis does contain its own internal problems and tensions, it moves beyond the above stalemate because it attempts to employ a democratic principle of representation in order to envision an alternative socioeconomic structure. This structure attempts to allow for the realization of Emerson's "higher plane" while at the same time insisting that any such "higher" realm should be of "the same essence" as the lower plane. In other words, Whitman also wants to erase the distinction between the labor of the hands and the labor of the mind. This complex system of representation deserves greater attention. It is difficult to define because it comprises an intricate kind of poetic mediation, which from here on will be called Whitman's poetics of labor.

In a note entitled "Emerson's Books (The Shadows of Them)," Whitman reflects on the influence of his "master" on his own work, while at the same time offering a critique of Emersonian thought. Here, Whitman suggests that Emerson's notion of an intellectual and spiritual "higher plane" is itself antithetical to the principle of democracy upon which Whitman insists. Chiding Emerson for his "dandified theory of manners" (1053), Whitman directly addresses him:

No, no, dear friend; though the States want scholars, undoubtedly, and perhaps want ladies and gentlemen who use the bath frequently, and never laugh loud, or talk wrong, they don't want scholars, or ladies and gentlemen at the expense of all the rest. They want good farmers, sailors, mechanics, clerks, citizens, - perfect business and social relations - perfect fathers and mothers. . . . The plan of a select class, superfined, (demarcated from the rest,) the plan of Old World lands and literatures, is not so objectionable in itself, but because it chokes the true plan for us, and indeed is death to it. (1054)

What troubles Whitman about Emerson, and what he claims not to have noticed in his youth when he had “Emerson-on-the-brain” and referred to him as “master,” is a disturbing implication of social stratification, and refinement of a “higher” class “at the expense of all the rest.” The distinction between “scholars” and “farmers,” which in Emerson’s terms is between “Man Thinking” and “animal existence,” suggests for Whitman an “Old World” that is opposed to the formation of character and occupations that he thinks America primarily “wants.” In Whitman’s view, the opposition of the old and the new is violent and clearly demarcated because the continued cultivation of the old is successfully “choking the growth of a distinct democratic community, and consequently stifling the democratic process; he is still waiting and working for that old world to be overthrown: “If ever accomplished, it will be at least as much, (I lately think doubly as much,) the result of fitting and democratic sociologies, literatures and arts - if we ever get them - as of our democratic politics” (1054). In Whitman’s visionary democracy, the language of “State power” will consist of “the same essence” as the language of that State’s poetry. Whitman’s poetics of labor is an attempt to provide a framework for such a State, and, as such, it is a strategy of mediation.

This would seem to align Whitman’s poetics of mediation with Thoreau’s own theory of poetic construction. Whitman, however, also rejects Thoreau’s implicit avoidance of and retreat from “civilization” because Whitman saw his role as much more than a “sojourner” in society. Judging from his poetic voice and his life, it is most probably safe to say that Whitman would have seen “two years and two months” of solitude not as part of a process of personal liberation, but as a form of cruel punishment, and his notion of the self demands full immersion within the current of the community. As he claims in “Song of

Myself": "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, and breeding, / No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them" (210). This passage concisely captures what Whitman rejects in both Emerson and Thoreau. With Emerson "above" and Thoreau "apart," Whitman's attempt at mediation is centered on the preposition "of." This places the poet firmly within his community and that community within his poetry, and this forms the basis of his larger claim that Walt Whitman is the poet "of" democracy.

This is not to say that Whitman's thought is entirely incompatible with his contemporaries. On the contrary, it demonstrates that each of these writers was concerned with precisely the same issue which they, however, approached in very different ways. The problem for each of them, stated simply, was how to reconcile the world of literature with the world of work. Yet, Whitman's approach is at once the most complex and most problematic because it attempts to overcome the opposition between Emerson and Thoreau through a synthesis of the two. It would be simply reductive to claim that Whitman was rejecting Emerson and/or Thoreau. Instead, the fact that he wanted to include both of them becomes a problem in itself. Even though Whitman later in his career attempted to distance himself from Emerson, he was not trying to discard his former "master," or to get him off his brain. In the section "By Emerson's Grave" from Specimen Days, for instance, Whitman shows that Emerson was a source from which he continued to draw, if for no other reason than for inspiration: "we reverently come to receive, if so it may be, some consecration to ourselves and daily work from him" (922). The significance here is on the emphasis of "daily work." Whitman no doubt perceived his relationship to Emerson in the same light as he saw his reader's relationship to him in "Song of Myself": "He most

honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher" (242). Similarly, Whitman shares an affinity with Thoreau's conception of the interdependence between the work of the hands and the work of the mind. Whitman exhibits a proud sense of joy, as does Thoreau, when relating his participation in physical labor, such as when he boasts of his day working with the "boatmen and clam diggers" in "Song of Myself": "I tuck'd my trouser-ends in my boots and had a good time" (196). It might be argued that Whitman is more a poet of leisure than of work, but it should be pointed out that there is a significant difference between passive "loafing" and organizing that experience into a poetic activity in which "I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass" (188). Whitman's "observing," translated into poetic expression, exemplifies Thoreau's process of transforming "daily work" into literary work.

Ernest Fontana has argued that "Whitman and Hopkins are among the first English language poets to represent and dramatize a first person lyric voice or persona that is foregrounded in their poems as someone engaged in ordinary labor" (105). Fontana focuses only upon "the Wound Dresser" and other such poems from Drum Taps, and insists on a distinction between "the poet as worker" in those poems and the poet as a reflective "visionary consciousness" (106). For Fontana, the difference lies in the poet being engaged in work as opposed to a distant representation of a working activity in which the poet "remembers and reflects upon an accidental encounter with a worker other than himself" (106). The purpose of forming an argument for Whitman's poetics of labor is to argue that Whitman is never disengaged in this way from the worker or the work because the writing of the poem becomes, or at least attempts to become, a part of that activity. Whitman's representation of work is always intended to participate in the working process of his community.

The poem then becomes involved in a process of exchange between those workers it represents (its intended audience) and the representative working voice of the poet (a worker also).

This analysis of Whitman's poetics of labor is organized in three separate sections. The first is an examination of Whitman's representation of those who work with their hands, and argues that Whitman is drawing upon Thoreau's celebration of such work, but is also urging those workers toward Emerson's "higher plane." The second section looks at different representations of "Man Thinking" in Leaves of Grass, and it is here that the issue of inclusiveness in Whitman's poetics becomes most problematic. The third section analyzes Whitman's attempts to legislate, or mediate, the discourses of poetry and politics, particularly in Democratic Vistas. The methodology of this study owes much to new historicist approaches to Whitman, and employs an interpretive strategy which David S. Reynolds has termed "reconstructive criticism."⁵ It is "reconstructive" because it intends to show that work itself is more than a motif in Whitman's poetry; it is a primary reason for his production of poetry. I use the term "poetics of labor" because work activities and the problems associated with working in a democratic society were central concerns for Whitman to which he returned throughout his career, and his poetry on this complex subject has not been sufficiently studied, especially in relation to the poet's own work. In other words, this thesis intends to demonstrate that these poems and prose pieces analyzed here comprise a revision of a democratic socioeconomic structure which places the poet at the center of that revised structure.

In the section "A New Army Organization Fit for America" from Specimen Days, Whitman makes a suggestion for restructuring the military which provides a good starting point for this study: "We have undoubtedly in the United States

the greatest military power - an exhaustless, intelligent, brave and reliable rank and file - in the world, and land, perhaps all lands. The problem is to organize this in the manner fully appropriate to it, to the principles of the republic, and to get the best service out of it" (744). Whitman intends to reorganize, not just the army, but the entire democratic community. However, the particular "problem" that Whitman identifies here is one which he continues to encounter and attempts to overcome through writing poetry.

NOTES

¹ It is important to place this discussion in its historical context. The 1840s and 1850s in America saw the emergence of the industrial revolution as well as manifest destiny. Thus, the arguments of both Emerson and Thoreau should be read as reactions to those cultural changes. In The Machine in the Garden, Leo Marx writes that those reactions consisted of a simultaneous resistance to, and fascination with, technological progress: "But there is nothing inherently ugly about factories and railroads; what is ugly is the dislocation and detachment from 'the Whole' which they represent when seen only from the limited perspective of the Understanding. The literary problem, accordingly, is society's problem in small. To dispel the ugliness which surrounds the new technology, whether in a poem or a landscape, we must assign it to its proper place in the human scale. Artists have a special responsibility to incorporate into their work such 'new and necessary facts' as the shop, mill, and railroad. For there will always be new things under the sun, and it requires genius to reveal their beauty and value" (241). My discussion of Emerson and Thoreau, like my focus upon Whitman, is an attempt to see how these writers reacted to "the dislocation and detachment" that these cultural changes had fostered in light of the issue of work, and my argument follows Marx's assertion that "the literary problem" was seen as evidence of a larger social issue.

² Drawing upon Georg Lukács, Gilmore defines reification as "the phenomenon whereby a social relation between men assumes the character of a relation between things. Because they interact through the commodities they exchange, including the commodity of labor, individuals in the capitalist market confront each other not as human beings, but as objectified, nonhuman entities. They lose sight of the subjective element in their activity" (39).

³ In "Wealth," Emerson criticizes such Utopian reform attempts as Brook Farm precisely because he believes any attempt to join the work of the hands with the work of the mind is futile: "We had in this region, twenty years ago, among our educated men, a sort of Arcadian fanaticism, a passionate desire to go upon the land, and unite farming to intellectual pursuits. Many effected their purpose, and made the experiment, and some became downright ploughmen; but all were cured of their faith that scholarship and practical farming, (I mean, with one's own hands,) could be united" (554).

⁴ It should be noted that Jameson's discussion of mediation is intended as an attack upon Althusser's use of the term, and Jameson himself quarrels with this definition because, as he says, "One cannot without intellectual dishonesty assimilate the 'production' of texts . . . to the production of goods by factory workers: writing and thinking are not alienated labor in that sense, and it

is surely fatuous for intellectuals to seek to glamorize their tasks - which can for the most part be subsumed under the rubric of the elaboration, reproduction, or critique of ideology - by assimilating them to real work on the assembly line and to the experience of the resistance of matter in genuine manual labor" (45). Jameson's quarrel with Althusser is strikingly similar to the opposition between Emerson and Thoreau, and for that reason alone, his use of mediation is appropriate, and perhaps even central, to an analysis of labor in nineteenth-century America.

⁵ Reynolds defines "reconstructive criticism as: "a term that applies both to the process of literary criticism and to the internal workings of literary texts. As a description of the critic's task, this approach calls upon the historical critic to reconstruct as completely as possible the socioliterary milieu of literary works through the exploration of a broad array of forgotten social imaginative texts, paving the way for responsible reinterpretations of canonized works and making possible the rediscovery of lost literature. . . . Applied to the internal workings of literary texts, reconstructive criticism views the literary work as simultaneously self-sufficient *and* historically shaped by environmental factors in society and personal life. In the case of the literary masterpieces of the American Renaissance, textual self-sufficiency does not constitute a rejection or evasion of socioliterary forces but rather a full assimilation and willed transformation of these forces" (561). I have focused primarily upon the "internal workings" of Whitman's poetry and prose because a full consideration of the "socioliterary milieu of literary works" in relation to Whitman's own work would be beyond the scope of this thesis.

LABOR OF THE HANDS: THE ENGINES OF DEMOCRACY

In "Song of Myself," Whitman announces, "Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion" (204). This tendency to embrace the multitude is typical. Earlier in the poem he catalogs America's motley citizenry: "Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I / receive them the same" (193). Whitman's claim to impartiality is evident in one of his earliest occupational lists: A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker/ Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest" (204). This short list serves to support Whitman's egalitarian claims, but it also demonstrates that the concepts of "rank" and "caste" cannot be so easily discarded as he tries to suggest. This a central problem for Whitman, one which he continues to try and resolve. Although here he seems to glide effortlessly over it, he had to contend with what he called "rank" and "caste" because the promise of democracy alone could not simply abolish them. Here, Whitman's solution is to acknowledge all ranks on the same level. Yet, even with his short list, Whitman orders occupations according to some priority; no matter how it is read the "farmer" is either first or he is at the bottom. The point is that there is, at the least, a strong implication of some kind of heirarchical structure at work, and what is most important about that structure is that the "artist" is in the middle, at the center.

It is tempting to simply claim that Whitman accepted all castes and leave it at that, but one can't eradicate an hierarchial structure simply by accepting all of its elements with one standard measure of open arms. Although he claims to "receive them all the same," Whitman knows he cannot eradicate difference

through blind acceptance or denial. The central purpose of constructing a poetics of labor is to examine Whitman's representation of the American work force of the nineteenth century in terms of this conflict. Overall, Whitman seems to side with the farmers and mechanics rather than with physicians and lawyers. As M. Wynn Thomas argues, this is evident in Whitman's "deliberately sinking his own personality, as he spoke, into the general character of the group with whose situation he closely identified."¹ However, that view presents problems because it suggests that Whitman simply rearranges the social order, which is essentially the same "caste," but inverted. In other words, an hierarchy cannot be eliminated simply by rearranging the elements that comprise it. Instead, the construction of Whitman's poetics of labor reveals an attempt to circumvent this particular problem with the emergence of "the equable man" (475), the poet, as an arbitrator of socioeconomic hierarchy. This involves him in a process of leveling those differences in order to formulate a common ground based upon his own democratic ideal. As Thomas demonstrates, Whitman was writing to and for an audience that seems to have abandoned that ideal:

During the forties and fifties Whitman had seen his hopes for the establishment of some version of direct democracy in America defeated by the emergence of a representative democracy in which the ideal of a *polis*, that is, of a genuinely self-governing community, was replaced by the actuality of party politics and professional politicians. Citizens had delegated the responsibilities of running their society to a few, and those few had constituted themselves into a power class which thoroughly controlled and intimidated public opinion. (15)

Yet, Whitman's solution presents added problems because he must convince his reader that he has indeed found the center of democracy and is not simply battling the "power class" for a higher position on the occupational ladder.

Whitman's attempt to be the representative for American working men and women has the constant potential to clash with the representation of himself as America's bard, and the paradox consists of a compulsion for social reform as opposed to the impulse to create a role for the poet in a society which still supports "caste" and "rank."

Whitman, however, was well enough aware of the paradox he was involved in to offer a compromise, which consisted of associating his own work as a poet with the work of mechanics and farmers. In other words, Whitman tries to persuade his audience that building a house, constructing a nation, and writing a poem are all related processes which are dependent upon one another. He does so by demonstrating in his own poetry an integration of seemingly unrelated modes of production. The poems "A Song for Occupations," "Song of the Broad-Axe," and "By Blue Ontario's Shore" all illustrate such integration at work in Leaves of Grass. In "A Song for Occupations," Whitman makes a strong argument in favor of "the ideal of a *polis*." In "Song of the Broad-Axe," Whitman uses the axe as a trope for redefining American production and progress. In "By Blue Ontario's Shore," he transfers that trope to include the production and progress of poetry. In other words, the poet is a worker who is also engaged in the development of democracy whose words provide an essential foundation. This relationship illustrates Whitman's desire to lessen, if not erase altogether, any distinction between his pen and the axe. In fact, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the "bard" and the "rough," and that is precisely Whitman's intention.

In "A Song for Occupations," Whitman announces, "In the labor of engines and trades and the labor of fields I find the developments" (355). David Sprague Herreshoff points out that " 'A Song for Occupations' is really a poem

for those engaged in occupations, a Whitman manifesto to the workers of the United States.” Unable to find any evidence of the workers themselves in the first line, Herreshoff argues that this absence reveals a “spooky ambiguity” which is suggestive of “an animism in Whitman’s mind” (127). While Whitman’s subtle use of personification in this line may in fact indicate an animistic philosophy, the argument of the rest of the poem silences any threat of “spooky” irony which it might imply. Still, the observation is worth mentioning, because the irony can be detected within the title itself once the poem reveals its concern, not with “occupations” themselves, but with the relationship between occupations and “those who are engaged in” them. The poem is essentially didactic in nature and intends to show how the “developments” function for, and are being created by, workingmen and women on an everyday basis. Here, Whitman assumes the role of an orator in order to demonstrate his lesson. “Workmen and women!” he announces at the start, revealing his penchant for framing rhetorical argument: “Were I to you as the boss employing and paying you, would that satisfy you?” (355). The implicit answer to his rhetorical question is of course “no,” because for Whitman that relationship with his audience will not “satisfy.” Rhetorically, he does not remain on the same level as his audience, because he has a lesson to teach. Yet, he exhibits a conscious desire to close the gap between poet and audience on a socio-economic level because he is explicitly hesitant of assuming the role of “boss” or “teacher.”

Donald Pease perceives this socioeconomic context in Whitman’s poetry in general:

When put into explicit ideological terms, the ‘common self’ could be (and has been) said to mask the class distinction between factory owners and factory laborers. But at the same time Whitman wrote,

this class distinction - along with the conflicting claims of States and the Union, merchant capital and commodity capital, slaves and masters - was not masked, but available for free and open debate. Through notions like the “man-en-masse” or the “body electric,” Whitman wanted not to conceal these distinctions but to rediscover a set of shared assumptions indicating what should be done about them.²

Yet, once the tension of “class distinction” and “conflicting claims” is acknowledged, another central paradox in Whitman’s poetics is revealed. That is, in “A Song for Occupations” he declines an authoritative voice within a poem that is designed to teach: “Neither a servant nor a master I, / I take no sooner a large price than a small price, I will have / my own whoever enjoys me, / “I will be even with you and you shall be even with me” (355). Characteristically, Whitman questions the hierarchical system in the American working environment, and makes a poetic attempt to eradicate that system. This strategy can be seen as an attempt to remove the ideological mask from the “common self.” Yet, he can’t afford to be too successful because he has to retain enough poetic authority to convince his reader.

Whitman’s initial strategy for resolving this issue is to “even” himself and his audience by elevating them toward the highest hierarchical levels:

Why what have you thought of yourself?
 Is it you then that thought yourself less?
 Is it you that thought the president greater than you?
 Or the rich better off than you? or the educated wiser than you?
 (Because you are greasy or pimpled, or were once drunk, or a
 thief,
 Or that you are diseas’d, or rheumatic, or a prostitute,
 Or from frivolity or impotence, or that you are no scholar and
 never saw your name in print
 Do you give in that you are any less immortal?) (356)

Whitman’s version of egalitarianism suggests an upward mobility, and it also

implies that the hierarchy itself is rather more subjective than his audience assumes. The president is only “greater” because “you thought” that he was greater. The difference between “you” and the “president” depends upon whether or not “you give in” to it, and here Whitman’s suggestion reveals his affinity with Emerson because he relies on our common “immortality” to complete his argument. As Emerson writes in “The Over Soul”: “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One” (206). The difference is that Whitman uses Emerson’s “eternal One” for a distinctly political purpose.

