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A “RECONSTRUCTED SOCIOLOGY”: *DEMOCRATIC VISTAS* AND THE AMERICAN SOCIAL SCIENCE MOVEMENT

TIMOTHY D. ROBBINS



IN 1908, the *Vassar Miscellany* printed “Walt Whitman,” an ostensibly run-of-the-mill essay from literature major Ruth Fulton. Identifying the “fundamental principle” of Whitman’s poetry in its “application to the life and things of everyday,” Fulton echoed the prevailing sentiment among US intellectuals, locating *Leaves of Grass* between poetry and critique.¹ At the same time, the ardent “disciples” and enthusiasts who had begun editing, circulating, and writing about Whitman in the waning years of the poet’s life were not just securing his place at the center of the national literary canon in the coming century, but reconceiving his work as a unique kind of social theory.²

After graduating from Vassar, Fulton did what many of those same academics and activists did: she pursued her late interests in the social sciences. She studied with the biggest names in the emerging disciplines—Elsie Clews Parson, Franz Boas, and Margaret Mead—before making a name for herself, as Ruth Benedict, in anthropology. Her revolutionary *Patterns of Culture* (1934) set down the principles of the Culture and Personality School, which—describing human groups, or “cultures,” as fluid but ultimately cohesive and consistent “pattern[s] of thought and action”—authorized the anthropologist to distill the native values of a community and to posit them (as Margaret Mead described it) as a kind of “personality-writ-large.”³ Fusing empirical studies and archetypal criticism, Benedict recombined the field’s originary split between science and literature. It is hardly a surprise, then, that Benedict’s juvenile literary criticism looked to the analytical prose of democracy’s self-appointed poet. In *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Whitman, too, conceptualized “culture” and “personality” and contemplated their functions in a modern

society. Culture in “America,”—what could be called history’s republican project—as Fulton explained via Whitman, was to take the form of a “typical personality of character, eligible to the uses of the high average of men, and not restricted by conditions ineligible to the masses.”⁴ If, by the 1930s, Ruth Benedict had adopted “personality” and “culture” as core concepts when investigating the value systems of America’s indigenous peoples, it was Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* that had placed the same terms at the center of a social theory for “American” Reconstruction. With the bloodshed of the Civil War still fresh, Whitman sought to invent a common tradition and a forward-looking vision; he did so by discarding the Victorian ideals of high “culture” for a democratic critique of his nation’s cultural history. What Fulton felt in *Democratic Vistas*, then, were the intellectual embers soon to be rekindled as a modern social science, forged in the fires of the nineteenth-century reform movement⁵ by the same name.

The vigorous debates surrounding the postbellum era’s social issues—not just its fundamental “color problem,”⁶ but the violent suppression of organized labor, the expansion of women’s suffrage, the rampant political corruption, the development of corporate monopolies, the onset of mass immigration, etc. —often occurred within the new discursive framework arranged by “Social Science,” a term that came to signify a movement of authors and activists influenced by the era’s varied and interwoven currents of positivist, evolutionary, and socialist theories.

While *Democratic Vistas*, which Ed Folsom aptly describes as the poet’s intervention “in the major social issues of his time,” certainly reflects this political moment—when utopian mood was joined to professional knowledge—literary scholars have tended instead to accentuate the work’s formal idiosyncrasies and grandiose rhetoric.⁷ Though Whitman insisted that *Vistas* was the product of his “moral microscope,”—his ethical investigation of Gilded Age America—critics perceived the text as exhortation more than examination, an activist literature rather than a true social science (*DV* 14).