Whitman alludes to this purpose in “Song of Myself” as well, when he measures the “exact dimensions” of the old gods and finds they are, at best, only equal to the average carpenter: “Discovering as much or more in a framer framing a house, / Putting higher claims for him there with his roll’d-up sleeves driving the mallet and chisel” (233-4). Yet, in “A Song for Occupations” the poet’s relationship to the working audience is considered in that measure as well. However, the relationship between Whitman and his worker-audience is not so easily weighed as that between the carpenter and the old gods. Even though Whitman seems to want to abolish the difference between the poet’s “name in print” and his anonymous audience, he does not make a case against individual ownership. Instead, he extends his rights to it: “I own publicly who you are, if nobody else owns” (356). Here, there is a sense that Whitman is staking a claim, and this claim allows him to continue on with the process of leveling socioeconomic difference while at the same time guarding his poetic originality.

Whitman attempts to skirt that conflict by involving the reader in the meaning making process of the poem. Ironically, he offers to “bring what you much need yet always have” (357), but he refuses to give that displaced “need” any material shape: “It is not to be put in a book, it is not in this book,” nor can it be found in “the president’s message” nor in “the reports from the State department or Treasury department” (357).³ “It” eludes any attempt at material transaction, including poetic transaction. Whitman demands that his reader “assume” (188) what he assumes and take joint ownership of the “eternal meanings” (355) within the poem which refute any attempt at representation: “I send no agent or medium, offer no representative of value, / but offer the value itself”(357). Ronald E. Martin notes that Whitman’s refusal to complete the transaction with his reader can be viewed on a linguistic level as well: “Whitman conceived of things-in-their-actuality as being ultimately beyond any conceptualization, or linguistic representation. In his technique of object-evocation the poet names the thing or the act, and it conveys its own inherent significance” (12). Whitman’s refusal to provide “linguistic representation” is certainly evident here, and the process of “object-evocation” reveals itself as well. However, in this case Whitman doesn’t even provide a concrete “thing” or “act” by which the internal meaning can be formulated. Instead, by bringing the displacement of “value” to his reader’s attention, he is rather significantly offering himself as an “agent or medium” through which to recover “what you much need yet always have.”

Throughout the poem, Whitman warns against the danger involved in displacing the “value itself” onto a representation of that value. In sections three and four he argues that religious, political, and not least of all, aesthetic

institutions are being misused in just this manner. “Libraries,” “our constitution grand,” and “religions divine” (358-9) have all been mistaken for the “value itself.” Whitman replies by employing images of construction: “All architecture is what you do when you look at it, / (Did you think it was in the white or gray stone? or the lines of / the arches and cornices?) (359). It is significant that Whitman uses “architecture” to form his argument. F.O. Matthiessen demonstrates the importance of this trope in Whitman’s poetry by drawing an analogy between Whitman and the American architect Horatio Greenough. Matthiessen argues that Greenough, “[h]olding fast to his conviction that the adoption of forms for purposes for which they were not intended was always a sign of decay, . . . looked directly around him for healthy roots from which American art could grow”.⁴ In this section of the poem, it is evident that Whitman likewise is affirming this “conviction.”

In their analysis of the poetic use of geometric figures, Nielsen and Solomon draw upon the work of Stanley Fish in order to argue that poets displace such figures in order to “‘deconstruct’ the world around them; they create a geometric shorthand by which the ‘fit reader’ is enabled to valorize the symbols that are sacred to technology”.⁵ In this case, it is not simply the Brooklyn bridge that is being “valorized.” Rather, the function of architecture in society is “deconstructed” in order to demonstrate its proper value in relation to those who use it. Like Greenough, he is arguing for the human ability to “form” architecture, but within that argument he also acknowledges the potential for “all architecture” to “form” human identity and perception. Here, Whitman suggests that such potential is dangerous.

In Whitman’s view, “architecture” is not the sum of its parts. It owes its

existence and shape to human perception and interpretation because it is constructed by the viewer, who is, in this sense, an architect as well. He is arguing against the individual loss of ownership of the “value” of architecture, and he provides an alternative in the form of his own transcendental vision: “Strange and hard that paradox true I give, / Objects gross and the unseen soul are one” (360). Once again, this is reminiscent of Emerson, but Whitman uses the idea to illustrate an integral relationship between working, poetry, and the ownership of value.

It is the singer, not the song, and the worker, not the work for which Whitman is arguing here, and he demonstrates this argument with a catalog detailing various workers in their workplaces. Although it has often been criticized as an illustration of Whitman’s “unenlivened”⁶ catalog technique, this section of the poem contains Whitman’s key argument concerning the worker/work relationship. Arguing for the “spontaneity” of Whitman’s catalog technique, Ronald E. Martin writes: “A Whitman list is generally guided only by association, with no categories of exclusion, hierarchy, priority or such. Its lack of logic constitutes a kind of destruction of knowledge, its spontaneity a kind of true-to-life vitality” (26). The sense of free association is apparent throughout section fifteen of “Song of Myself”:

The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big
wheel,

The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and
looks at the oats and rye,
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm’d case,
He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother’s
bed-room;) (200)

Here, Whitman’s representation of workers is subsumed within the larger “day-

in-the-life” activity which he is attempting to convey. The progression from the “spinning-girl” at work to the “farmer” in repose to the “lunatic” in confinement seems random, especially since it is contained within so many more “spontaneous” images. In contrast, Whitman’s catalog in “A Song for Occupations” does progress in a more linear fashion than most, and its logical progression is easier to detect. This is not to argue that one is more lively than the other, but it is to say that Whitman used the technique for a variety of purposes. In “A Song for Occupations,” a sense of “exclusion, hierarchy, [and] priority” in the catalog is an active part of its structure, and that structure provides a concrete illustration of his central argument in the poem, namely that “All music is what awakes from you when you are reminded by the instruments” (359).

Phillip Fisher’s distinction between “work” and “Ritual” provides an important context for this central argument: “One important aspect of this contrast between work and ritual, between output and self-regulation,” claims Fisher, “is that all societies are transparent to one another insofar as they are organized toward output Work promotes, just as ritual blocks, social transparency.”⁷ Fisher argues that social transparency is necessary in a democratic economy because without it society is incoherent. When output becomes ritualized, then not only is economic identity misrepresented as religion, but social cohesion is obscured as well (85). Fisher’s argument is useful in illustrating Whitman’s emphasis upon the way in which the worker has all but vanished from the work. With both Fisher and Whitman the emphasis is placed upon machinery and job functions, as in the first line of “A Song for Occupations”: “House-building, measuring, sawing the boards” (360).

Curiously, those who do the “measuring” and “sawing” seem divorced from the action. The only mention of the worker is in relation to the tool or the job: “The work and tools of the rigger, grappler, sail maker, blockmaker” (360).

As the list grows and gains momentum, it becomes increasingly obvious that the worker is subordinated to the products and processes in which he is involved. It would seem that Whitman’s “A Song for Occupations” is primarily a celebration of “engines and trades”: “Stave-machines, planing-machines, reaping-machines, Ploughing-machines, thrashing-machines, steam-wagons” (361). At this point, it can indeed be tempting to dismiss the poem altogether for its “unenlivened” representation. Yet, that sense of lifelessness is in perfect accord with the conclusion of the poem because of the fact that it is “unenlivened.” It is often tempting when reading Whitman to gloss over the catalogs, but in the case of this poem at least, to do so would be to miss its impact. It is necessary to experience that lifelessness in order for the conclusion of the poem to work because the appearance of the “workman” at the end would not be as powerful or noticeable if he hadn’t first been subordinated to his “work and tools.” In order to fully appreciate Whitman’s strategy here, it is important to realize, as Fisher points out, the direct relationship between “work and tools” and the common identity of nineteenth century America:

. . . the vast geography of America and the radical mixture of immigrants within that geography steered themselves toward a common identity by means that were - instead of religious, ideological, cultural, historical, or linguistic - fiercely economic and, in the end, profoundly dependent upon the mass production and broad distribution that capitalism created (62).

Whitman makes a case against dehumanized production by dehumanizing his

representation of it, and he does so by appealing to the "common identity" of "transparent" workers. In other words, he is arguing against a ritualistic approach to labor that is "fiercely economic."

This is not to say that Whitman wasn't interested in "work and tools" as processes and materials of democracy in themselves. On the contrary, Whitman continually demonstrated his fascination with all sorts of mechanical processes. For instance, "Passage To India" begins with a celebration of "The gigantic dredging machines" (532). However, even in that poem "the strong light works of engineers" (531) such as the Suez Canal reveal a "Passage to more than India" (539), and in "A Song for Occupations" Whitman is most concerned with demonstrating that all work exists for "you" and not "you" for it:

The hourly routine of your own or any man's life, the shop, yard,
store, or factory,
These shows all near you by day and night -- workman! whoever
you are, your daily life!
In that and them the heft of the heaviest -- in that and them far
more than you estimated, (and far less also,)

In them realities for you and me, in them poems for you and me,
In them, not yourself -- you and your soul enclose all things,
regardless of estimation,
In them the development good -- in them all themes, hints,
possibilities. (361)

This passage sums up the social message of the poem. Whitman's intent is not to condemn the production itself because that "daily life" is worth "far more than you estimated." As with the construction of the Suez Canal, Whitman takes a certain joy in the actual machinery of the workman's "hourly routine." In fact, between the previous catalog and the above passage, there is an excellent illustration of one of the difficulties that F.O. Matthiessen found in his analysis of Whitman's "language experiment": "In such a passage you come up against

of the most confusing aspects of Whitman, the easy-hearted way he could shuttle back and forth from materialism to idealism without troubling himself about any inconsistency" (521). Yet, in this instance at least, Whitman does "trouble himself" to deliver a rather straightforward argument, and he does so by including the parenthetical aside, "(and far less also,)." Here, Whitman argues against a working attitude or philosophy in which "realities" are in "you and me" for "them," rather than "[i]n them realities for you and me." The distinction is important because it assures against the workman's subordination to the work. Whitman's parenthetical reversal best illustrates his hope for a non-alienated working environment, and highlights the existence of what Thomas calls a "derangement of the uniformity of value" (20) in his own time.

Whitman's argument includes the "daily life" of the poet as well. In the conclusion of the poem Whitman declares: "The popular tastes and employments taking precedence in poems or anywhere" (362). Once again, Whitman advertizes his egalitarian ideal by siding with the "popular tastes." His choice of subject matter for this poem certainly suggests that he wants to practice in his own poetry this aesthetic theory. Indeed, the poem ends with a promise to the reader that he won't forsake "popular tastes and employments" for any form of institutional authority which might attempt to compromise that promise:

When the psalm sings instead of the singer,
 When the script preaches instead of the preacher,
 When the pulpit descends and goes instead of the carver that
 carved the supporting desk,
 When I can touch the body of books by night or by day,
 and when they touch my body back again,
 When a university course convinces like a slumbering woman
 and child convince,
 When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the night-
 watchman's daughter,

When warrantee deeds loafe in chairs opposite and are my
 friendly companions,
 I intend to reach them my hand, and make as much of them
 as I do of men and women like you. (362)

The parallelism works on two different levels here. First, the actor is stressed over the action. The “singer” takes precedence over the “psalm” because Whitman refuses to personify the “psalm” or any material of value with human qualities. He is arguing against the convention of personification while at the same time manipulating it to help him make the argument. Second, emblems of institutional authority such as the “pulpit” and the “body of books” are contrasted with common images of “daily life,” and Whitman subordinates each symbol of authority to its corresponding “daily” image in order to emphasize what he has already argued. However, his message is stronger because he has raised the stakes to include the institutional symbols which supposedly bind the worker to his or her work. For Whitman, the value of “daily life” cannot be manufactured, and for that reason alone it takes precedence over all others.

POETRY AND ITS “EMPLOYMENTS” IN WHITMAN'S POETICS OF LABOR

“A Song for Occupations” and “Song of the Broad-Axe” can be read almost as companion poems because in “Song of the Broad-Axe,” written one year later in 1856, Whitman employs the same argument as in the earlier poem, but focuses it upon the significance of one particular tool. In the first section of the poem, Whitman emphasizes the harmony between nature and technology, which work together to give birth to, or produce, an axe. There is the sense that the mechanical production of the axe is a natural extension of the life span of a tree, as he visualizes the “helve produced from a / little seed sown” (330).

Whitman specifically states that he wants to use the axe symbolically, as the “long varied train of an emblem” (331). Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett note that this “train” is “the poem itself” (185), but within the “poem itself,” the axe is used to symbolize the forward motion of time as well. Whitman suggests that a creative as well as a natural element is involved in the production of an axe by noting the aesthetic quality of the tool. The axe maker’s craft is likened to “fingers of the organist skipping staccato over the keys of the great organ” (331). Cecelia Tichi has argued that Whitman’s focus upon the aesthetic nature of the axe represents the “ideology of environmental reform realized in literary art of uncompromised achievement” (206). Her work is helpful not only because it offers one of the few attempts to treat the poem seriously in itself, but also because it establishes Whitman in an American tradition of “environmental reform” which can be traced back to Edward Johnson and Joel Barlow. Tichi views “The Song of the Broad-Axe” as the culmination of this tradition because “[i]n Whitman we have at last the writer in whom the ideology present in American literature since the mid-seventeenth century is realized as aesthetic achievement” (x). Yet, what is most troubling about her analysis is that she insists on separating “the ideology present in American literature” from Whitman’s “aesthetic achievement.” She demands that there be an absolute distinction between “the materials of American culture” (231) and “a poetic landscape, one sustained in language alone” (220). It is important to confront this distinction because an analysis of Whitman’s poetics of labor should demonstrate that “Song of the Broad-Axe” is deeply rooted in material culture, and that its significance lies in a dynamic interplay between the “material” and the “aesthetic,” the actual and the ideal.

Tichi distinguishes Whitman from his environmental reform predecessors

by his ability “to transcend the sociopolitical plane of experience” (225). Her entire argument rests on the premise that Whitman’s “New Earth” exists “not in its engineering” (236), but “within a self-enclosed poetic world” (228). It must be acknowledged that her thesis is placed within the context of environmental reform poets like Johnson and Barlow who used the idea of the “New Earth” in order to argue for specific “programs and doctrines on environmental reform in America” (224). By contrast, she argues, Whitman used that idea solely for aesthetic purposes. This teleological progression is useful for allowing us to see the tradition in the first place. However, it is one thing to argue that, for instance, Whitman’s aesthetic program takes precedence over his “sociopolitical” platform; it is quite another to claim that “Whitman’s New Earth lives within ‘The Song of the Broad-Axe’ without obligation to sociopolitical or economic considerations” (241). Tichi focuses upon the latter, and in doing so creates a binary opposition in the poem in which “Whitman distinguishes from ephemeral culture the enduring personal sufficiency vouchsafed to all humankind forever” (234). She uses this opposition to “diminish the powerful presence of material symbols of America” (235), and insists that Whitman was working with this same opposition in mind.

Tichi uses various pieces of evidence to demonstrate that Whitman’s poetry is intended to be divorced from the material culture in which it was produced:

The Whitman who late in life confided to Horace Traubel that he sometimes considered Leaves of Grass to be “only a language experiment” confirms what his musings on words have suggested all along: that the “words of true poems” comprise a cosmos all by themselves. He adopted this idea early, in 1856, when in the margin of a review he clipped and saved Whitman wrote, “Every first-rate poet is felt to be the regent of a separate sphere, and the master of a complete poetic world of his own.” We must look for

Whitman's American New Earth, then, as a "heart's geography's map" made and validated in the words that are respirant from the poet's mind. (228)

This evidence helps to clarify Tichi's argument, but it fails to represent Whitman's aesthetic theory in full view. Tichi succeeds in demonstrating that the idea of a "complete poetic world" was prominent in Whitman's mind, but if one is to construct Whitman's "heart's geography's map" in order to pinpoint his poetry, it is necessary to have the entire "map." As Whitman wrote in his 1855 "Preface" to Leaves of Grass:

Through the divinity of themselves shall the kosmos and the new breed of poets be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future. . . . They shall not deign to defend immortality or God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul. They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth. (25)

The fact that he insists upon "real objects today" argues directly against Tichi's claim that Whitman was trying to escape "ephemeral material culture."

Similarly, it must be kept in mind that, in Specimen Days, Whitman writes that "the costless average, divine, original concrete, " which is the ultimate poetic expression of all the "true poets," is in essence the union between "Nature and Democracy" (925-6).

What this means in terms of "Song of the Broad-Axe" is that even though, as Tichi claims, the poem does indeed transform the "real objects today" which it represents into "a fundamental symbol of life and of creation" (238), it does not follow that it has disengaged itself from those real objects. It certainly doesn't imply that Whitman was attempting to suppress those objects. It is important to stress this point because while there are problems to his poetic theory and

historical approach, a diminution of material culture (and cultural material) is not one of them. The axe is treated as both an aesthetic object and a material product, and that is what makes it such a powerful cultural symbol. Whitman characteristically refuses to differentiate the two, or create an hierarchical division between the material and the symbolic. In fact, the foremost difficulty with Tichi's analysis of the poem, in Paul Bové's terms, is her "New Critical presupposition that language magically can free itself and its user from the immediate historical past to return to some ahistorical scene which actually transcends time . . . or simply to begin again, free of historical consequences".⁸

In "Song of the Broad-Axe," Whitman makes an argument similar to the one in "A Song for Occupations." However, he becomes even more harsh in his criticism of the tendency, within his own time, to venerate things in themselves. Whitman's solution, as in "A Song for Occupations," is to transfer that veneration onto his fellow citizens. His criticism is aimed at the citizen whose democratic vision has been blurred, and who has mistaken the thing itself for the "value itself." The middle sections of the poem are typically used to support the view that it represents an anti-materialistic philosophy. Here, as in "A Song for Occupations," the "architecture" of the city exists as a function of human perception: "How the floridness of the materials of cities shrivels before a man's or woman's look" (336). While in "A Song for Occupations" the human ability to create "materials" through vision is emphasized, here a "man's or woman's look" contains the power to destroy "the floridness" of structures, but not the structures themselves. David Cavitch writes that "only the vigor of individuals survives and endures through the pomp and decay of empires"⁹ Yet, while this section of the poem can be read as a revision of Shelley's "Ozymandias," in which the materials themselves are indeed "shrivelled," Whitman argues for the

power of human vision and imagination by showing how those faculties provide us with the ability to penetrate the mask of “floridness.” The materials are not diminished in themselves, but are subordinated to those who perceived and imagined them in the first place:

All waits or goes by default till a strong being appears;
 A strong being is the proof of the race and of the ability of
 the universe,
 When he or she appears materials are overaw'd,
 The dispute on the soul stops,
 The old customs and phrases are confronted, turn'd back, or
 laid away.