As a consequence, literary historians have often understood Whitman’s only book-length treatment on “political and literary

subjects”⁸ as something of an art-movement manifesto advocating for the need and potential of a dissident, participatory literature. But in the pages that follow, I hope to revive *Democratic Vistas* as a case study of early American social science, as well. Situating the text’s composition—from manuscript notes, source material, and pilot essays to its publication as an 84-page pamphlet—within the intellectual tendencies of Reconstruction-era social science reveals *Democratic Vistas* as an equally important document for the nascent discipline. In his program to cultivate a population of self-reliant, creative readers, Whitman examines the national histories of literary institutions; he meditates on the social reproduction of “taste” and its connections to political and economic power; and he conceives of a democratic reception theory based on a new ethics of reading, entering debates about the “best books” with the country’s newly professionalized class of librarians. Finally, I argue that, in linking the transmission, reception, and circulation of “culture” to the nation’s social evolution, Whitman laid the groundwork for that concept’s adoption by future sociologists, anthropologists, and activists at the turn of the twentieth century—with the young Ruth Benedict as the case in point.

Receiving Democratic Vistas

While Whitman always recognized his essays as an intervention into the era’s debates on democracy and culture, critics have long perceived a divide between *Democratic Vistas*’ lack of an applied science and the vague, often romantic poetics advanced in its place. This rift was established in the immediate aftermath of the publication of Whitman’s “Democracy,” the 1867 essay that became the basis for the ensuing book. Printed in *The Galaxy: A Magazine of Entertaining Reading* in response to Thomas Carlyle’s anti-democratic diatribe *Shooting Niagara: And After?* of the same year, “Democracy” addressed the social problems and corruption of the dawning Gilded Age by championing America’s liberal institutions as a political training ground for the working classes. Whitman located the reconciliation of North and South (and laborer and capitalist) in the cultural productions of

homegrown authors to come. Bronson Alcott—in his private journal—offered the lone enthusiastic reaction, celebrating Whitman’s attack on the “thoughtless literature and Godless faith of this East.”⁹ More typical was the review found in the *Round Table*, which diminished Whitman’s foray into political philosophy for, among other things, its curious absence of “the immediate present, between us and this splendid future,” still “seething with the at least tangible and vivid problems that none show us how to escape.”¹⁰ These opening rounds effectively demarcate the text’s larger reception history. For instance, Gay Wilson Allen, in his pioneering *Walt Whitman Handbook* (1940), acclaimed the spiritual politics of *Vistas*, finding in Whitman’s essay “[d]emocracy as a moral and ethical ideal” rather than a “theory of the sovereignty of the people.”¹¹ Harold Blodgett conceded that Whitman was “no analyzer of social problems” and only scanned those political theories which “supported his own idealism.”¹² *Democratic Vistas*, then, was both defended as a democratic sermon against the nation’s elitist, Anglo-influenced culture and reproached as the nebulous polemic of a literary dilettante.¹³

New Historicist renderings of Whitman’s career, such as Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* (1982), Betsy Erkkilä’s *Walt Whitman: The Political Poet* (1989), and David Reynolds’ *Walt Whitman’s America* (1996) transformed *Democratic Vistas* into an incisive and timely critique of the period’s political events and a contribution, albeit not always a serious one, to the history of democratic thought. The critical guideposts thus shifted from mystical speculation to the scenes of Whitman’s everyday, just as scholars continue to resituate the text against the backgrounds of Gilded Age politics—on issues such as black suffrage, party politics, and organized labor.¹⁴ Whitman’s intellectual sources also received more thoughtful attention, with the influence of Hegel at the fore. Some came to regard *Democratic Vistas* as a kind of projection of the Absolute Idea onto the American scene, a presence reflected in the text’s vacillating, vaguely “dialectical” structure, which Erkkilä refers to as “Hegelian, working through oppositions and contradictions toward some higher synthesis.”¹⁵ Like initial commentators, later scholars were split on whether to understand Whitman’s historically-staged narratives of

human culture—underwritten by nation and ethnicity—as a radical break from the democratic faith of his poetry or an extension of the poet’s latent conservatism.¹⁶