What is your money making now? what can it do now?
 What is your respectability now?
 What are your theology, tuition, society, traditions, statute-
 books, now?
 Where are your jibes of being now?
 Where are your cavils about the soul now? (336)

A significant feature of this section is that it is addressed directly to someone. The questions which challenge “your” assumptions about the value of “money-making” and the “soul” suggest that Whitman is not addressing a “strong being,” but rather someone who has obscured the sharp distinction between florid “being” represented by the material, and the “ability of the universe” which is contained within the “strong being.” Clearly, Whitman suggests that a “strong being” is preferred over one who “jibes” and “cavils” about such fundamental issues. Once again, he offers to “bring what you much need yet always have,” and in this case he offers the “transparent” representation of the axe as a medium through which to move between the material and the ideal, the body and the soul.

In this sense, the poem absolutely is dependent upon the materials which engendered it, and they take an active part within the poem as well. Bové’s

discussion of "Song of Myself" is helpful in this context:

In other words, Whitman does not rest in a poetic "victory" over the outside world and over time, both of which threaten him in the poem. There is no sense of his poetry or of his journey having come to an *end*, to a *conclusion* which *sums up* the entire enterprise and contains it. There is no "concrete universal" in this poem. There is merely the continuing process of discovering and creating along the way of Whitman's daily encounters with things in the world. (172)

In the case of "Song of the Broad-Axe," Whitman does attempt to claim an historic triumph "over time", although that claim seems suspect and should be challenged. However, he most definitely does not claim a "victory over the outside world" because Whitman's use of the axe as a cultural symbol is dependent upon his representation of it as a "concrete" tool which functions within that culture in "concrete" ways. As Fisher demonstrates, "A tool exists at the site of a repeated social action. Its weight, size, and materials are all organized around the action" (86). In this sense, it becomes difficult, and also unnecessary, to distinguish between Whitman's dual employment of the axe in the poem; both functions are "transparent."

The emphasis upon organic and aesthetic qualities of the axe is extended from the first section to the second section of the poem as the "varied train" of the land is defined by its natural bounty and beauty: "Welcome are all earth's lands, each for its kind" (184). Yet, the axe, like the poet, remains at the center of those lands because these are all "lands of the make of the axe" (331). Section three catalogs the "varied " functions of the tool, beginning with "the log at the wood-pile, the axe supported by it" (331). Here, the axe is associated not only with the workers who use it and what it produces, such as "old-fashion'd houses and barns" (185), but also with American character itself, such as "the American contempt for statutes and ceremonies" (332), and finally "the power of

personality just or unjust" (334). The axe is credited with having achieved a national identity. In carving out American society, the axe reveals "the beauty of independence" (332). Here, the analogy between "the poem itself" and the axe seems most apt because just as the axe gives shape to America, the poem gives shape to the axe's central function in that process. The implication is that there is also a direct relationship between axes and builders, and words and poets.

The remainder of the poem consists of an inductive argument in which Whitman illustrates how material work, which all begins with the axe, becomes the physical evidence for Whitman's democratic ideal. In the beginning of section nine, Whitman proclaims, "(America! I do not vaunt my love for you, I have what I have.)" (338). What he "has" at first is simply an observation of the various working tools which the axe has spawned:

The axe leaps!
 The solid forest gives fluid utterances,
 They tumble forth, they rise and form,
 Hut, tent, landing, survey,
 Flail, plough, pick, crowbar, spade,
 Shingle, rail, prop, wainscot, jamb, lath, panel, gable,
 Citadel, ceiling, saloon, academy, organ, exhibition house,
 library,
 Cornice, trellis, pilaster, balcony, window, turret, porch,
 Hoe, rake, pitchfork, pencil, wagon, staff, saw, jack-plane,
 mallet, wedge, rounce,
 Chair, tub, hoop, table, wicket, vane, sash, floor,
 Work-box, chest, string'd instrument, boat, frame, and
 what not,
 Capitols of States, and capitol of the nation of states,
 Long stately rows in avenues, hospitals for orphans or for
 the poor or sick,
 Manhattan steamboats and clippers taking the measure of
 all seas. (338)

The catalog moves back and forth between the tools of production to the

product itself, from one “Hut” to many “Capitols of States.” Whitman’s personification of the axe is intended to demonstrate that the process of molding a democracy begins with that single “leap.” Whitman also uses this catalog as a rhetorical tool to demonstrate how this creative process works on more abstract levels in his own poetic vision. His shapes are ordered inductively from “[s]hapes of the using of axes anyhow, and the users and all that neighbors them” (339) to the “main shapes” which comprise “Democracy total, result of centuries” (341).

Whitman’s poetic “shapes” reveal a view of history which is undoubtedly teleological. Whitman’s use of the past in this poem suggests that the “leap” of the axe in 1856 is the culmination of all the work that has been done in previous centuries. Poststructuralist criticism of nineteenth-century American romanticism has worked to problematize such an uncomplicated view of historical development. For instance, in his discussion of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Robert Shulman discusses the effect of Whitman’s historical assumptions on the contemporary reader:

The changes made by industrial capitalism register with more impact on us than on Whitman. Whitman is a reminder of the lost promises of cohesion between the natural world of seagulls and sunset and the world of a developing industrial capitalism whose basic dynamics he failed to see as at odds with the harmony and continuity he affirms. ‘These and all else’ are not precisely ‘the same’ for him as for us. If the changes made by industrial capitalism do not discredit Whitman, they at least compromise one of his appeals to shared, enduring experience. (140)

Just as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” demonstrates an assumption of “continuity” between the present and the future, so does “Song of the Broad-Axe” reveal that same assumption bisecting the present and the past. Whitman uses the figure of the “European Headsman” (337) to sever the connection between past

and present, and by doing so reveals a view of history as a linear progression. The headsman “leans on a ponderous axe” (337). Here, the axe is viewed as passive and subordinate to the violent purpose of the headsman. Whitman condemns him for such destructive labor, but he is confident that this episode has now been locked safely in the vaults of history:

I see the headsman withdraw and become useless,
I see the scaffold untrodden and mouldy, I see no longer
any axe upon it,
I see the mighty and friendly emblem of the power of my
own race, the newest, largest race. (338)

Ironically, Whitman does not implicate the axe itself in this episode of the past. Instead, he downplays the ability of the axe to “sever the heads of queens,” and concentrates upon the creative, shaping nature of his “friendly emblem.” However, he does not deny the potential destructive uses of that emblem even among the “newest, largest race” because not only are “huts” and “capitols” given shape, but also a disturbingly familiar shape arises as well:

The shape of the step-ladder for the convicted and sentenced
murderer, the murderer with haggard face and pinion'd
arms,
The sheriff at hand with his deputies, the silent and white-
lipp'd crowd, the dangling of the rope. (340)

This “shape” suggests that the “headsman” has not “withdrawn” very far at all. The axe is responsible for shaping, but it does not seem to differentiate between “the roof over the supper joyously cook'd by the chaste wife” and “[t]he shape of the gambling-board with its devilish winnings and losings” (340) as Whitman implicitly does. A further responsibility is placed upon those who employ the tool, and he demonstrates this by condemning the headsman. In any case, it is significant that Whitman represents tools not only to demonstrate their proper employment within society, but also to shape a poetic vision across time, linking

the past to the future. What's more, Whitman seems to gamble on his future reader's ability to implement those tools symbolically in order to establish, as Fisher argues, "proof of a democratic coherence of experience over time in terms of technology" (74).

Whitman's development of the axe is important because it is central to his vision of democratic progress, and because it is the starting point for his development of the role of the poet in that democracy. Within the catalog of tools in this poem, it is curious that "pencils" and "string'd instruments" are involved in the production of houses. Similarly, an allusion to writing "tools" stands out in the catalog in "A Song for Occupations": "The awl and knee-strap, the pint measure and quart measure, the counter and stool, the writing-pen of quill or metal, the making of all sorts of edged tools," (361). While such allusions may seem random, they are significant because in Whitman's poetics of labor, the work of art (and "work" is used in the double sense of the finished product and the work involved in producing it) is central, and never separated from or subordinated to, other modes of production. "String'd instruments" and "organs" are as necessary to the forming of "main shapes" as are "saws" and "work boxes." In fact, artistic expression seems to be the goal to which the axe itself finally aspires.

With this double sense of "work" in relation to art in mind, Whitman created a kind of poetic manifesto in "By Blue Ontario's Shore." Bradley and Blodgett mention that "in theme and intent this poem is essentially the poetic equivalent of the 1855 Preface" (340). In both, Whitman issues a call to arms for American poets and poetry. In the "Preface," Whitman asserts: "Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetic stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall

not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. Of all mankind the great poet is the equable man" (8). These sentences can be found almost word for word in sections nine and ten of "By Blue Ontario's Shore." Gary A. Culbert recognizes the significance of the poem to Whitman in relation to his larger project in Leaves of Grass:

To understand why 'By Blue Ontario's Shore' received such respect and concern from its author, one must recognize the poem as nearly important as 'Song of Myself' and 'Starting from Paumonok' as a repository for germinal ideas. It is even more important than these as an example, through its revisions, of the growth and development of Whitman's thought towards the poet and the nation. (35)

By rearranging his prose argument into poetic form, he makes an even more convincing argument because now a direct relationship can be established between Whitman's celebration of the achievements of democracy at work in "Song of the Broad-Axe," and a specific celebration of the the work of a poet and a poem in a poem.

Just as in "Song of the Broad-Axe," Whitman uses the metaphor of a house to launch his celebration of poetry in "By Blue Ontario's Shore":

Ages, precedents, have long been accumulating undirected
materials,
America brings builders, and brings its own styles.
The immortal poets of Asia and Europe have done their
work and pass'd to other spheres,
A work remains, the work of surpassing all they have done. (470-1)

Here, Whitman's primary interest lies in constructing the house of and for American poetry. What is perhaps most significant about this construction is its arrangement of "undirected material" into poetic form. The fact that so many of these materials had been culled from his own prose is evidence for Whitman's belief in the power of poetic form, as if that form increases the credibility of his

assertions. Whitman is quite specific about who will be admitted into his house and who will be denied admittance. In this instance, Whitman is unwilling to accept anything that does not bear the American stamp. The “immortal poets of Asia and Europe” bear more than a passing resemblance to “the European headsman” in “Song of the Broad-Axe.”

Throughout the poem, Whitman uses images of tools and work activity in relation to the production of poetry. He claims, “We wield ourselves as a weapon is wielded” (469). Even though the image has shifted from a tool to a weapon, the “wielding” poet assumes essentially the same role as the “leaping” axe. And just as the “leap” of the axe announces the beginning of the construction of the nation, the poet who “wields” himself is involved in a similar coronation in which he announces the beginning of a new poetic era. And once again Whitman’s strategy is to begin with that single, active verb and move outward with it. That outward movement includes a catalog of the poet’s available materials. Each observation that the poet makes, from “[t]he noble character of mechanics and farmers” to “Factories, mercantile life, labor-saving machinery” (473) confirms his earlier assertion that “[t]hese States are the amplest poem” (471). He later modifies this assertion: “Freedom, language, poems, employments, are you and me” (481). Implicit in all these assertions is the claim that the poetry of “the equable man” is a justifiable “employment” in itself, and the related implication is that Whitman is himself “the equable man.” At one point, he specifies just what it means to be an “equable man”: “I dare not shirk any part of myself, / Not any part of America good or bad, / Not to build for that which builds for mankind, / Not to balance ranks, complexions, creeds, and the sexes” (481). Whitman’s goal “to balance ranks” helps to clarify his assertion in “Song of Myself” that he is “of every rank,” and the attention that he

gives in these poems to “employments” can be seen as part of that balancing process with the poet at the center.

In “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” the poet emerges as the “strong being” for whom Whitman was searching in “Song of the Broad-Axe:”

He is the arbiter of the diverse, he is the key,
 He is the equalizer of his age and land,
 He supplies what wants supplying, he checks what wants
 checking,
 In peace out of him speaks the spirit of peace, large, rich,
 thrifty, building populous towns, encouraging
 agriculture, arts, commerce, lighting the study of man,
 the soul, health, immortality, government,
 In war he is the best backer of the war, he fetches artillery as
 good as the engineer’s, he can make every word he
 speaks draw blood, (475)

Obviously, the word “equalizer” is significant in this context, but what is perhaps even more significant is the almost equivocal definition of “the equable man.” It seems that his main concern lies in maintaining the status quo, not influencing or shaping it. For instance, the “spirit of peace” finds no expression through him during wartime, and vice versa. Yet, there is no doubt of his potential power because his words have the same dangerous potential that the axe does.

Whitman offers an agreement that he will use that voice solely for the common will and good of the people. Still, he must also convince his audience that he is indeed that man. And to do so, he must convince not only the mechanics and farmers, but the scientists and priests, which is rather a different task, and a difficult one. In short, Whitman challenges those within the higher “ranks” to abdicate the hierarchical structure, and to join the rest of his audience in creating a new structure in which “I will be even with you and you shall be even with me.”

NOTES

¹ Thomas includes a section of a letter from Whitman to Traubel which demonstrates Whitman's identification with the working class: "I resolved at the start to diagnose, recognize, state, the case of the mechanics, laborers, artisans, of America--to get into the stream with them--to give them a voice in literature: not an echoed voice--no: their own voice--that which they had never had before. I meant to do this naturally, however--not with apologies--not to lug them in by the neck and heels, in season and out of season, where they did belong and where they didn't belong--but to welcome them to their legitimate superior place--to give them entrance and lodgement by all fair means" (27).

² While Pease focuses upon "Song of Myself" in the context of slavery and the Civil War, his argument that "Whitman intended his poetry to perform an explicit political duty" (119) fits well within the labor context as well.

³ Thomas suggests that underneath Whitman's resistance to specificity in the exchange with his reader "may very well lurk not only an objection to some of the dramatic social consequences of an advanced money economy, but also an awareness of the changing character of money itself. . . . By the 1850s America had come to rely heavily on paper currency, in which a note was issued in lieu of gold. Indeed the socioeconomic structure on mid-nineteenth-century America depended directly on devices for producing financial flexibility and fluidity, of which paper money was a vital example" (20).

⁴ Matthiessen typically links Greenough's and Whitman's artistic aims by viewing both artists' democratic vision: "What adds real fervor to Greenough's rhetoric is the perception, which unites him with Blake and Whitman, of man in his full revolutionary and democratic splendor as the base and measure of society. The main source for great art lies in following the body's command to create a comparably organic structure. Moreover, a healthy society can exist only if the magnificent and terrible energies of men can find through its organization their fulfillment" (151).

⁵ Nielsen and Solomon focus upon "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," and argue that Whitman fits within the tradition of poetic "building." They find it significant that his use of "the open-ended, or partial geometric figure" in the poem preceded the actual construction of the bridge: "As in the best technological designs, the plan was sufficient inspiration, almost an act equivalent to the actual construction" (8). The poem thus serves as a kind of symbolic blueprint.

⁶ In a comparison to “Song of Myself,” Shulman writes: “When Whitman fails to tap this dissident energy over the course of an entire poem, he produces the unenlivened catalogs of poems like “A Song for Occupations.” To do his best work, Whitman needs to incorporate into his affirmative vision his opposition to dominant tendencies of official society” (237). I am debating this point because I think that such an “opposition” guides this poem. The catalog appears “unenlivened” only when taken out of that context.

⁷ Fisher argues that a society that is structured around work, or “output,” is transparent because “no matter how they produce the food, clothing, dishes, and spoons, social processes can be read backward from the results” (82). That is, the “output” can be acknowledged by the community not only through the final product, but also through the work activity itself. By contrast, ritual, or “self-regulation . . . occurs as enigmatic, riddlelike, opaque details of social life, because the first act of self-regulation is not the question of power but the far more primitive question of membership, of inside and outside” (83). This distinction is significant to my own argument because I am claiming that Whitman was working against what he saw as a tendency toward ritual. Fisher’s argument is predicated upon the claim that “Americans were not a *Volk*,” a community with a “common racial origin” and a “common history” (60). Instead, he argues, Americans, from Thomas Jefferson to Jasper Johns, have attempted to “map” out a “Democratic social space” for that community, even though the basis for that community is solely economic. Fisher discusses Whitman to some extent within the context of this argument, and my purpose in constructing a poetics of labor Whitman’s work is to present his “map” of the economic “*Volk*” of America in full view.

⁸ While Bové’s argument is mostly concerned with demonstrating how such an approach denies a relationship between a poem and its past, it is not difficult to see that such an approach would be interested in disavowing a significant connection between a poem and its present as well. A closer attention to Whitman’s poem should reveal that it is dependent upon a “temporal structure” (138), and that it does not try to escape the “sociopolitical or economic considerations,” of 1856, but rather significantly confronts them.

⁹ Cavitch’s psychoanalytic interpretation of the poem is interesting as an alternative approach. His methodology provides a useful vocabulary for Whitman’s emphasis upon “individual will” (91) in the poem. But the claim that the materials themselves are devalued within the poem misses the fact that the “you” in the poem has already placed him/herself below the “great city” (190). Whitman’s argument focuses on raising his audience’s vision beyond the “pomp and decay” of those things because the “decay” of the community will occur after individual vision is weakened.

LABOR OF THE MIND: THE PROFESSOR, THE POET, AND CHRIST

Whitman is careful to balance his images of mechanics and farmers with those of physicians and priests because he is trying to distribute and instill a common value onto a democratic audience without regard to socioeconomic difference. Yet, he does not distribute that message equally. Whitman attempts to raise the vision and self-perception of his worker audience by claiming that their value to that democratic society equals that of any citizen regardless of "rank." He demonstrates that the difference between ranks is not fixed, but is merely subjective, like the difference between "you" and "the President." Likewise, he is arguing that the hierarchy involved with ordering specific job functions is based on a "feudal", anti-democratic tradition. Whitman's relationship with the lower ranks of his worker audience seems quite positive. He values that relationship because from those workers Whitman maintains an intimacy with the materials out of which "the main shapes arise" (341), and so there is a level of intimacy in his relationship with the common laborer as well. Whitman's task is to extend that relationship to include material production, national identity, and individual identity. This is a synthesis with which Whitman seems most comfortable, and it provides the basis for his attempt to reorganize his community in poetry. As he announces in "Song of Myself": "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul" (207).