But perhaps the most decisive turn in recent scholarship is the focus on Whitman’s “programme of culture” for a democratizing United States.¹⁷ Erkkilä, for one, indicates that the politics of *Democratic Vistas* actually turn on Whitman’s gestation of culture, which anticipated “postmodern investigations into the ideological bases of literature, literacy, and literary value.”¹⁸ A wave of texts came to focus on Whitman’s cultural criticism as a counterpart to his political theory, positioning his essay along a spectrum of critical traditions from “redemptive instrumentalist” to proto-Pragmatist.¹⁹ The most promising of these trends posits Whitman as something of an early theorist of reception studies. In *Walt Whitman and the American Reader*, Ezra Greenspan argues that in *Democratic Vistas* Whitman articulated the “participatory role to be played by the reader in the construction of the artifacts of culture.”²⁰ More recently, James Perrin Warren demonstrates how Whitman attempted to “reconstruct” a democratic audience after the fractures of the war.²¹ Morton Schoolman refers to the same practice as an “aesthetic education,” where the reciprocity between authorship and reading might inspire mass audiences to “learn the possibilities for creativity available in a democratic society.”²² “Culture” in Whitman’s American context, then—i.e., for democratic purposes—was necessarily social, a process governed by the cycles of production and reception and thus demanding sociological examination.

So while scholars such as Harold Aspiz reiterate that the Whitman of *Democratic Vistas* was “content to be a dreamer of the absolute and to subordinate sociological doctrine to poetic inspiration,” to dismiss his text as merely utopian overlooks Whitman’s sensitivity to contemporaneous rhetorics of reform.²³ Retracing the compositional history of *Democratic Vistas* demonstrates how even minor changes and additions made by Whitman suggest the presence of social science discourses. By updating and reframing the text in this manner, Whitman attempted to raise sociology to the visionary heights of “poetic inspiration,” refusing to see any distance between

the everyday pragmatics of social science and the horizontal aspirations of his prophetic poetry.

“Democracy”: Carlyle Contra “The People”

Although source material for *Democratic Vistas* is vast, the main force behind Whitman’s original thesis was *Shooting Niagara: And After?*—the text that directly provoked the publication of “Democracy.” Carlyle’s essay was itself a response to Britain’s passage of the Reform Act of 1867 extending suffrage rights to working-class men, which he portended would hasten civilization’s demise. Carlyle went as far as to claim that, if anything, the United Kingdom ought to further circumscribe voting rights in an effort to stabilize social and moral authority among intellectuals.²⁴ Already unpopular in the northern U.S. as an opponent of the Civil War, Carlyle now condemned the product of Union victory, black suffrage, as the epitome of democracy’s threat to natural order. His message reached America in an instant. Horace Greeley reprinted *Shooting Niagara* in the *Tribune* alongside an editorial remonstrance, as did *Macmillan’s Magazine*. The text was ultimately reissued as a pamphlet, further inciting American readers.

Francis and William Church, editors of the recently launched *Galaxy* magazine, a “New York rival to the *Atlantic Monthly*,”²⁵ sought a response to Carlyle, an apologia for America’s democratic institutions. William Douglas O’Connor suggested Whitman, who obliged—despite personal admiration for Carlyle, the most referenced author in his oeuvre outside of Emerson²⁶—and entered the fray with “Democracy,” his “counterblast” to “Shooting Niagara” (*Corr* 1:341-42). Opposed to Carlyle’s anxiety about the dissolution of the old social order, the opening lines of “Democracy” looked to that past to affirm the country’s future, in the passage that forms the basis of Whitman’s progressive historicism:

America, filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past, including Feudalism (as, indeed, the present is but the legitimate birth of the past, including feudalism,) counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claims success?) almost entirely on the future.²⁷

For Whitman, the extant success of U.S. democracy derived from the comparative fairness of its formal institutions. In actuality, though, “democracy” was an elusive, even aspirational ideal. It relied not only on the continuous expansion and practice of its principles to be achieved, but on the lessons of the mode of life and government which preceded it, “feudalism.”