There are times, however, when Whitman's contentment with this relationship, from which "hands-on" activities suggest increasingly abstract "shapes," seems a bit too comfortable. For instance, in "Song of the Exposition,"

the representation of the laborer slips into pastoral sentimentalism: "(Ah little reck's the laborer, / How near his work is holding him to God, / The loving laborer through space and time.)" (341). Whitman's celebration of "industry's campaigns" (346) threatens to break his pact with the laborer not to reify industry, and not to "make as much of them as I do of men and women like you." Yet, as if he too senses the apparent contradiction in his thought, Whitman attempts to reassure his laborer audience towards the end of the poem that he has not betrayed them by subordinating the worker to the work:

I raise a voice for far superber themes for poets and for art,
 To exalt the present and the real,
 To teach the average man the glory of his daily work and
 trade,
 To sing in songs how exercise and chemical life are never to
 be baffled,
 To manual work for each and all, to plough, hoe, dig,
 To plant and tend the tree, the berry, vegetables, flowers,
 For every man to see to it that he really do something, for
 every woman too;
 To use the hammer and the saw, (rip, or cross-cut,)
 To cultivate a turn for carpentering, plastering, painting,
 To work as tailor, tailoress, nurse, hostler, porter,
 To invent a little, Something ingenious, to aid the washing,
 cooking, cleaning,
 And hold it no disgrace to take a hand at them themselves. (347)

In terms of the poetics of labor, the poem's argument is rather subversive. Just as "A Song for Occupations" is not so much about the occupations themselves as it is about those who perform them, "Song of the Exposition" is not so much about the 1871 Exposition itself as it is about "the male and female laboring not" (346). The theme pervades this section in such admonishing phrases as "really do something," "cultivate a turn," "invent a little," and especially in the last line's injunction "to take a hand at them themselves." This is particularly ironic considering that the occasion of the poem was the Annual Exhibition of the

American Institute which was a celebration of industry and technology.¹

Whitman seems to want to ensure that the leisurely spectators at this event “confront the laboring many” (346) because beneath the surface of this paean to technology is a reminder to those “laboring not” to “really do something.”

This claim deserves further investigation. If Whitman is indeed addressing here those who are not “install’d amid the kitchen ware” (343), then what exactly is it he suggests they “really do?” To get into the kitchen and “take a hand” at material production is one obvious answer. Yet, if Whitman’s larger goal is to establish a socioeconomic egalitarianism, then this answer in itself hardly seems sufficient because to “take a hand” at “manual labor” is not the same as to be “install’d amid” it. The point is that this important undercurrent of this poem represents part of a larger argument which is central to Whitman’s poetics of labor. Addresses to, and representations of, “those laboring not” taken as a whole form a coherent argument just as his poetry to the laboring class does. These two arguments are opposite sides of the same coin because they both have in common a concern with “rank” and “caste.” The difference is that in this second argument Whitman challenges and criticizes rather than celebrates, and he challenges not so much on economic, social or political grounds, but rather on epistemological issues. Yet, for the most part, those issues are played out within particular socioeconomic settings. This is significant because it highlights a central paradox in Whitman’s challenge. That is, with a few important exceptions, Whitman dismisses a great number of “white collar” workers throughout Leaves of Grass, and he dismisses them, not only because of epistemological differences, but also because he claims that a poet (usually himself) can be more effective at those positions. The paradox lies in his simultaneous denunciation of physicians and priests and his claim to “receive

them all the same.” Throughout, as he questions the usefulness of these positions and the people who hold them, there is a tension at work within Whitman which consists of an impulse to exclude them from his vision and a sense of obligation to contain them within it. From that tension, there runs an undercurrent of ideological prejudice which Whitman cannot quite stifle, which makes this aspect of Whitman’s democratic reconstruction quite a different challenge for him. Unlike his addresses to the “common” worker, there are destructive and iconoclastic impulses at work in his various attempts to bring other professions down to a “common” level. This tension here brings Whitman dangerously close to a point where it is not “very well” that he contradicts himself because if his democratic vision is to hold true, he must find some way to “receive” those whom he rejects. As always, Whitman offers poetry as the solution.

Whitman seems to have the greatest conflict with religious workers, or at least those who work within religious institutions, whom he generally refers to as priests. In section forty-three of “Song of Myself,” he makes a sharp distinction between himself and priests:

I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over,
 My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,
 Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between
 ancient and modern,
 Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five
 thousand years,
 Waiting responses from the oracles, honoring the gods, saluting
 the sun, (236)

Whitman’s expression of his faith sounds much like a boast, especially when it is prefaced by the slight address to “you priests.” The dismissive tone seems sharper yet with the suggestion that he contains and feels more faith, not only in

quantity but in variety, than priests “all time, the world over.” Whitman’s faith is allegedly all inclusive and pantheistic. For him, there is no contradiction between “minding the Koran” (236) and “[a]ccepting the Gospels” (237). Whitman claims not to “despise” priests, but as representatives of faith, and as workers within a tradition of faith, he clearly finds their job inadequate. Whitman knows that his association of himself with Christ will read like heresy to those who work to maintain the hierarchical “chain of being.” The point is that here Whitman wages a thinly veiled attack on those who are occupied in the religious field.

In “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” the force of this attack is amplified. He dismisses the priests much like Plato would banish the poets:

Already a nonchalant breed, silently emerging appears on
the streets,
People’s lips salute only doers, lovers, positive
knowers,
There will shortly be no more priests, I say their work is done,
Death is without emergencies here, but life is perpetual
emergencies here,
Are your body, days, manners superb? after death you shall
be superb,
Justice, health, self-esteem, clear the way with irresistible
power;
How dare you place any thing before a man? (479)

Whitman essentially has “fired” the priests on various grounds: They are neither “doers” nor “lovers, and they contain no “positive” knowledge. Worst of all, they place primary importance on “Death” rather than on the “perpetual emergencies” of the material present. Ironically, in the next section of the poem Whitman insists that he has “argued not concerning God” (479). In a sense, this is true because his argument is focused upon the professional institution of “priests,” and not on the spiritual “faith” which that institution has mismanaged

and misrepresented.

It is not entirely clear just whom he means when Whitman uses the word “priest.” It is certainly a denominational label, but it is a socioeconomic one as well. Recall that in “A Song for Occupations,” Whitman promises that “[w]hen the script preaches instead of the preacher,” he will value the former as much as he already values the latter. Here, Whitman defends the humanity of the “preacher” as well as the work that he performs. This defense further problematizes his dismissal of the priest because here is a clear instance of Whitman’s reception of religious workers within his democratic scheme. However, this does not necessarily imply the acceptance of priests because Whitman does not use the two labels interchangeably; a preacher is not a priest. In order to clarify the difference, it is necessary to acknowledge what Matthiessen calls the “Quaker center” of “Whitman’s vision” (539).

It is often noted that Elias Hicks, the Quaker preacher, had a formative influence on Whitman, one which he consistently acknowledged throughout his life. Justin Kaplan notes that Whitman’s family “tended toward Quakerism but belonged to no meeting.” Whitman’s mother, according to Kaplan, attended church intermittently, while his father never went. The evidence strongly suggests that “religious exercises or observances did not figure in their home life” (70). However, it does seem to be the case that the entire family did admire Elias Hicks, and did attend his occasional sermons. Kaplan further writes that Hicks was, at the time of Whitman’s childhood, “at the center of the doctrinal storm that two years earlier had split the Society of Friends into liberal and orthodox communions” (68), with Hicks residing in the “liberal” camp. This anecdote is useful because it can help clarify, not only the pervasiveness of Hicks’ influence on Whitman, but also Whitman’s distinction between priests

and preachers.

Hicks seems to have provided the young Whitman an early example of the possibilities of expression in language. David Reynolds writes, "the Quaker belief in spontaneous expression of the 'inner light,' divorced from creeds or churches, prepared the way for Whitman's singing of himself" (24). The separation of "creeds and schools" from individual spirituality is indeed a pervasive theme in Whitman's poetry, and is the central motivation behind his dismissal of priests. Hicks was involved with making a similar separation, and this is the key issue behind Hicks' influence on Whitman. Rather than inspiring him to follow a specific "creed," Hicks inspired Whitman to write poetry. As Kaplan writes:

When he was about twenty he debated with himself whether he should become a Hicksite Quaker, but he put aside this as impossible. "I was never made to live inside a fence" - he was certain Leaves of Grass could never have been written on the inside of anything. Judging from this outcome, the orthodox Quakers may have been right, after all, when they denounced Elias Hicks as being little better than a deist and a heretic, and for Whitman himself even this exemplary preacher - a "brook of clear and cool and every healthy, ever-living water" - could only go so far. (70)

Hicks' influence on Whitman provides a perfect illustration of what David Reynolds calls the "process of assimilation and transformation" (562). That is, just as Hicks "transformed" the Quaker "creed," Whitman reshaped Hicks' sermons into a religious and spiritual poetic expression that was independent of any specific "creed." Hicks provided Whitman with an early model of this process through his "transformation" of the Quaker's "creed," which helps to explain Whitman's lifelong admiration of the preacher, and, more importantly, the distinction which "the preacher" receives in "A Song for Occupations."

Whitman makes no such allowance for priests. Admittedly, he is rather

vague concerning the priests whom he denounces. He does not place them in a specific environment, let alone a specific working environment. All we are really told is that shortly they will no longer be needed. The label itself is rather vague. Is this a veiled attack on Catholicism? Could those orthodox Quakers who opposed Hicks be considered priests? Here, Whitman's own ideological agenda is most apparent because the implication is that priests are those who defend any form of religious orthodoxy. His attack is aimed at those representatives of religious tradition who stand in the way of the religious "transformation" he is trying to administer. Anyone who resists this change, including the physicians and priests he claims to represent, will in fact be excluded from Whitman's democratic reformation. Typically, he does not seem to have been bothered by this apparent contradiction.

Whitman's attitude toward priests is unequivocal throughout his career as a poet. In section forty of "Song of Myself," Whitman announces his own ability to heal and restore life to "any one dying." He offers himself as the complete physical and spiritual healer and commands, "Let the physician and the priest go home" (232). In the following section, Whitman assembles a melting pot of Gods, from "Jehovah" to "Mexitli," in order to announce that "they were alive and did the work of their days". Whitman implies that their "work" is completed, but he further suggests a way in which these "dead" Gods might still prove useful: "Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself / Discovering as much or more in a framer framing a house, / Putting higher claims for him there with his roll'd up sleeves driving the mallet and chisel" (233). In this sense, the Gods and the priests are much like the European Headsman from "Song of the Broad-Axe," who also "did the work of . . . [his] days." This comparison seems especially fitting because just as a linear view of history is traced in "Song of the

Broad-Axe" from the Headsman to the carpenter, so do the Gods participate in a similar teleological progression. This progression culminates in Whitman's claim that he can now complete "the rough deific sketches" by transforming them in his own image, and then disseminating them out toward those with "roll'd up sleeves", the workers and the drivers of the democratic engine. Additionally, in his representations of them, the workers themselves are endowed with even greater power than the Gods whom they have replaced. So, by spreading that message to them through poetry Whitman has assumed the role of the preacher in an attempt to overtake the priest.

Whitman makes this very claim in Democratic Vistas by stressing the "social and religious" function of the poet's role: "View'd, to-day, from a point of view sufficiently over-arching, the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature. The priest departs, the divine literatus comes" (932). Whitman sees the progression from priest to "divine literatus" as arbitrary and inevitable, just as he viewed the progression from headsman to "wood-cutter." What is most significant about this progression is the replacement of an old order with a new one, and here Whitman's "social and religious" solution becomes problematic because what is at stake here is Whitman's egalitarian ideal. It is not altogether clear whether the "divine literatus" is simply replacing the priest's position in the social and religious hierarchy, in which case the old order itself is retained, or whether his emergence represents a revision of the "problem." One thing is certainly clear; unlike the allowance made for a preacher such as Elias Hicks, who possesses the ability to merge religious principle and poetic form, the unpoetic priest is gone, and this seems at odds with his claim to "receive them all." However, in this instance, that claim suggests something other than

accepting and acknowledging all workers and trades because Whitman “receives” the priest by terminating him and replacing his position with that of “the divine literatus.” Ironically, in his dismissal of the priest, Whitman seems much more comfortable assuming the role of the boss than in any of his addresses to the common worker.

This is not to say that religion itself ceases to play a major role in Whitman’s reconstruction. On the contrary, Whitman dismisses the priest because he opposes any distinction between the spiritual and the material, and “the divine literatus” represents the beginning of the end of such self-division. Whitman’s relationship with God, and thus his “social and religious” message as a poet-priest, is quite different even from Elias Hicks’ liberal Quakerism. For instance, in the 1860 poem “To Him that was Crucified,” he displays this unique religious viewpoint through a direct address to Christ: “My spirit to yours Dear Brother / Do not mind because many sounding your name do not understand you, / I do not sound your name, but I understand you” (510). Typically, Whitman announces the possession of valuable knowledge which he refuses to name, just as he refused to name the “value” of labor in “A Song for Occupations.” The comparison is apt because in that poem he argues for the commonality of the laborer and the president, and in this poem he argues against the hierarchical relationship between himself and “Him.” This egalitarian relationship with the divine is extended to include his audience as well.²

Whitman’s relationship, however, with Christ is still in some ways exclusive, and this would seem to undermine that extension. As he continues his message to Christ, it appears as if Whitman has ascended to a higher rank denying any further access to it: “That we all labor together transmitting the same charge and succession, / We few equals indifferent of lands, indifferent of

times, / We, enclosers of all continents, all castes, allowers of all theologies, / Compassionaters, perceivers, rapport of men" (510). This poem can be read simply as a paean to martyrdom in which case Whitman obviously maintains at least a spiritual hierarchy. The "few" who comprise this "caste" seem to be involved in the process of disseminating and dividing "continents" by maintaining control of "all theologies," Yet, at the end of the poem Whitman includes a clause which does provide an opening for the many who do not belong to this exclusive group. He tells Christ that both of them are working together with the hope of "transmitting" the possibility that everyone "may prove brethren and lovers as we are" (510). So, in one sense a religious hierarchy is maintained, but with this last statement he also includes the possibility that "all castes" can achieve "the same charge and succession" that he and Christ already enjoy.

According to Whitman, this latter possibility is denied by the priest's creed because the aristocratic structure of that creed is antithetical to democracy. Whitman uses the priest to represent this "religious and social problem" in other aspects of social organization as well. For instance, in Democratic Vistas he draws an analogy between the priest's system and the system of military organization in America:

The whole system of the officering and personnel of the army and navy of these states, and the spirit and letter of their trebly-aristocratic rules and regulations, is a monstrous exotic, a nuisance and revolt, and belong here just as much as orders of nobility, or the Pope's council of cardinals. I say if the present theory of our army and navy is sensible and true, then the rest of America is an unmitigated fraud. (956)

The "orders of nobility" to which Whitman objects in the military hierarchy manifest themselves most clearly in "the Pope's council of cardinals," and

Whitman unequivocally claims that such a system does not belong in his democratic model. Instead, Whitman's system of organization, whether it be religion or the military, always includes the possibility of ascendancy toward the upper levels of those organizations. In addition, Whitman uses the older organization of religious "nobility" as a kind of litmus test in order to verify the organization of other social institutions in his democratic model. Of course, in the case of the military, he does not provide an alternative to "the present theory," but the significance of the passage lies in the comparison itself. The task of the poet in Whitman's democracy is to judge those institutions and require that they are organized in accord with his egalitarian ideal. As Herbert J. Levine has argued, Whitman "conceived of his role evangelically" (147), and Whitman used his role as a poet in order to reconstruct a religious foundation which was independent of older religious paradigms. As Levine writes:

Egalitarianism and individualism were, in Whitman's view, essential American values. In his version of the national myth, the American people had made a solemn covenant in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to make equality and liberty the sacred principles of national life. . . . It was clear to him that American democracy needed to have its cardinal principles reformulated on a religious basis. Christianity, he saw, could not be the religion of the republic: its theology was monarchical and its doctrine of the Incarnation, privileging the divinity of one special person, was undemocratic. (148).

Whitman was not willing to accept any "monarchical" model of social organization, and again that refusal reveals the basis of Whitman's own ideological bias. Levine's argument demonstrates that Whitman's reformulation necessarily included a rejection of certain "undemocratic" principles, from which follows his dismissal of certain "undemocratic" professions such as priests.

Whitman followed this same process of reconstruction in his examination

of other institutions as well. For instance, Whitman inspects and judges institutions of science and education just as he does with religion. Although he is less harsh in his treatment of them, Whitman finds essentially the same problem underlying these institutions in their failure to organize according to that democratic principle. Additionally, these evaluations are complicated by Whitman's repeated claim for the superiority of poetry in relation to every institution he evaluates. In other words, while he attempts to reorganize these institutions on political and socioeconomic grounds, he simultaneously criticizes them on epistemological and aesthetic grounds. The poet is always superior to any other institution he presents. True, there is a sense in which institutions themselves, especially the institution of science, are themselves mythologized through poetic representation, but that is always qualified by the claim that the poet's work is more effective.

In "Song of Myself," there is a similar ambiguous attitude in Whitman's address to scientists as in his address to the priests whom he denounces but claims not to "despise." In one sense, Whitman's treatment of science and scientists is much more favorable, even congratulatory. Robert J. Scholnick, for instance, has argued for this favorable treatment: "The conceptions of the scientist provide the poet with the originating ideas or 'seed' of poetic ideas" (385). This is undoubtedly true, but Whitman's treatment of the scientific profession is much more ambiguous than Scholnick suggests because while he does seem more inclined to accept the disciplines of science, there is the same sense here that ultimately he is working to overcome them. Section twenty-three begins with a dedication:

Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration!
Fetch stone crop mixt with cedar and branches of lilac,
This is the lexographer, this the chemist, this made a

grammar of the old cartouches,
 These mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas,
 This is the geologist, this works with the scalpel, and this is
 a mathematician. (210)

Here, Whitman celebrates scientists for their work in much the same way that he celebrates the work of the wood-cutter. He also approves of the scientists' epistemology of classification because it provides a method of classifying the "stonecrop," "cedar," and "lilac," which is an "exact demonstration" of the scientific method. He also congratulates them for adding to worldly knowledge and charting "the ship through dangerous unknown seas." He acknowledges the useful work they perform, and he sees as well how each separate scientific discipline can be used in a practical sense. Science "works," and this suggests that Whitman has judged the work of science to be appropriate to his idea of democracy. Yet, he is careful to distance himself and his poetic discipline from it as well.

Immediately following this celebration, Whitman claims that the work of science is not his work, because science is not poetic, and, therefore, incomplete: "Gentlemen, to you first honors always! / Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling, / I but enter them to an area of my dwelling" (210). He acknowledges that "facts are useful" not only by providing the practical knowledge of how nature can be "mixt" for human benefit, but also because he can "enter by them" the higher discipline of poetry. He can use scientific "facts" for poetic material, as this section itself demonstrates, but, more importantly, he can use them to acquire "an area" of poetic vision. The scientists' inability to transform facts into poetry represents their major limitation in Whitman's argument, and Whitman attempts to "complete" scientific discourse by adding

poetry to it. He makes this attempt most convincingly in the 1865 poem "When I Heard the Learnd Astronomer" where Whitman presents his reaction to an astronomer's lecture:

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before
me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide,
and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with
much applause in the lecture room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars. (409-10)

Whitman clearly is not impressed with the "charts and diagrams," and neither does he seem taken up with the ceremony, "with much applause," of the lecture. Indeed, the entire spectacle seems to nauseate him. Whitman's alternative view of astronomy suggests what the astronomer cannot chart, namely the "mystical" quality and "perfect silence of the stars." Once again, as with religious knowledge, Whitman is not only able to understand and use scientific knowledge, but he also transforms that knowledge by completing "proofs" and "figures" and endowing them with poetic vision.