Britain, and the larger signifier “Europe,” served as historical and cultural counterpoints here and throughout the development of *Democratic Vistas*. As America’s “feudal” past, it had much to offer the nation’s authors, for the “moral and political speculations of ages, long, long deferred, the Democratic-Republican principle, and the theory of development and perfection by voluntary standards” (3) were among the lessons derived from examining and understanding Europe and then integrating the useful and discarding the reactionary aspects of its outdated culture. This national-historical configuration, New World democracy as the product and adversary of European feudalism, offered Whitman a valuable rhetorical frame for his initial attempt at the genre of the Victorian social essay—and its canon of Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin, and Mill. Whitman diverged from this refined tradition in style and organization. His circumlocuted, pivoting prose, and his structure, “a collection of memoranda, perhaps for future designers, comprehenders,” produced an argument “open to the charge of one part contradicting another” (3). “Democracy” was insistently “not the result of studying up in political economy, but of the ordinary sense, observing, wandering among men,” a sociology forged on the noisy streetcars of New York and the provisional infirmaries of Civil War battles (3). A collection of jottings and reshuffled notes, Whitman’s social philosophy, naturally, contained multitudes.

Whitman’s argument for republicanism rested not on its immanence, but with the law of history’s progressive urge. Modern social and economic realities furnished states with a decision of linear proportions: either “look forward and democratize,” or “lean back and monarchize.”²⁸ Whitman admitted the difficulties of suffrage and integration and accepted the “well-wrought argument” of the “eminent and venerable” Carlyle (920). But he resolved present contradictions the way he always had, by projecting resolution into the

future. Traveling by “maps yet unmade” (923), Whitman concluded that his essay could only “throw forth a short direct or indirect suggestion of the premises of that other plan, in the new spirit, under the new forms, started here in our America” (920). “Democracy” never intended to outline a political program or social philosophy, or even “counterblast” Carlyle,²⁹ but only to recommend how citizens, especially those with a mind towards history and literature, could begin to develop self-prescribed principles of democracy within and against the stubborn resolve of feudalist values.

The problems facing Whitman’s theory of America derived not from the pens of foreign critics, but from the internal fissures remaining from the war. Whitman recognized the urgency of the wide array of “social problems,” and the central task of “Democracy” was to sketch out a cohesive social model based on the care and valor of the American populace. In a manuscript preface to “Democracy,” Whitman wrote that the virtuous and duly sovereign subjects in the United States are “not as in other Lands, & in all the past residents in special Eminences of rulers or leaders,” but in the “fair broad, limitless, average mass of the Common People” (*NUPM* 854). The coming-subject of the national community, introduced here as “the People,” were to become the sustained focus of “Democracy” and *Democratic Vistas*. Indeed, by pitting this notional subject, the “People,” against the “eminent” rulers of past systems, Whitman skirted Reconstruction’s concrete issues of racial conflict.³⁰

Yet this formulation, his projection of a national subject-to-be-filled, indicates how prescient Whitman was as a theorist and a rhetorician. In manuscript notes recorded alongside “Democracy,” Whitman pondered that “with all the elements, promise, & certainty of a Democratic Nationality on the largest scales, & humanities en-masse, such as have yet existed only in dreams-a People” (*NUPM* 863-864). While the “People” are the subject of a democratic nation, they are but a historical creation, one forged from practice rather than treated as an abstract political category. Turning social criticism from policy to ontology, Whitman’s theory sketched not what the “American People” want or need, but what they can aspire to be. His essay aimed to represent the “idea of that Something a man is,”

since potentiality, not only practicality, is vital to realizing the “revolutionary idea that the last, best dependence is to be upon Humanity itself.”³¹ This critical move in “Democracy,” shifting attention from remedies for present governance to prospects of a harmonious future, aligned Whitman with the emerging field of cultural sociology. In the language of the social sciences, Whitman proposed developing “a fit, scientific estimate and reverent appreciation of the People,” and he bemoaned that a model for “The People” did not yet exist as a literary—and thus a lived—possibility (921).