The setting for this poem is significant. The exact occasion is not known, but what is important is that Whitman places the astronomer in "the lecture room" in his own working environment. In other words, this is a portrait of a scientist at work, and it is clear that the poet, unlike the rest of the audience, finds little use for such work. Whereas in "Song of the Broad-Axe" the wood-cutter's axe becomes the object of celebration, the astronomer's "charts" and "diagrams" become the objects of parody. It is unclear whether the poet flatly rejects the astronomer's "proofs," or if he uses them by transforming them into

his own “dwelling.” In any case, the message that there is more on heaven and earth than the astronomer dreams of in his philosophy is quite clear. Whitman objects to scientific methodology for much the same reason that he rejects the work of the priest. That is, it robs the observer of direct access to the observed. However, this is not to say that Whitman was rejecting science any more than he was rejecting religion. It is to say that Whitman can make better use of both disciplines. In a sense, the poet becomes the archetypal priest and the quintessential scientist. “When I Heard the learned Astronomer” is also a demonstration of the “equable man” at work.

In “Song of the Answerer,” Whitman provides another description of the “equable man,” Just as the “equable man” is democracy’s “common referee,” so can the “Answerer” level all hierarchies. Both the “President” and “Cudgel that hoes in the sugarfield” are given equal treatment by the “Answerer,” and “both understand him and know that his speech is right” (316). Like the “equable man,” the “Answerer” is also a poet, but the “Answerer” has an even greater ability to envelop all “creeds and schools” as well as scientific and religious institutions. For instance, he claims, “The words of true poems are the tuft and final applause of science” (317). Of course, the maker of “true poems” is the “Answerer,” whose poems have the ability to deliver the listener “into space to behold the birth of stars, to learn one of the meanings” (317), and this is precisely the “meaning” which Whitman finds lacking in the astronomer’s “answer.” In other words, the poet completes the “facts” of science by translating them into “true poems.” As Diane Kepner demonstrates, those “true poems” reveal the interdependence between materialism and idealism, “God” and “atom”, in Whitman’s system:

The scientist’s view, according to Whitman, is useful but not whole.

He thinks it time to recognize that the poet's view of the world is more comprehensive than the scientist's. . . . What this means for Whitman is that the deliberately metaphorical language of poetry offers a better description of "reality" than the language of science. (197)

As with religious discourse, Whitman's use of scientific language consists of transforming it into poetic language which can best communicate his "answer" that "the truth of Being is knowable, and that direct observation of the visible world can give each of us a more accurate and personally meaningful sense of the truth than all the logic and sermons of priests, scientists, and philosophers" (Kepner, 187). According to Whitman's epistemology, poetry is the "final applause" of every discipline.

The poet, along with his ability to bridge the spiritual and physical world, contains an administrative power that forms the basis of his role within Whitman's poetics of labor. It is the ability to communicate through "true" poetry which contains all knowledge and disciplines. In other words, the "Answerer's" poems contain a new, inclusive, one might even say interdisciplinary, epistemology which is powerful enough to effect societal reform. What's more, they have the power to be understood by everyone because they encompass everyone:

The sailor and traveler underlie the maker of poems, the
 Answerer,
 The builder, geometer, chemist, anatomist, phrenologist,
 artist, all these underlie the maker of poems, the
 Answerer,

The words of the true poems give you more than poems
 They give you to form for yourself poems, religions, politics,
 war, peace, behavior, histories, essays, daily life,
 and every thing else,
 They balance ranks, colors, races, creeds, and the sexes,
 Forever touching them or close upon them follows beauty,

longing, fain, love-sick. (318)

Here, Whitman's occupational list includes scientists almost exclusively. Even those not directly involved in a scientific discipline use science and are dependent upon it. It is no coincidence that the "builder" and the "geometer" are linked together in this list. It is also no coincidence that the artist is at the end because in Whitman's scheme it is the artist who represents the "final applause," or completion, of science. That completion entails a reformulation of political, social, and religious institutions, and "true poems" endow each citizen with the tools to reconstruct those institutions and thereby to "balance" them. Whitman is not simply an iconoclastic revolutionary intent on destroying all social organization; he is very much interested in how those organizations can work more effectively within a democracy, and his addresses to the workers within those institutions are intended to supply them with the vision of poetry. The lack of such vision underlies the "social and religious problem" which he is trying to correct through poetry.

The workers on the higher end of the hierarchy suffer from the same malady as the common laborers do, but while Whitman wants to validate common labor and reify it through poetry, he wants to persuade the "shapers" of institutional knowledge to change radically their ways of working, and in some cases, to stop working altogether. In "To a Historian," Whitman offers another such message which closely resembles his critique of the astronomer's lesson. However, in this case Whitman reveals a stronger affinity with the historian's discipline while at the same time arguing against the historian's use of it. The historian has vision as well, but it is focused in the wrong direction:

You who celebrate bygoness,
Who have explored the outward, the surfaces of the races,

the life that has exhibited itself,
Who have treated of man as the creature of politics,
aggregates, rulers and priests (167).

Whitman accepts this process of exploration, but he rejects the methodology. The historian's focus on "the outward" and "surfaces" is problematic for Whitman because it is antithetical to his poetic explorations. As he exhorted the workers in "A Song for Occupations," any construction which will serve the purpose of democracy should work "for you" not the other way around. The historian's focus upon "bygones" and his explorations of what happened in the past work to create the same paradigm of "man as the creature" of his own constructions in the present. Whitman, on the other hand, claims to have found a better method of using history which reverses that paradigm:

I, habitan of the Alleghanies, treating of him as he is in
himself in his own rights,
Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom exhibited itself,
(the great pride of man in himself,)
Chanter of personality, outlining what is yet to be,
I project the history of the future. (167)

Of course, as Roy Harvey Pearce has argued, this view of history is also problematic because it oversimplifies historical process, and because it neglects Whitman's own "present" relationship to history: "The poet of the future . . . is so by virtue of being the poet of the present, not the poet of the present and the past but the present as it derives from the past" (93). Additionally, Whitman's glaringly oxymoronic projection of historical futures reveals a teleology which seems to invalidate any discussion of "bygones" that would treat the past as anything but an unsuccessful attempt of present achievement. This is precisely what happens in his history of the axe, which is intended to glorify the present through a condemnation of the past. He is only interested in

the surface exploration of the medieval headsman insofar as it confirms his vision of “the history of the future.”

It is tempting to claim that Whitman here is anticipating Hayden White’s view that all historical narratives have their “origins in the literary imagination” (99). As White Argues: “The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable” (98). However, unlike White, Whitman seems to be claiming that both the historian’s and the poet’s projections represent the “actual.” In other words, there is no argument in Whitman’s poem against the actuality of historical accounts, just as Whitman’s visionary “outlining” is not taken to be fictional. Instead, the difference between the two lies in the poet’s superior perspective. For Whitman, the historian’s work is inadequate because it focuses upon what “has [already] exhibited itself,” while the poet has the greater ability to shape what “has seldom exhibited itself.” Whitman objects to the historian’s view because that method suggests that Whitman (and all of us) is not “in himself in his own rights,” but is the “creature” of his own past. Again, this is a problematic issue in Whitman’s epistemology, but one way to understand his position is through his representation of differing epistemologies in terms of his poetics of labor because his arguments with religious, scientific, and academic methodologies are represented in direct addresses to the workers of those respective disciplines.

Everyone but the poet seems to prove inadequate in providing the structure most conducive to the democracy he is trying to construct. In this sense, the poet serves an instructive function. He is a teacher who incorporates

different disciplines and methods of interpretation, and who translates this multi-disciplinary epistemology into poetry for the instructive purpose of giving material shape to that vision. In order to communicate this vision, Whitman often adopts the persona of a teacher, as in “Who Learns my Lesson Complete?”:

Boss, journeyman, apprentice, churchman and atheist,
The stupid and the wise thinker, parents and offspring,
 merchant, clerk, porter and customer,
Editor, author, artist, and schoolboy- draw nigh and
 commence;
It is no lesson - it lets down the bars to a good lesson,
And that to another, and every one to another still. (517)

Once again, Whitman uses a short categorical list in order to create the impression of unanimity which is suggested here with his use of such binary oppositions as “churchman and atheist.” There is also a sense of equivocation on Whitman’s part here. He has assumed the role of the teacher, gathered everyone into one poem, and then claims that his lesson “is no lesson.” He would appear to be uncomfortable with the role, but this is characteristic of Whitman’s pedagogical technique. The same strategy is employed in “A Song for Occupations” in which Whitman promises the “value itself” while at the same time refusing to clarify or specify whatever it is he has to offer. Whitman concedes that he cannot explicate his lesson, at least not in the way that an astronomer can explicate the stars: “I cannot say to any person what I hear - I cannot say it to myself - it is very wonderful” (518). In essence, the sense of the “wonderful” is the “lesson complete.” The word is used ten times in this short poem. Whitman’s sense of wonder includes his faith in human immortality, the memory of “my mother’s womb,” our ability to “affect each other without ever seeing each other,” and the simple fact that “the moon spins round the earth,”

which are all “equally wonderful.” Whitman’s “lesson” suggests that both “boss” and “journeyman” are “equally wonderful” as well, and both have an equal access to the “wonderful,”: “And that I can think such thoughts as these is just as wonderful, / And that I can remind you, and you think them and know them to be true, is just as wonderful” (518). This short poem provides another demonstration of the “equable” poet at work.

Whitman’s affinity with the role of the teacher is similar to his identification with Christ in “To him that was Crucified.” This becomes clearer yet if the above poem is read in conjunction with “The Base of All Metaphysics,” written in 1871. In this short poem, an “old professor” lectures on the “base and finale too for all metaphysics” (275). Significantly, the professor is also placed within his own working environment. “At the close of the crowded course,” he tells his students that the foundation for his lifetime study, which includes “the new and antique,” from Socrates, Plato and Christ to Kant and Hegel, is a knowledge of “the divine”: “The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend, / Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents, / Of city for city and land for land” (275). What is most striking about this portrayal is that it represents the philosophy of the “Answerer” in the voice of a character other than Walt Whitman. Like Whitman, the professor is working against an inherited tradition which has obscured the proper relationship between philosophical authority and “the value itself.”

The defining characteristic of an “equable man” or an “Answerer” is his ability to work against institutional authority, not in order to destroy it, but to “complete” it. Whitman addresses this issue in the 1860 poem “I Hear It Was Charged Against Me.” He refutes the charge that he “sought to destroy institutions, / But really I am neither for nor against institutions / (What indeed

have I in common with them? or what with the destruction of them?)” (281).

Instead, he claims that his goal is constructive because he seeks to establish “the institution of the dear love of comrades.” Whitman further suggests that he is not working alone toward this endeavor. The professor also lays “the divine” foundation underneath the academic institution, just as Whitman does himself in the case of religion, science, and history. This says much for the stature of the professor in terms of Whitman’s poetics of labor because he is one of three others who is allowed to assume the role of “Answerer” or “equable man.” Christ and Abraham Lincoln are also both included with Whitman in this exclusive group. Yet, what remains to be seen is just how this essentially authoritative, administrative body, which Whitman as poet chairs, can be reconciled with his poetic construction of socioeconomic equality. This raises a number of issues, the most important of which concerns the paradoxical position of the poet in this construction.

NOTES

¹ In their notes to the Norton Critical Edition of Leaves of Grass, Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett note that the poem “was published in the same year as a booklet under the title After All, Not to Create Only. The latter title seems to be more in keeping with the labor theme of the poem, especially since Whitman is arguing that all creations, including the creation of an “Exposition,” require labor of the hands as well, which, unlike the “creative” labor of the mind, goes unacknowledged.

² Matthiessen was particularly disturbed by the ease at which Whitman “transferred the supremacy [of Christ] to himself” (545), and he attempts to trace the effects of that transference up to his own time: “This religious assurance, unleashed from all control in dogma or creed, must be called no less than terrifying in the lengths to which it was to go in proclaiming the individual as his own Messiah. For this tendency, so mildly innocent in Emerson, so confused and bombastic in Whitman, was to result in the hardness of Nietzsche. . . . When the doctrine of the Superman was again transformed, or rather, brutally distorted, the voice of Hitler’s megalomania was to be heard sounding through it” (546). The historical links here are, at the very least, questionable, but Matthiessen’s main point is “that the source of [Whitman’s] real poetry was not in the grandiose or orotund but in the common and humble” (546). However, the distinction between “grandiose” and “common” is precisely the one which Whitman is trying to erase. Nonetheless, Matthiessen’s Christian reading of Whitman is interesting because it demonstrates the enormous risk that Whitman was taking by identifying himself with Christ.

POLITICAL AESTHETICS: THE POETIC PRESIDENT THROUGH TIME

The inclusion of Lincoln into the group of “Answerers” and “equable” men is suggested by Whitman’s cluster of poems dedicated to him. The association is most clear in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” with its depiction of the Christ-like Lincoln as a savior of democracy. Whitman views Lincoln’s death as a kind of triumph because his efforts to restore the union were successful. This is suggested in the elegy in the collective manner in which each and all mourn Lincoln’s death:

With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the
bird,
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever
to keep, for the dead I loved so well,
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands - and
this for his dear sake,
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim. (467)

The poem ends on this positive note, suggesting a sense of order, faith in the union, and even harmony between the “comrades mine” and nature; all are restored through the shared ritual of mourning.

In all the Lincoln poems, a sense of hierarchy is maintained between the fallen president and the mourners, including the poet. Such deference is rare in Whitman’s voice. Even in his address to Christ Whitman is careful to erase such a deific tone. Similarly, the popular “O Captain, My Captain” employs a military order which Whitman elsewhere attempts to debunk. On the surface, this status is conferred upon Lincoln because of the perceived agreement between Whitman and his comrades that Lincoln’s policy was responsible for the

maintenance of their community. However, in the entire cluster “Memories of President Lincoln,” as Betsey Erkkila notes, the president himself is never named. Instead, the emphasis is upon the remaining community and the possibility of maintaining a democratic connection between individual and society even as that society mourns the loss of its representative. Thus, Whitman’s poems, like Lincoln’s policy, is an attempt to maintain social union also through the representation of the poet’s mournful voice. As Erkkila writes:

By refusing to name Lincoln, to single him out, Whitman also emphasizes his representative status. Lincoln is embedded in the poem as a figure of the American people: the one is continually balanced with the many, the separate person with the en masse, as Whitman places Lincoln and the particularities of his death in a poetic pattern that is at once national and universal. Although the poem moves toward the apotheosis of Lincoln in the silver face of the western star, that apotheosis does not take place apart from the American people; the western star is in its largest configuration a star of the American people. (228)

Whitman resolves the problem of “feudal” deification by merging the “apotheosis” of the individual with a similar transformation of the community who take part in the ritual of that apotheosis. This demonstrates a central function of the poet in relation to society because it suggests a similarity between Whitman’s work and Lincoln’s. Whitman’s reconstruction of society demands that poetry have the ability to legislate, and his elegy is intended to achieve the same effect as Lincoln’s legislation to preserve the Union. Of course, this immediately begs the question as to whether or not poetry can indeed be effective as policy. This question brings into focus the central problem of this inquiry into Whitman’s poetics of labor. That is, after examining his revision of the socioeconomic structure of a democratic society, it is necessary to investigate further the work and the place of the poet within that

revised society.

In his own answer to this question, Allen Grossman points out that poetry and policy are, in one important sense, incompatible because Whitman and Lincoln are working within separate modes of discourse which are perceived and received differently by the society which created them: "Lincoln's language, unlike Whitman's, is empowered because it is of the same nature as the institutions that invented him, and his space and time are institutional space and time" (197). This is undoubtedly true, but it can also be argued that Whitman's major struggle lies in the conflict between his desire to institutionalize poetry and to transcend institutions and institutionalization. Whitman's discourse is not "empowered" because Whitman was not elected. Lincoln's representative status gives his discourse an officially sanctioned power to, in a sense, make the word flesh, and Whitman wants his words to possess that kind of power. A significant part of Whitman's struggle lies in his attempt to establish some kind of representative status for the poet as well. As Grossman writes: "The refounding of personhood, the historical function of the poet, was the deferred business both of the American Revolution and of American literature. But the perfect equality of being requires, as Whitman understood, an infinite resource of fame" (192). One can further argue that Whitman "defers" his poetry to the future in order to use that "resource of fame" to gain the kind of institutional empowerment that the president already possesses.

Grossman's argument fails to consider Whitman's attempt to use poetic fame to reconstitute institutional power, and to work within existing institutions in order to do so. Grossman insists that Whitman's lack of institutional power necessarily sets him against Lincoln's "regulative policy," and in his argument there is an absolute division between the discourses of the poet and the

president:

On the one hand, a Whitmanian policy - open, egalitarian, in a sense socialist (as Matthiessen thought it to be), generalized from the fame-power of art, and darkly qualified by that abjection of the subject value which is the other side of receptivity; and, on the other hand, a Lincolnian system - closed, republican, capitalist, a regulative policy driven by the logic of clarification, and darkly qualified in its turn by the oblitative implications both of moral exclusiveness and the delegatory economies of labor? We have seen that the centered, hierarchical, Lincolnian ethical rationality is precisely the enemy element from which Whitman is bent upon exempting his human world. (197)

The problem with such a polarization is that it fails to acknowledge Whitman's view of the poet as a participant within the "delegatory economies of labor" as well. Grossman sees Whitman's poetic purpose as corresponding to "the leisure of receptivity, not the rational labor of the will" (186). However, Whitman's view of poetic purpose also works against a correspondence between poetry and "the leisure of receptivity" by trying to give poetry a role in the "Lincolnian system." In fact, much of his poetry corresponds to that system, and can best be seen as an attempt to synthesize receptivity and "rational labor." The construction of this synthesis is central to Whitman's entire poetics because Whitman needs that "delegatory" power which Lincoln represents not only to enforce his revision of society, but also to claim the authority to do so. Still, Grossman's argument that there is a tension between the two is well taken, and his final conclusion that these antithetical systems of discourse ultimately are not "two [opposing] policies of union" (204) is pertinent because Whitman's attempt to combine the egalitarian system with the delegatory one is intended to endow poetic discourse with the same authority as Lincoln's "empowered" politics.

It is necessary to see that these seemingly opposing systems are

incorporated within the poetic function in Whitman's reconstituted society. To view that function as simply representative of an "open" egalitarianism is to forget, as he claims in "By Blue Ontario's Shore," that not only is Whitman's "equable man" responsible for balancing "ranks, complexions, and the sexes" (481), but also is the nation's "common referee" who "judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling round a helpless thing" (475).