“The Labor Question” and the Advent of Sociology

To fully understand his seemingly utopian pleas for a “people” culture in *Democratic Vistas*’ notes and essays, it is helpful to firmly situate Whitman’s work in the milieu of the “Social Science” movement. In the US context, “Social Science” named the merger between the “scientific” theories of social life emanating from Europe—from Condorcet (“Science of Society”), St. Simon (“Science of Man”), Comte (“Sociology”) and Fourier in France; to Mill, Spencer, and Carlyle in England; to the Left Hegelians in Germany—with the homegrown utopian and reform movements of mid-nineteenth-century America. Uniting these tendencies was the belief that through the efforts of observation and reason, social laws could be discovered and formulated—as in the natural sciences—to guide humans towards a more peaceful social order, absent poverty and alienation. The global project of sociology turned on the notion that humanity was the agent of its own history, that social institutions, norms, and actions were at least as responsible for the fate of an individual or a people as was divinity or nature. Social scientific thinking moved in tandem with a “modernist” notion of historicity—i.e., the idea that present circumstances comprised a radical break with the past. As historian Dorothy Ross explains, these nineteenth-century social philosophies originated “in an effort to understand the character and future of modern society ... premised on a decisive difference between modern society and its feudal and ancient forerunners.”³² As with Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, the earliest social scientists devoted much energy

to articulating the processes by which past social orders (feudalisms, monarchies, tribal societies) dissolved, chiefly as a means of theorizing substitutes: whether democracy, capitalism, socialism, or some combination therein. Now that history had become intelligible in terms of human actions, the laws of causation linking past, present, and future were likewise knowable. Underwriting the new faith in social progress, of course, was an expansion of the theory of evolution. In the nineteenth century, biological explanations (of reproductive success and environmental adaptation) were transposed into the social realm and figured among the main catalysts of historical development. And while Whitman culled his thoughts on evolution from a *mélange* of sources, including transcendentalism, German idealism, and various Eastern religions, he was receptive to any theory that conceived of social life according to patterns discernible through scientific study.

Whitman of course had his finger on the pulse of these debates even as he contrived a new career path as America's poet. As for sociology, which A. H. Halsey famously cast as the nineteenth-century's merger between "explanation and interpretation, between science and literature, between objective behaviour and subjective meaning,"³³ the United States was fertile ground for this new literary science of society. When the new social thought migrated to America by way of reprints, magazine reviews, and popular lectures, the ideas met favorably with Whitman's personal canon of anti-bureaucratic tastes—Emersonian transcendentalism, Tom Paine's radical deism, and the "Inner Light" doctrine of Quaker preacher Elias Hicks. But by the close of the Civil War, American "social science" had undergone a political facelift. The radical, utopian energies of the previous decades appeared frivolous in the face of rebuilding a war-torn nation with millions of new, formerly-enslaved citizens. In 1865, a group of New England reformers, scholars, and clergy—spearheaded by journalist and Whitman ally Franklin Benjamin Sanborn³⁴—formed the American Social Science Association (ASSA) and the *Journal of Social Science*. These professionals were more conservative than the communal socialists of the antebellum period, but more goal-oriented than the liberal lyceum clubs of the same era. According to Jessie and Luther Bernard, ASSA sought "to develop a sound social theory on

the basis of which they might take practicable legislation”; as a result they represent the clearest precursors to the academic sociologists of the Progressive Era.³⁵

Because of its frenetic intellectual and linguistic history, by the time Whitman was set to publish “Democracy” in 1867, “social science” seemed both nascent and pervasive—a part of established discourse, yet undefined. In autumn of that same year, the New York Congregationalist weekly *The Independent* even queried “What is social science”—this entity that seemed “necessary” to “practical existence.” Was it a form of natural science, systematic and specialized, or was it like “the works of Walt Whitman, still waiting for an adequate description?”³⁶ It is telling that both *Leaves of Grass* and “social science” had to endure the political trials of the Gilded Age before receiving an adequate hearing. For in this period, Whitman and the self-defined social scientists engaged issues across the spectrum of social problems and through a range of genres and media—while increasingly looking to each other’s works to forge new critical idioms.