One could argue that Whitman engages in a kind of political competition for that "empowered" discourse. However, this is definitely not the case with the Lincoln poems. In fact, "the sweetest, wisest soul" is perhaps the only leader that Whitman is willing to acknowledge and place above his own self. This is especially evident in the famous title "O Captain, My Captain," a label that Whitman otherwise rejects in his condemnation of military rank. This reveals the extent of Whitman's admiration for Lincoln, and that admiration is strengthened by the fact that Whitman seemed to think of his "Captain" just as he thought of Christ, as a "comrade" working to achieve democratic realization. While Whitman was generally a sharp critic of political power and discourse and defended poetic power and discourse with the claim that it was a more natural form of judgment, he makes an exception of Lincoln. Lincoln's political authority is acknowledged because Whitman saw that "a policy that intends, as did Lincoln's, the same structure as its discourse is a poetry" (Grossman, 186). Whitman insisted upon a connection between politics and poetry, and his exceptional treatment of Lincoln is based upon his belief in the inherent poetry within Lincoln's policy. For instance, in "A Lincoln Reminiscence," Whitman demonstrates Lincoln's awareness of this connection as well: "As is well known, story-telling was often with President Lincoln a weapon which he employ'd with great skill. Very often he could not give a point-blank reply or comment - and

these indirection, (sometimes funny, but not always so,) were probably the best responses possible" (1072). These narrative "indirections," in Whitman's view, reveal Lincoln's personal and poetic connection to his policy, and political narratives are precisely what Whitman demands of democratic poetry. As he asks in "By Blue Ontario's Shore":

What is this you bring my America?
 Is it uniform with my country?
 Is it not something that has been better told or done before?
 Have you not imported this or the spirit of it in some ship?
 Is it not a mere tale? a rhyme? a prettiness? - is the good
 old cause in it? (477)

Clearly, Whitman does not view Lincoln's story as "a mere tale," but one which contains within it "the good old cause," which of course is the Union itself.

Whitman's reverence for Lincoln can perhaps best be seen through a comparison of his poetic representation of other presidents. His "open" egalitarianism is the motivating force behind his poetic criticisms of those legislators whose policy seems to be devoid of "the good old cause." For instance, in "To A President," most likely referring to James Buchanan, Whitman writes:

All you are doing and saying is to America dangled mirages,
 You have not learn'd of Nature - of the politics of Nature
 you have not learn'd the great amplitude, rectitude,
 impartiality,
 You have not seen that only such as they are for these States,
 And what is less than they must sooner or later lift off
 from these States. (410-11)

Here again is an argument against an occupation which is not in accord with Whitman's political vision of democratic work. The President succumbs to the same basic shortcomings that Whitman identifies with all the other occupations which are responsible for forming a democratic epistemology. As in the case of

the priest or the scientist, the poet can be said to perform that work more effectively than the President, and Whitman's perception of the poet as America's "common referee" is never more clear than when he offers such political criticism. Again in "To the States, To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad," Whitman delivers a similar invective against Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan:

What deepening twilight-scum floating atop of the waters,
 Who are they as bats and night-dogs askant in the capitol?
 What a filthy Presidentiad! (O South, your torrid suns! O
 North, your arctic freezings!)
 Are those really Congressmen? are those great Judges? is
 that the President? (415)

Both these poems were first published in 1860, and both use natural images in order to expose and counteract the "unnatural" effect of "a filthy Presidentiad."¹ This use of nature is significant in terms of the poet's purpose because, as Donald Pease argues, "Whitman tried to recover for the American masses what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called the 'common self'" (115). In order to do so, Whitman tried to return political legislation to what he saw as its origin in nature.² By politicizing nature, Whitman provides some criteria by which to judge any particular law or legislator. This adds significance to Whitman's use of the natural image of the sun to distinguish presidential judgment from poetic judgment. Thus, the poet's claim to legislative authority lies in his ability to discern nature within the "common self," and from that to make judgments based upon the positive or negative relationship between democratic legislation and the democratic self. As Pease argues: "What is surely most radical about Whitman's poetry inheres in his refusal to acknowledge the distinction between the individual soul and the United States of America" (129).

Whitman uses natural images as the evidence for his judgment, and to test for a correspondence between the nation and the self. For instance, his description of the “16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad” reveals “scum floating atop of the waters,” and his conclusion that “we will surely awake”(279) demonstrates his belief in the efficacy of natural judgment, and in the ability of the natural “common self” to correct the harmful (but likewise natural) effect of presidential “scum.” Contrast these images with the healthy natural images of Lincoln in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” and it becomes quite clear that the poet’s representation of nature in relation to the “common self” is central to a poetic “policy of union.”

THE “ESTHETIC WORKER” AND THE NEW ORDER OF POETRY

The relationship between nature, politics and poetry is the focus of Whitman’s Democratic Vistas. Pease’s discussion of this relationship focuses strictly upon Whitman’s poetry before the Civil War. Such a focus is quite common in Whitman criticism, the general consensus being that Whitman’s work slowly declined after the war. A simple comparison of his production in these two periods provides a convincing case for that consensus. This issue itself seems rather limited in its possibility for generating a useful inquiry, but it is important to consider in the context of Democratic Vistas because this essay reveals a dramatic change in Whitman’s attitudes about literature. It may even suggest why we tend to read Whitman’s post-Civil War poetry as somehow inferior to his earlier work because Democratic Vistas, published in 1871, demonstrates that Whitman was in the process of reevaluating that work. This essay presents a different version of the poet from the one we get in the 1855

“Preface” because in 1871 Whitman offered a compromise to that original platform for American poetry. This essay is arguably Whitman’s most important statement of literary theory. Whitman is forced to admit that his “open” poetic legislation for effecting socioeconomic reform had, at least up to 1871, failed. Consequently, there is a sense of anxiety as well as anger in the essay, and that sense is augmented by the fact that Whitman still has not resolved the problem of placing the poet in his revision of labor because his audience seems to have placed the poet, not in the center of society, but outside the margins of it.

Both Richard Chase and Robert Weisbuch agree that “it is Matthew Arnold, not the always credited Thomas Carlyle” (Weisbuch, 83) who provides the motivation for Whitman’s essay. However, they disagree on the nature of that motivation. Weisbuch claims that Arnold “is the rejected muse of Whitman’s finest prose essay” (83), while Chase argues that Whitman’s lack of “historical objectivity” proves that he was “more Arnoldian than Arnold” (139). However, one can argue as well that Whitman’s relation to Arnold is not necessarily an either/or situation. A convincing case can be made for each argument. At the time Whitman wrote this essay the poet’s role in American society had not come to pass as he prophesied it would in the 1855 “Preface.” In other words, the distinction between American and European, what Whitman would call “feudal,” literature was not so sharp as he had hoped it to be. Because of that, Whitman can be seen both working within, and at odds with, the mode of discourse available to him in 1871 (as well as in 1855). Whitman’s poetic, egalitarian vision of American democracy had not materialized. Instead, Whitman sees that “Pride, competition, segregation, vicious wilfulness, and license beyond example, brood already upon us” (989). Now, instead of having the luxury of being able to make the neat continental and historical distinction between

feudalism and democracy, Whitman is forced to ask of himself and of his society, “who shall hold in behemoth? who bridle leviathan?” (989).

This is perhaps the most difficult of any question posed by Whitman in all of his writings. It is by far the most tense moment in Democratic Vistas because Whitman seems compelled to admit that this social monster is not only “useless to deny” (990), but is also, at least in 1871, insurmountable. Again, this is suggested by the natural imagery which he uses to describe it: “Democracy grows rankly up the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all - brings worse and worse invaders - needs newer, larger, stronger, keener compensations and compellers” (990). The discrepancy between Whitman’s democratic ideal and the political and socioeconomic reality of the late nineteenth-century makes up the central conflict in Democratic Vistas. Whitman seems well aware of this conflict between submitting to that reality and attempting to subvert it, and this pervasive tension can account for the apparent discrepancy in Weisbuch’s and Chase’s readings. Chase argues that it is Whitman’s historical perspective which accounts for his “Arnoldian” argument, and claims that both Whitman and Arnold lack “objectivity” because they are most interested in moving their argument away from the historical present and toward the future by way of a teleological endpoint. This tendency in Whitman has already been noted in “Song of the Broad-Axe” and in “To a Historian.” Weisbuch, however, argues that Whitman’s numerous constructions of a “history of the future” reveal the most important distinction between him and Arnold: “Arnold tends to see the dissolution of feudalism as something to which we must react, whereas Whitman, despite his notation of a prevailing ‘atmosphere,’ sees the transformation as something we must achieve” (88). Thus, Whitman is “more Arnoldian than Arnold” because he is more interested

in attempting to defeat the fearful growth of “leviathan” by “projecting” the future “divine literatus.” His argument consists of a synthesis in which the “literatus” will contain feudalism, in the sense of “bridling” it and accepting it, but will also be able to “transform” it through poetry. It can be argued that Whitman chooses this option because he himself is “bridled” by the discourse of feudalism. He must acknowledge its existence and incorporate it within a program intended to reform it. This conflict recalls Whitman’s problem with the priest, especially since in Whitman’s view the priest is a representative of feudal institutions and epistemologies. Yet, in his battle with the entire system of the “leviathan,” Whitman cannot simply claim to transfer the system to the poet’s function as he can with the occupation of the priest. Instead, Whitman’s strategy is to imagine a future in which the “literatus” will establish a new discourse for society that can transform and tame the “[u]nwiely and immense” (989) feudal beast.

Democratic Vistas can be read for its political commentary, as if it were a political tract similar to the unpublished The Eighteenth Presidency. No doubt the essay’s political emphasis is important, but it must not be forgotten that its central concern, and for that matter its proposed solution to political and social problems, is [American] literature. As Betsy Erkkila writes: “ ‘Democratic Vistas’ is at once an ‘ars republica’ and an ‘ars poetica’ in which Whitman seeks to justify the ‘democratic republican principle’ as the theory of America and the political; ground of his own life and work” (248). The essay provides his most complete outline of the poet’s job and function in a democracy. Even more so than in the 1855 “Preface” or any of his meta-poetry, the realities of life as a writer are stressed, and from that a clearer picture emerges of the “common referee[‘s]” function and obligation:

Observing, rapport, and with intuition, the shows and forms

presented by Nature, the sensuous luxuriance, the beautiful in living men and women, the actual play of passions, in history and life - and, above all, from these developments either in Nature of human personality in which power, (dearest of all to the sense of the artist,) transacts itself - out of these, and seizing what is in them, the poet, the esthetic worker in any field, by the divine magic of his genius, projects them, their analogies, by curious moves, indirections, in literature and art. (987)

Here, Whitman establishes a synthesis between the egalitarian “esthetic worker,” and the feudal artist by combining the poet’s “divine” gift with the social obligation of “transacting” power in his art. This is one way in which Whitman attempts to incorporate and overcome the feudal “leviathan” at least as it manifests itself in the occupation of writing poetry.

It is significant that “power” is identified as the poet’s most valuable sense, particularly since the essay is a reaction against the poet’s loss of power and influence in society. One could argue here that Whitman is anticipating some of Foucault’s notions of the relationship between truth and power because both are interested in the ways in which power “transacts itself.”³ Whitman’s argument, however, is more overtly interested in the placement of that power. That is, he is attempting to confer power upon the “esthetic worker” by giving him the responsibility of marking its transactions. Indeed, the potential for power in poetry is the central issue of Democratic Vistas, and it is necessary to trace more closely the ways in which Whitman defines poetic power in relation to a democratic society in order to see just how the poet fits within that society.

A majority of the critical discussion of Democratic Vistas tends to focus on Whitman’s social and political criticism, particularly in the way in which he reformulates his pre-Civil War stance on social and political institutions. This is a significant issue because Whitman makes a concerted effort to include even

those aspects of post-Civil War society that he despises: "My theory includes riches, and the getting of riches, and the amplest products, power, activity, inventions, movements, & c. Upon them, as upon substrata, I raise the edifice designed in these Vistas" (951). Here again, there is containment as well as inclusion as Whitman's "edifice" is constructed above all that he "includes." Essentially, that "edifice" consists of a synthesis of the "singleness of man, individualism," and "the mass, or lump character" (940) in America. This is the basis of the conflict which Whitman, "like a physician diagnosing some deep disease" (937), is attempting to remedy. He claims to have discovered a solution to this "serious problem and paradox," but that solution is located toward a future in which "the two will merge and will mutually profit and brace each other, and that from them a greater product, a third, will arise" (941). It is with the announcement of this "greater product" that Whitman provides his most thorough, and perhaps most problematic, answer to the question of the "esthetic worker['s]" place in his poetics of labor.

Whitman claims that the American "problem" is a result of the completion of the first two stages, first "the planning and putting on record the political foundation rights of immense masses of people" (976) followed by the "material prosperity, wealth" as well as the "produce" of those people. Whitman announces that "a native expression-spirit," fostered by "original authors and poets to come" (977) will be responsible for the resolution of the conflict between the individual and the "masses." In some ways this announcement is no different from that which he made in the 1855 "Preface," where Whitman first introduces the emergence of the "equable man." However, Whitman suggests there that the poet need not settle for a synthesis. Instead, he argued that the democratic cohesion of the "common self" was already strong enough to defeat

any challenge to its authority:

No great literature nor any like style of behaviour or oratory or social intercourse or household arrangements or public institutions or the treatment by bosses of employed people, nor executive detail or detail of the army or navy, nor spirit of legislation or courts or police or tuition or architecture or songs or amusements or the costumes of young men, can long elude the jealous and passionate instinct of American standards. (25)

At this time, Whitman was indeed confident that his social and literary ideals had already materialized, and that a direct relationship between literature, policy, and society already had been established, and thus the “third stage” had already emerged. As Whitman wrote to Emerson in 1856: “What a progress popular reading and writing has made in fifty years! The time is at hand when inherent literature will be a main part of These States, as general and real as steam-power, iron, corn, beef, fish” (1329-30). Whitman’s confidence in the efficacy of literature is revealed in his metaphors used to describe it. It is both a “real” manufactured product like “steam-power” and as natural as “fish.” Yet, the fifteen years between this letter and Democratic Vistas seemed to have demonstrated to Whitman that literary “progress” simply had gone one step forward and two steps back, and everything which in 1855 could not penetrate “American standards” seems to have gotten through as well.

The traditional way to read Democratic Vistas is to consider the work in the “three stages” of America that Whitman maps out, almost as if they were three separate pieces. Robert J. Scholnik has pointed out that this is actually the way it was first published in The Galaxy.⁴ However, these “three stages,” when read as one piece, reveal a complex work of literary criticism that provides a convincing case for the way in which literature can operate in society. That ideal future model is contrasted with what Whitman sees as the disappointing

reality of that relationship in 1871. There is an appropriate analogy here between literature and the axe in "Song of the Broad-Axe." Just as he claims that the axe work of the headsman is destructive and misdirected, so does he argue that "[p]resent literature, while magnificently fulfilling certain popular demands, with plenteous knowledge and verbal smartness, is profoundly sophisticated, insane, and its very joy is morbid" (983). Conversely, Whitman contrasts the positive work of the democratic wood-cutters and carpenters with the negative work of the headsman just as he distinguishes between the "insane" literature of the second stage with the positive poetry of the third.

Richard Chase referred to Democratic Vistas as Whitman's "Theory of America." Chase focuses upon "the fundamental contradiction" (156) of the first two stages (what Whitman calls the "serious problem and paradox"), and gives considerably less attention to the third stage. However, since the thesis of Whitman's argument depends upon the literature of that third stage, it would seem more appropriate to think of Whitman's essay as his "Theory of American Literature." Chase places less emphasis upon Whitman's discussion of literature because he finds a fundamental contradiction between Whitman's poetic theory and his practice. Still, it is necessary to see that for Whitman his literary theory is not only the main point of his argument, but also the solution to the American social disease he has diagnosed. As he argues in conclusion:

In fact, a new theory of literary composition for imaginative works of the very first class, and especially for highest poems, is the sole course open to these States. Books are to be called for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself of herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay - the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. (993)

The power that Whitman bestows upon the reader displays an awareness of what we would call reader-response criticism. This is evident in his use of architectural and athletic imagery to describe the reader and the reading process. However, a major difference between Whitman's conception of the role of the reader and our contemporary notion is that, while he never claims that the book need be "complete," he does argue that the nature of the "serious problem" lies in the absence of the right kind of literature.

For Whitman, an athletic literature must precede an athletic readership, and he argues that the presence of a "New World literature" (971) will provide the basis for the athletic reader on which to build the "frame-work" for the third stage of society he is projecting. The problem is that readers do not yet have the necessary materials with which to begin this construction:

What, however, do we more definitely mean by New World literature? Are we not doing well enough already? Are not the United States this day busily using, working, more printer's type, more presses, than any other country? uttering and absorbing more publications than any other?. . . . I say that a nation may hold and circulate rivers and oceans of very readable print, journals, magazines, novels, library-books, "poetry" and c. - such as the States to-day possess and circulate . . . and yet, all the while, the said nation, land, strictly speaking, may possess no literature at all. (971-2)

The problem with his argument is that Whitman offers no representative of this "New World literature," but this is because he believes American society is blinded by its own literary production. The poets and their readers have succumbed to the same kind of material subordination that he argued against in "A Song for Occupations." The act of production itself enhances a false sense of security guided by the related assumption that an American literary culture has already been established. The emphasis on quantity over quality has

produced a kind of literature that Whitman hesitates to even label “ ‘poetry’.”

Here, the affinity with Arnold that Chase identifies becomes most apparent. As Arnold writes in Culture and Anarchy: “Plenty of people will try to give the masses, as they call them, an intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses. . . . Our religions and political organization give an example of the way of working on the masses. I condemn neither way, but culture works differently” (112-3). Chase argues that, even though Arnold and Whitman do not agree on what “culture” is, both of their arguments reach the same conclusion:

But do not both authors believe that the present danger in their countries is anarchy, that modern man places too great a faith in the mere machinery of legislation, that lively, elevating ideas should be current, that the middle class is the one to rely on, that aggressive assertions of material progress, including the mass production of vulgar literature, may cloak a virulent moral sickness, that poetry has a very broad function, including that of religion? (155)

While it can be said that both Whitman and Arnold come to these same conclusions, they also differ radically in their approach to these conclusions. For instance, Whitman’s concern with the self, which is developed into a philosophy of “personalism” in the “first stage” of his argument, is for Arnold, not something to strive for, but rather “an anarchic concern for the public good” (Weisbuch, 94). As Weisbuch argues, the basis for each writer’s differing approach to culture can be located in distinct attitudes of “cultural time” (109). That is, each culture’s conception of itself in relation to history can account for such differing approaches to cultural reform:

Arnold’s employment of history is a speculation upon a concrete something. Whitman’s prophecies are of what has never been. We see in this an American priority of consciousness . . . actualism, or the American desire to make palpable the poet’s vision and live it out on the literal plane of everyday existence; and, opposing such

confidence, a sense of having been deprived of the objective world, an ontological insecurity, which yet may be transformed into epistemological freedom. (Weisbuch, 104)

Both Weisbuch's and Chase's discussions of Whitman and Arnold are helpful because they highlight by contrast Whitman's belief in the responsibility of the poet to effect societal change. Additionally, Weisbuch's terminology is significant in terms of Whitman's poetics of labor because Whitman's "programme of culture," unlike Arnold's, is an attempt to subvert that "ontological insecurity" (which is not an issue for Arnold due to his "cultural time") by reactivating the self-assurance and "actualism" of poetic sovereignty that he earlier outlined in the 1855 "Preface." Yet, in order to transform that insecurity into an "epistemological freedom" that Arnold already possesses, Whitman must first create a new space for poetry to do the political and social work he demands of it. In light of that purpose, it is helpful to think of Whitman's work as poet and critic as a poetic equivalent of the legislation of the American founding fathers. This is most likely how he perceived himself. Whitman, in 1871, is not the "divine literatus," at least not yet.

Whitman's sharpest criticism of his present society, and of all past societies, is that they have ignored the actualizing possibilities of poetry. An essential part of that argument concerns American society's failure to recognize the poet's work as work, as an occupation that deserves the central placement in the socioeconomic structure that he has given it. As he writes early on in

Democratic Vistas:

Literature strictly considered, has never recognized the People, and, whatever may be said, does not to-day. Speaking generally, the tendencies of literature, as hitherto pursued, have been to make mostly critical and querulous men. It seems as if, so far, there were some natural repugnance between a literary and professional life, and the rude rank spirit of the democracies. There is, in later

literature, a treatment of benevolence, a charity business rife enough it is true; but I know nothing more rare, even in this country, than a fit scientific estimate and reverent appreciation of the People, of their measureless wealth of latent power and capacity, their vast, artistic contrasts of lights and shades . . . (944)

Whitman's actualist approach to literature is the driving motivation for his argument. Literature has failed in its duty to transfer that actualism to "the People." Instead, it has fostered a "critical and querelous" outlook which, in his view, works against "the rude rank spirit of the democracies." Here, Whitman criticizes writers and poets themselves for failing to celebrate or even "appreciate" that common spirit. At the same time, Whitman also criticizes "the People" for their refusal to recognize the "professional life" of the literary artist. One might argue that this aspect of his criticism is not directed at "the People" so much as it is against "the highly artificial and materialistic bases of modern civilization" (991) and the political and social institutions which are responsible for that civilization. However, that "natural repugnance" can be read as a symptom of the professional poet's exclusion from the "rude rank spirit" of the hierarchy of labor. As Grossman observes, the poet traditionally is ranked according to the "receptivity of leisure." If poetry is viewed as something of a pastime, then the problem that Whitman is identifying becomes even more "serious," especially considering Whitman's position as a professional poet. Whitman even seems to suggest that there is an unspoken animosity between "the People" and the idea of a democratic literary profession. Still, Whitman is careful to direct the brunt of his criticism toward the "esthetic worker" because he is implying that the democratic public, or any public for that matter, hungers for "a fit scientific estimate and reverent appreciation" of itself, and once they receive it they naturally will respond with an appropriate "estimate" and

“appreciation” of the literatus. Whitman summed up this process of correspondence between poet and audience best in the 1855 “Preface:”

An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make a superb nation. The soul of the largest and wealthiest and proudest nation may well go half-way to meet that of its poets. The signs are effectual. There is no fear of mistake. If the one is true the other is true. The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it. (26)

Yet, what Whitman discovered sixteen years later was that there possibly should have been a “fear of mistake” because his formula seemed to have backfired on him. Self and nation had come together, not as a result of some egalitarian fulfilment, but because they had embraced the “leviathan.” Whitman sees nineteenth-century literature reflecting and contributing to the ideal of wealth. He asks, “where is the man of letters, where is the book with any nobler aim than to follow in the old track, repeat what has been said before - and as its utmost triumph, sell well, and be erudite and elegant” (975).

Even as Whitman lunges out against what William Charvat has termed the “mass poets” (107) who are only interested in capitalizing on the market for poetry and nothing more, Whitman nowhere defines just how the “divine literatus” is going to be able to, if not “sell well,” at least exist in a society which embraces wealth. If a poet is to be a worker in the sense that a mechanic is a worker, then it seems reasonable that the “esthetic worker” can expect some kind of economic exchange for his or her work. As Charvat explains, this was not at all a reasonable expectation for professional poets in the nineteenth-century, and remained a significant obstacle to those writers who were interested in producing something other than the poetic ornaments characteristic of the “mass poets.”

Before 1865 no American poet, not even Longfellow, was able to

live comfortably or with a sense of security on his income from verse. Since 1865 a few poets have, in their old age, received a dependable, though never sufficient, income from the sale of their collected verse - verse which failed to support them at the time they wrote it. . . . The term "the poet's life," therefore, has never had a genuine economic dimension, like the term "physician's life." (106)

The reality of this situation reveals the difficulty of Whitman's career-long attempt to map out some space for the poet in society. That difficulty may also help to explain why Whitman seems to want to avoid the issue at times. For instance, in the 1860 poem "No Labor Saving Machine," he even scoffs at the idea of exchanging his poetry for any kind of material compensation:

No labor-saving machine,
Nor discovery have I made,
Nor will I be able to leave behind me any wealthy bequest
to found a hospital or library,
Nor reminiscence of any deed of courage for America,
Nor literary success nor intellect, nor book for the book-shelf,
But a few carols vibrating through the air I leave,
For comrades and lovers. (283)

For the most part, Whitman tends to emphasize the materiality of objects, or at least the interdependence of the corporeal and the ephemeral, such as that between the body and soul that Kepner identifies as Whitman's philosophy in "Song of Myself." However, when concerned with the body of his own poetry, Whitman tends to deny its material existence, such as the fact that he probably was paid for publication, that its publication date fixes the poem in time, that he may indeed enjoy "literary success," or that his poems may sit happily (perhaps untouched) upon someone's "book-shelf." the denial of his poetry's materiality is perhaps best expressed in his assertion in "So Long!" that "who touches this book touches a man" (611).

In Democratic Vistas, Whitman does come closer to some kind of an

explanation of his position on the material nature of poetry:

We must not say one word against real materials; but the wise know that they do not become real till touched by emotions, the mind. Did we call the latter imponderable? Ah, let us rather proclaim that the slightest song-tune, the countless ephemera of passions arous'd by orators and tale-tellers, are more dense, more weighty than the engines there in the great factories, or the granite blocks in their foundations. (971)

In his view, a poem is not really a poem until it is read, and because a song or poem is able to connect “the mind” to the material of the poem or song, and thus allow for further connections between the seen and the unseen, even the “slightest song-tune” is, in this sense at least, more real, “dense,” and “weighty” than an engine. Of course, this argument does not provide much in the way of “real” help or advice for the starving poet, but it is Whitman’s way of transcending such issues. What Whitman does not do, and most probably does not want to do, is to outline a “cultural programme” that entails any kind of institutionalization of poetry. Although he does argue against the diletterism of the “mass poets,” he does not seem to be at all bothered by the fact that the poet, as Whitman did, spends much of his “real” time in some other occupation throughout his poetic career. Instead, he “promulge[s]” (931) a future in Democratic Vistas in which poets are not merely “unacknowledged legislators” (140), as Shelley claimed, but have the power to mediate and “transact” power. As a result of that mediation and transaction, Whitman hopes, the audience of the future literatus will take care of its own.

One of the striking ambiguities, however, of Democratic Vistas is whether or not Whitman considers himself to be the future literatus whose poetry will have the power to reconcile the American paradox. As Mark Bauerlein argues, Whitman “has satisfied neither the individual goal of self-expression nor the

social goal of literary reform" (127). This is evident not only in Whitman's failure to identify any specific poem or poet that would correspond to "New World literature," but also in the suggestion that Leaves of Grass has neither effected that "social goal," nor has it achieved a "common" readership that a literatus demands. As shrewd as Whitman was at self-promotion, he avoids any suggestion that his own work represents the kind of poetry that a literatus would write. For instance, there is a telling moment in the essay where Whitman chides himself for failing to practice his own theory: "It is the fashion among diletants and fops (perhaps I myself am not guiltless,) to decry the whole formulation of the active politics of America, as beyond redemption, and to be carefully kept away from. See that you do not follow this error" (965). Although Whitman's self-criticism is parenthetical and thus almost beside the point, it does demonstrate his "guilty" sense of failure in relation to the political and social responsibility of the poet as America's "common referee."

Whitman traditionally has been regarded as less than successful in terms of nineteenth-century public acceptance and reception. A sense of public rejection seems characteristic of the American Renaissance. Matthiessen begins his study of the era with a defense of the "arbitrary" (x) selection of five authors who all struggled in their own ways with popular and critical success. For Whitman, this issue is especially problematic because he so often explicitly and implicitly makes the issue the subject of his work. Ezra Greenspan argues that this is due to Whitman's anti-establishment intentions:

Whitman was never to become a "standard" or even a widely accepted author during his lifetime; his failure to become so hurt him deeply. Not even the homage paid him in Camden by distinguished visitors from overseas or the plaudits from foreign critics could compensate him his sense of public failure. In recoil, he began in the late 1860s to fabricate the myth that he was completely ignored,

even conspired against, by the literary establishment. Blaming the establishment, of course, was easier than blaming the people, something which Whitman was unable and unwilling to do. (217-8)

Greenspan's insight that Whitman's arguments with the "literary establishment" are motivated by a desire to self-mythologize is undercut by the ease at which he accepts the "sense of public failure," which can be seen as part of that myth. Ed Folsom has provided additional evidence which suggests that Whitman's tendency to "fabricate" myths was also responsible for his image as a "public failure." In an examination of nineteenth-century textbooks and anthologies, Folsom concludes that Whitman was indeed more popular than we previously have assumed. That assumption, he argues, has been encouraged by what Edwin Haviland Miller has called Whitman's "martyr pose" (346). That pose has disguised Whitman's business acumen in relation to the "literary establishment," and Folsom argues that it was intended to convey an anti-establishment image:

Certainly Whitman had a lot to do with creating such an image: he had a stake in making himself appear to be the embattled poet, the prophet rejected in his own country, a victim of a critical and educational establishment intent on keeping America enchained in convention and tradition. Such a pose sharpened Whitman's self-portrayal as the independent revolutionary artist who fought against overwhelming feudalistic forces and endured, beating the odds to emerge as the first truly democratic artist. (345)

This is not to say that those "feudalistic forces" were solely the result of Whitman's manipulation of the media and his own persona. For instance, no one would suggest that Whitman's "leviathan" was fabricated merely to advertise his "revolutionary" image, or that he never faced adverse conditions in the literary market. However, it does suggest that to see Whitman only as the "embattled poet" (which, according to both Greenspan and Folsom, this is what Whitman wants us to see) is to reduce the complexities of that persona.

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the issue of Whitman's attitude toward the "establishment" provides an excellent illustration of Walter Benn Michaels' argument that one cannot be simply for or against any cultural "leviathan" when one is a part of it.⁵ Whitman had to exist within aspects of his culture which he despised, just as anyone does, and Democratic Vistas demonstrates Whitman's awareness of that unpleasant fact.

Even though Whitman does not claim the status of "Divine literatus" directly, he does seem satisfied to do the work of the prophet. That label is certainly applicable to Whitman's vision of "New World literature," but it is also, as James E. Miller suggests, an apt description of Whitman's own poetic self image, and thus another aspect of the myth of that persona: "The poet, endowed with a transcendent sight, serves as humanity's eyes of the spirit. If the poet foresees the future, it is not through supernatural gift but rather through a sensitive and perceptive interpretation of what is and what went before" (50). The significance of Miller's argument lies in the assertion that Whitman's future projections are an attempt to change, to "actualize" the present. Obviously, the literatus is a kind of Christ figure, and although Whitman elsewhere identifies with Christ, he does not confer that role upon himself in relation to American literature because the present work is not yet complete; "the People" are not yet ready. It would be more appropriate to say that Whitman is a poetic Jeremiah, or rather John the Baptist, creating a space for the "literatus of the future." Whitman's work, as he sees it, is out of the past, in the present, for the future.

There is a strong sense of martyrdom in Whitman's identification with the role of prophet, which further suggests a link between Whitman and his representation of Lincoln. It is not entirely clear, however, why Whitman would want to effect a "martyr pose" because his idea of poetic communication seems

to transcend anthologies and textbooks, but it could be argued that his self-mythologizing is intended to create a space for his own poetry within the poetic future that he is “promulging.” He does want to be a part of that future, and his direct addresses to the reader seem to confirm that desire. As he states in “Song of Myself”: “The past and present wilt - I have fill’d them, emptied them, / And proceed to fill my next fold of the future” (246). Consistent with his attempts to project his poems into that future is his desire to “wilt” present conditions and revise them because the poetic work of the future must be “consistent with the institution of these States, and to come in range and obedient uniformity with them” (993). In other words, the poetic president, like the political president, cannot announce himself. To be the poetic representative of a democracy, which for Whitman is to be the representative of “the human soul” (987), requires public acknowledgement and confirmation of that representative status. Whitman argues that this is the most important part of the democratic process:

I think, after all, the sublimest part of political history, and its culmination, is currently issuing from the American people. I know nothing grander, better exercise, better digestion, more positive proof of the past, the triumphant result of faith in human kind, than a well-contested American national election. (954)

Similarly, it is up to the people to put their poets to “the national test” (955). Whitman argues that for a poet to pass that test he must “absorb” as well as be “absorbed” by his audience, and Whitman’s poetics of labor provides a model for the process of absorption of all “schools and creeds,” all “castes and hues” that he thinks a democratic literatus must demonstrate in order to receive confirmation as the poetic representative of the people, and thus it can be seen as Whitman’s attempt to receive that kind of acceptance in the future.

Whitman's theory of representation, which is practiced in his absorption of all "castes" and "creeds," establishes the grounds for such a "national test" for poetry. Additionally, his celebration of the self, an underlying concern of all of his work, can be read, as Mitchell Breitweiser suggests, as a strategy for opening up a debate on poetic representation that is distinctly democratic:

The opposition between partial, particular interest and general, magnanimous representativeness that is explored in Leaves of Grass is the central characteristic of the worsening ideological fracture that led, for example, to Robert E. Lee's famous agonized indecision about whether he should think of himself as a Virginian or as an American. . . . arguments over whether Whitman did or did not mean for us to take his idea of a poetic president seriously miss the point: his aim in dwelling on partiality and representativeness is to reveal the complexity of an idea present in common thought and to dispel the illusion of simple and merely political choice. (136)

The complexity of the issue of "representativeness" in Whitman's poetry is perhaps the central issue of his poetry, and "his idea of a poetic president" is a significant part of that issue. If that idea is not taken "seriously" then much of that complexity is lost because the opposition that Breitweiser outlines here is present for Whitman in poetry as well as in politics. The point of Whitman's presentation of the issue is to actualize tomorrow, to provide the "frame-work" which the poet's constituents, his audience, must complete, and thereby reconcile the opposition. Similarly, Whitman's absorption of oppositions, the ranks, castes and schools as well as the working representations of them, from mechanics and farmers to physicians and priests, is the basis for that framework. That framework, if recognized as representative of democracy, further introduces the "third stage" of poetic and political representation which can only be completed through a public confirmation that the "general" and "particular" have merged in that poetry. In this sense, Whitman's poetics of

labor, the center of which is the “work” of poetry, is an attempt to “bridle leviathan” through a reconstruction of the political, socioeconomic, and aesthetic culture that created it. As Robert Pinsky writes:

Whitman established the American tradition in which the poet treats American life in his poetry by trying to establish that poetry’s place in American life. Whitman does this by raising explicitly, with bravado, the questions that Freneau, in his historical circumstance, cannot begin to frame. To imagine an American life, American poetry characteristically - maybe inevitably - begins by imagining, implicitly or explicitly, its own unrealized place in that life. (21)

Whitman’s attempt to create an “unrealized place” for his own “particular” poetry as well as for poetry in “general,” provides a foundation for American poetry that now considers Whitman (and perhaps he would not be surprised at this) the poetic equivalent of America’s legislative forefathers, and since that place is confirmed through a recognized “American tradition,” then we might say that Whitman’s “third stage” has emerged. The “divine literatus” is not a “particular” poet, but the tradition itself, as it continues to work with and for “the word en-masse.”

NOTES

¹ In The Eighteenth Presidency, written in 1856, Whitman waged an even more vehement attack against Fillmore, Pierce and Buchanan. In this pamphlet, as well as in the poem, he tends to lump all three of them together. Thus, when he says that “[t]he President eats dirt and excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on the States” (1310), we can assume that Buchanan is not being singled out. To Whitman, he is but the third leg of a triumvirate of “filthy” American leadership. Significantly, Whitman’s intended audience in his argument is “the great mass of mechanics, farmers, men following the water, and all laboring persons” (1307). Whitman’s violent objection to these three presidents is that their policy has ignored the working “mass”, and Whitman’s intention is to alert both “Workmen! [and] Workwomen!” (1316) to what he sees as a political travesty.

² Pease argues that Whitman’s attempt to restore the “common self” was motivated by his belief that “natural law” and democratic ideology had at some point been disconnected, and it was Whitman’s intention to bring them back together: “Natural law did not work according to men’s designs, but was, by its nature, that which revealed its designs through mankind as well as his environment. By defining natural liberty as a regenerative power, Whitman means it to be a force capable of reforming the nation’s legislators who founded their compromises upon it. (124)

³ In “Truth and Power,” Foucault writes: “It is necessary to think of the political problems of intellectuals not in terms of ‘science’ and ‘ideology,’ but in terms of ‘truth’ and ‘power.’ And thus the question of the professionalization of intellectuals and the division between intellectual and manual labor can be envisaged in a new way” (74). The issue of labor is certainly tangential to Foucault’s argument, but the connection he makes is pertinent to Whitman because, although Whitman does not equate the terms “truth” and “power” in quite the same way as Foucault, he was interested in using them to consider questions of “professionalization” and related work issues “in a new way” as well.

⁴ Scholnick, in his discussion of the publication history of Democratic Vistas, argues that Thomas Carlyle, not Matthew Arnold, is Whitman’s “rejected muse”: “On 16 August 1867 Horace Greeley printed in the Tribune the full text of Carlyle’s Shooting Niagara, a savage attack on democratic tendencies in England and America, so that he could denounce Carlyle and other critics of American democracy in an editorial published that same day. Greeley’s editorial was followed by many other articles defending democracy in American newspapers and magazines. The most significant was Whitman’s

uncompromising defense "Democracy," which appeared in the Galaxy in December, 1867. In May 1868, he published a sequel, "Personalism," in the same magazine. The Galaxy, editors declined to publish the third and concluding essay, "Literature" or "Orbic-Literature," possibly because of its length, . . . but Whitman combined the three essays, and with some significant additions and deletions, published them as Democratic Vistas" (291).

⁵ In his discussion of Dreiser, Walter Benn Michaels argues against a criticism of culture that focuses upon mere "approving (or disapproving)" any aspect of the culture in which one is embedded: "It thus seems wrong to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections; you don't like it or dislike it, you exist in it too. Even Bartleby-like refusals of the world remain inextricably linked to it--what could count as a more powerful exercise of the right to freedom of contract than Bartleby's successful refusal to enter into any contracts?" (18-9).

A POEM'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

The construction of a poetics of labor in Leaves of Grass is useful because it helps to visualize Whitman's unique response to the lingering American paradox of the individual in society. Work is such a pervasive theme in Whitman's poetry because it epitomizes the point at which the individual and the community converge. There are certainly other themes and motifs in Leaves of Grass which represent the convergence as well, such as sexual love, but the issue of labor is perhaps the most engaging and important such issue in Whitman's poetry, particularly since the labor of the poet is central to all other forms of labor. By validating and celebrating the work of the hands, Whitman intends to teach those workers the transcendent value of such labor. In this sense, Whitman "absorbs" both Emerson and Thoreau by incorporating the "higher plane" into the corporeal plane of "blue collar" work. Additionally, by criticizing and questioning the "white collar" work of the mind, and especially the institutionalization of such work, Whitman argues that such work is damaging to the principle of democracy if it is blind to its purpose of conceptualizing a democratic future. The realization of any such future is impossible without a marriage of both kinds of labor, and as proof of that assertion Whitman would point to the United States itself, even in 1871 when he seems to have felt it on the brink of collapse.

For Whitman, the significance of the American paradox is that it is a condition which is not to be resolved. The opposition between "the word en-masse" and the "simple separate person" (165) is the necessary paradoxical

foundation of democracy for Whitman, and he sees it as his and every other artist's job to communicate the significance of the union. That is why the poet is the center of Whitman's working democracy. The poet's job consists of maintaining a balance between the individual and society, and that balance can best be maintained in the present as well as in the future by continuing to develop a corresponding equality between the work of the hands and the work of the mind within society through the individual. As Emerson wrote of Plato in Representative Men, his greatness as a philosopher lies in "his discernment of the little in the large, and the large in the small; studying the state in the citizen and the citizen in the state" (351). This same interrelationship is extended in Whitman's poetry to include the mind and the hands, and the soul and the body.

There is a strong affinity between Emerson's philosopher and Whitman's poet because just as Emerson argues that Plato "is more than an expert, or a schoolman, or a geometer, or the prophet of a peculiar message" (351), so does Whitman argue that the poet can encompass and "absorb" such labels in the office of the poet. Yet, both Emerson's Plato and Whitman's poet are placed in the complex position of absorbing the citizen and the state by moving outside of both. This is demonstrated repeatedly by Whitman as he defers his ideal democracy to the future. Likewise, as Emerson writes of Plato: "He represents the privilege of the intellect, the power, namely of carrying up every fact to successive platforms, and so disclosing, in every fact, a germ of expansion" (351). The discovery of a "germ of expansion," is strikingly similar to Arnold's use of the term in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," published in 1864.¹ It is precisely Emerson's justification for the office of the philosopher, just as it is Whitman's foundation for his defense of the office of the poet.

One might even say that Plato is Emerson's "Divine Literatus." As he

writes in "Plato; Or, The Philosopher":

Plato, too, like every great man, consumed his own times. What is a great man but one of great affinities, who takes up into himself all arts, sciences, all knowables, as his food? He can spare nothing, he can dispose of everything. What is not good for virtue, is good for knowledge. Hence his contemporaries tax him with plagiarism. But the inventor only knows how to borrow; and society is glad to forget the innumerable laborers who ministered to this architect, and reserves all its gratitude for him. (338)

The absorption of historical contexts and different ways of knowing is a key function for which both Whitman's poet and Emerson's philosopher are responsible. Yet, the greatest difference between the two is the ease at which Emerson dismisses "the innumerable laborers" in favor of the reified philosopher. Whitman's representations of "innumerable laborers" demonstrate, if nothing else, that the dismissal of the many in favor of the one is an anti-democratic act which results in an anti-democratic literature. It is not enough for Whitman that the poet has "consumed his time"; he must also be consumed by them. Of course, it is possible to argue that Emerson recognizes that distinction as well because his description of Plato shows him being absorbed into a philosophical tradition of which he is the founder. Yet, when Whitman uses absorption in this manner, he is describing a process in which the work of the "architect" is "commensurate" with those who "ministered to" him. If society is "glad to forget" its "innumerable laborers," then in Whitman's view society remains idle in the second stage of cultural history, which he describes in Democratic Vistas as something to be overcome. There is essentially no difference in Whitman's argument between literary reification and the subordination of any worker to his or her work because both actions exemplify a "feudal" system which Whitman consistently identifies as his enemy.

Both Emerson's and Whitman's "literatus," however, work toward precisely the same goal, and Emerson does recognize the importance of the poetic faculty even within the discourse of philosophy. This is why he claimed that "Plato is clothed with the powers of a poet . . . [but] chose to use the poetic gift to an ulterior purpose" (339). With the "gift" of poetry backing his philosophy, Emerson claims that the philosopher then possesses the supreme power of the intellect, which consists of a "strong solving sense to reconcile his poetry with the appearances of the world, and build a bridge from the streets of cities to the Atlantis" (345). Whitman outlines the work of the poet in essentially the same terms, but reverses the roles of poetry and philosophy in the process. As is the case with every mode of discourse that poetry confronts in Whitman's argument, philosophy is absorbed by poetry. In a sense, both Emerson and Whitman essentially are trying to chart a course toward "Atlantis," but they are using separate discourses to get there.

If poetry is as powerful as Whitman claims it is, then the question yet remains how society can help but be overwhelmed and itself consumed by the all encompassing powers of the poet. Whitman's answer to that question can be found in his freedom as a poet to say "do I contradict myself / very well I contradict myself / (I am large I contain multitudes.)" (246). Poetry becomes the ultimate form of communication for Whitman because it gives him the freedom to transcend the urge to resolve or synthesize contradictions. Instead, he offers the option of existing within an "equalized" contradiction by simply letting it be, and this is the essence of both Whitman's politics and his poetics. Whitman's answer to the American paradox between self and society is analogous to his conception of the relationship between body and soul: "I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased by the

other" (192). Such oppositions in Whitman's poetics need to be acknowledged and accepted as oppositions; they are not to be overcome. Whitman's concern with abasement suggests an affinity with the Derridean concept of the implicit hierarchies involved in all binary oppositions. However, Whitman believes that the democratic poetry of the "equable man" in a democratic society can work successfully to balance the traditional hierarchical arrangement of such oppositions. This makes the paradox itself valuable, and not a situation that requires any further resolution.

In her discussion of Whitman and slavery, Karen Sanchez-Eppler defines Whitman's desire to achieve such balance as a "poetics of merger and embodiment," and argues that Whitman can "embody," and thus balance, the contradiction between master and slave, for instance, because his poetry aspires to "the power to mediate oppositions" (924). According to Sanchez-Eppler, such power can best be defined as an "ideal of absorption" (946). This is certainly in close agreement with what the construction of a Whitmanian poetics of labor has attempted to demonstrate all along. However, it is tempting, but dangerous, to end the argument at the level of that ideal because that suggests closure and completion of both "merger and embodiment." The "merger" between the one and the many is the basis for all contradictions in Leaves of Grass (the title itself suggests that basis), and like the one and the many, oppositions between the body and the soul, master and slave, boss and worker, are never reconciled or synthesized in Whitman's poetry. This is not to say that Whitman condones a system which perpetuates hierarchical relationships like master and slave because such a system is clearly not "commensurate" with the democratic system he is trying to perpetuate. In other words, the resistance to synthesis does not entail an acceptance of such

relationships. What Whitman does condone is an attentive guard against abasement of either side of such oppositions, and that guard, if successful, would preclude a master/slave system of social organization. Whitman's insistence on remaining at the center of any such opposition suggests that it is the opposition itself, not its resolution, that makes Whitman's sense of a democratic poetry valuable because it consists of a continuous balancing process. This process could not and should not be completed because it is the essence of Leaves of Grass as well as, Whitman would argue, the labor of living.

In Whitman's view, American society is where it needs to be because it has already subscribed to a principle of democracy. America's work consists of ensuring that it does not "abase itself" to that principle, and the most convincing evidence of this purpose in Whitman's poetry lies in his representations of that society at work. The primary purpose of those representations is the test for an "equable" relationship between the worker and the work. For Whitman, working toward that goal suggests working toward the "history of the future" as well. As he says in the Drum Taps poem "The Centenarian's Story": "The two, the past and present, have interchanged, / I myself as connector, as chansonnier of a great future, am now speaking" (434). The poet as "connector" (mediator) attempts to embody linear time in order to show that the act of "speaking", which is itself "embodied" in the written poem, works from the past, in the present, and for the "great future." What matters most to Whitman is that all work, whether it be the swing of an axe, the legislation of a president, or the writing of a poem, is of value only insofar as it is executed with that purpose in mind.

In 1900, George Santayana argued that "Whitman failed radically in his dearest ambition: he can never be a poet of the people" (186). Santayana's

argument is symptomatic of a profound misreading of Whitman's "dearest ambition," which in Whitman's words focused on the other side of the opposition between the each and all. As he says in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads": " 'Leaves of Grass' indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature - an attempt, from first to last, to put a person, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America) freely, fully and truly on record" (671). This purpose statement suggests that Whitman's "dearest ambition" is to be a poet of the "person." At the same time, however, there is always the sense in which that "simple separate person" embodies "the word en-masse" as well. So, there is some truth to Santayana's view of Whitman's intention, but he fails to recognize the complex process by which Whitman attempts to embody "the people" through self-expression.²

Santayana argues that Whitman is guilty of misunderstanding the people he is trying to speak for, and of misunderstanding the people's relationship with and use of poetry:

Their [the people's] hope is always to enjoy perfect satisfaction themselves, and therefore a poet who loves the picturesque aspects of labour and vagrancy will hardly be the poet of the poor. He may have described their figure and occupation, in neither of which they are much interested; he will not have read their souls. They will prefer to him any sentimental story-teller, and any sensational dramatist, any moralizing poet: for they are hero-worshippers by temperament, and are too wise or too unfortunate to be much enamoured of themselves or of the conditions of their existence. (113-14)

Alan Trachtenberg argues that Whitman "anticipated" (19) such objections, and such interrelated issues in Whitman's poetics as the relationship between the poet and the reader, the possibilities and implications of a democratic poetry,

and, not least of all, what it means to work and participate in a democratic society, do speak well against Santayana's assertions. Whitman might have very well agreed with Santayana about what the people expect from poetry, but for Whitman that hero-worshipping "temperament" is the enemy which only contributes to the cultural stagnation that characterizes the second stage of social development.

Santayana's contentions with Whitman, however, should not be taken lightly, nor should they be discarded as simply anti-Whitmanian or elitist. Along with John Jay Chapman and D.H. Lawrence, he offers one of the most useful early criticisms of Whitman because the problems he addresses, particularly the issue of the representation of daily work, require consideration by any reader of Whitman.³ Yet, Whitman does indeed anticipate Santayana's criticism because he was well enough aware that he was working outside the poetic tradition of "sentimental story-tellers" and "hero worship." As he says in "A Backward Glance O'er Travl'd Roads": "No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as coming mainly toward art or aestheticism" (671). Whitman has sensed all along that he is asking his reader to work toward a different way of reading and "viewing" poetry, and of reading and "viewing" oneself in a community of selves. The attempt to move the poetic experience outside the realm of "art or aestheticism" is an attempt to marry both of those readings, which is to say that poetry requires continuous labor.

In the end, the only people who are excluded from Whitman's revisioning of America are not simply the physicians and the priests of the world. Such categorical exclusion would also not be "commensurate" with the principles of democracy, though for Whitman physicians and priests do suggest

an anti-democratic way of working. For that reason, they may in fact fit the description of those he will not accept, and those who are excluded consist of anyone who does not accept his way of “viewing,” which is not only suggested in the conclusion of “A Backward Glance O’er Travl’d Roads,” but throughout his work. For instance, in the Drum Taps poem “To A Certain Civilian,” Whitman exiles into obscurity one who insists on “a literary performance” in a poem:

What to such as you anyhow such a poet as I? therefore
 leave my works,
 And go lull yourself with what you can understand, and
 with piano-tunes,
 For I lull nobody, and you will never understand me. (455)

Perhaps it is merely coincidence, but it seems rather significant that “works” and “tunes” are both given a singular, visual prominence in this poem through the use of enjambement. For Whitman, poetry is like architecture; it is “what you do to it when you look upon it,” and Whitman hopes to isolate those who focus on “tunes” from those who see “works.” This is because he was working against artistic closure and toward what Bové calls “a more temporal poetics of discovery”(179). In this sense, the essential work involved in reading a Whitman poem, according to Whitman, begins at the moment the poem concludes because he is trying to challenge the distinction between poetry and life that those who want “tunes” would make. That challenge becomes the labor of the reader as well. As he writes in “A Backward Glance O’er Main Travl’d Roads”:

I round and finish little, if anything; and could not, consistently with my scheme. The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine. I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought - there to pursue your own flight. (666-7)

In Whitman's scheme, the reader must also resist the impulse to "round and finish" a poem's contradictory suggestions because such closure implies a poetry of "tunes" rather than "works."

Just as the work of the poet entails a process of absorption between the poet and his audience, the "proof" of the reader is that he or she has absorbed the poem just as much as the poem has absorbed the reader. The poem is then complete when it comes to embody the contradiction between "the word en-masse" and "simple separate" individuality. As Whitman claims: "I have allow'd the stress of my poems from beginning to end to bear upon American individuality and assist it - not only because that is a great lesson in Nature, amid all her generalizing laws, but as counterpoise to the leveling tendencies of Democracy" (667). The concept of "counterpoise" is central to Whitman's poetics of labor because he uses the theme of labor in poetry in an attempt to "counterpoise" the social structure of work, but for Whitman such social reorganization is nothing if it is not balanced with "American individualism." It is not enough for Whitman to argue that mechanics, poets, and physicians are really "all the same." At a certain point, "the leveling tendencies of Democracy" themselves become problematic because they obscure the individual, and the only way to work against such backlash is through the "stress" of poetry. As Whitman says in "To a Pupil": "Rest not till you rivet and publish yourself of your own Personality" (515). This advice again suggests the most prevalent theme in Whitman's poetics of labor, which is the convergence of the worker and the work. Here, the worker is explicitly the work because "Personality" is both, and Whitman's fundamental purpose is to get every worker to that point: "The greater the reform needed, the greater the Personality you / need to accomplish it" (515). Whitman's poetics of labor is motivated by the desire to ignite a radical

“reform” of labor that begins and ends with the individual “Personality” in poetry.

Poetry is central to Whitman’s sense of reform, and he does not doubt that poetry is the ultimate form of labor. However, there are telling moments in which Whitman doubts his argument for his own work. Such a moment occurs in the 1874 poem “Prayer of Columbus,” in which Whitman identifies with the “battr’d, wreck’d, old” (540) Columbus who despairs that his own individual effort and work will remain unacknowledged. Whitman’s voice in the character of Columbus is unmistakable: “Thou knowest my years entire, my life, / My long and crowded life of active work, not adoration merely” (540). Throughout the poem, there is a simultaneous sense of hope and despair as Columbus/Whitman looks back upon “the work so far accomplished” (541). First of all, he wishes that “the swords I know may there indeed be turn’d to reaping - tools,” but there is also the fear that he has only contributed to his own dissolution: “Is it the prophet’s thought I speak, or am I raving? / I know not even my own work past or present” (542).

It is moments such as these when Whitman realizes the individual demands that his definitions of the poet of democracy place upon him. There is clearly a personal price to be paid for working within a “temporal poetics of discovery.” That is, there is no way for him to be true to what he thinks a poet should be, and at the same time fully comprehend the effect of his “past or present” life’s work. Any such attempt to “round and finish” that work would place limits on its effectiveness in the future. The best that he can do, and this is exactly what he did, is to write through that despair, and make it part of his work as well. The meaning of the poet’s labor becomes the labor of the reader through history, and the work of reading Whitman so far certainly suggests that he was indeed not simply “raving.”

Ezra Pound in 1913 made a significant, but perhaps begrudging, contribution to that work in his address to Whitman in "A Pact": "It was you that broke the new wood, / Now is a time for carving. / We have one sap and one root - / Let there be commerce between us" (89). Whitman's despair in "Prayer of Columbus" is lifted in these four lines because Pound demonstrates a willingness to labor with Whitman on his own terms, which are also Pound's terms since they share "one root." That willingness remains essential to an understanding of Whitman's work because whenever he is read it is always "a time for carving."

NOTES

¹ In Arnold's argument, it is the critic who performs essentially the same task as Emerson's philosopher and Whitman's poet. Arnold distinguishes between an "epoch of concentration" in which the time is well suited for creative activity, and an "epoch of expansion" which is a time of critical activity that works toward "rendering" [an epoch of concentration] possible" (266). Despite the differences in each argument concerning who primarily is responsible for the "expansion," the philosopher, the critic, and the poet are doing the same work. Thus, Whitman's "second stage" in Democratic Vistas is equivalent to Emerson's and Arnold's use of "expansion."

² In his essay "Whitman's Visionary Politics," Alan Trachtenberg argues that Santayana's perception of Whitman was marred by his inability to consider the political basis of Whitman's poetics: "Santayana inaugurated at the turn of the century a line of elitist thinking about Whitman which not only discounts his theory of democracy but sees it as pernicious, destructive to his native talent" (18).

³ In his essay "The Soul of the Tramp," Chapman makes a similar point as Santayana when he says that "the American mechanic would probably prefer Sigurd the Volsung, and understand it better than Whitman's poetry." However, unlike Santayana, Chapman argues that Whitman was not even able to portray accurately the mechanic: "As to his talk about comrades and Manhattanese car-drivers, and brass-founders displaying their brawny arms round each other's brawny necks, all this gush and sentiment in Whitman's poetry is false to life. It has a lyrical value, as representing Whitman's personal feelings, but no one else in the country was ever found who felt or acted like this" (73). In Studies in Classic American Literature, D.H. Lawrence makes essentially the same point, and attributes it to Whitman's tendency to merge the "en-masse" with himself: "As soon as Walt *knew* a thing, he assumed a One Identity with it. If he knew that an Esquimo sat in a kyak, immediately there was Walt being little and yellow and greasy, sitting in a kyak. . . . DEMOCRACY. EN MASSE. ONE IDENTITY. The universe, in short, adds up to ONE. 1. Which is Walt" (178). In his consideration of the problem of identification in Whitman's poetics, Lawrence comes closer than either Santayana or Chapman to an understanding of the political basis Whitman's poetry.

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