It is in “Democracy” that Whitman begins to test the conceptual field of social science, hinting at the political stakes for this unique “science of the present and the future.”³⁷ Following the Civil War, in the face of one of the most violently unequal economies in modern history, the issue most immediately pressing for “scientific” solutions was the omnipresent “labor question,” and so the abolitionist lexicon was amended to these new realities. David Roediger explains that as the “popular working class consciousness that emerged during the later stages of the Civil War, especially in the North, saw the liberation of Black slaves as a model,” a kind of tonal shift occurred, wherein the terrors of African slavery were transposed onto the miseries endured by (the mostly) white, industrial “wage-slaves.”³⁸ Thus, as Whitman turned to the essay to consider the prospects of democracy, questions of labor and capital—for him—trumped issues of race.

Outside of Whitman’s tragic erasure of the “color problem,” when scholars look to his prose even for insights into political economy, they have often found its roaming, moralistic style an obstacle to the larger criticisms of Gilded Age capitalism. Richard Pascal, for

example, thought *Vistas* limited as an economic critique because Whitman privileged a “moralistic assessment of the state of the nation’s soul” over and against “the more sociologically oriented view that a powerful and impersonal historical current is at work.”³⁹ But Whitman was never in fact more explicit about the “depravity of the business classes” and the serious threats inequality posed to the country (*DV* 11-12). In “Democracy” he called the labor question a “yawning gulf” and a “danger” to “incarnated Democracy advancing, with the laboring classes at its back” (925). In 1871, he even added a footnote expanding on “the labor problem,” a gulf “rapidly widening every year,” and proving to be *the* “huge impedimenta of America’s progress” (*DV* 71-72). Naturally, Whitman’s solidarity was with the “decent working-people,” the heroes of his future democracy who subsisted in misery with “nothing ahead and no owned homes [and] the increasing aggregation of capital in the hands of a few” (*DV* 71).

At the same moment, the “Social Science” movement was also engaging with the crises of economic exploitation, often in language reproduced by Whitman. For example, the *Galaxy*, just months prior to their publication of “Democracy,” printed a tract by Marie Howland where she discussed the “broad and deep benevolence” of the champions of “Social Science,” who saw the attainment of “not only comfortable, but even luxurious homes, for those who gain their bread by daily manual labor” as essential to social progress.⁴⁰ In 1871, the *Journal for Social Science* ran a position paper by William Strong arguing that sociology, in effect a “science of historical social progress,” must accept as its pivotal question: “[h]ow is [labor] to be conducted in harmony with intellectual, moral, and physical advancement?”⁴¹ As the social sciences admonished, Whitman too recognized that democracy, a system of moral and cultural values based on independence and participation, could never flourish under the oppressive weight of vast economic disparity. He figured that a certain basic level of security—namely that afforded to the property-owning middle-classes—was required to secure the potentials of “the People” and stave off social conflict.⁴² As Whitman relocated critique of capitalism from the economic to the cultural sphere, he

argued that American workers must be allowed the time and space to re-create themselves independently of their work. The “true gravitation-hold of liberalism,” he professed “will be a more universal ownership of property,” and the “vast, intertwining reticulation of wealth.”⁴³ While only a more just and egalitarian distribution—a “reticulating” network of prosperity—could secure the interrelated social organism of America’s “great and varied nationality,” that also depended upon a thriving national literature (928). As important to politics as a healthy and equal economic exchange was cultural commerce. Democracy, according to Whitman, not only demands “men and women with occupations, well-off, owners of houses and acres, and with cash in the bank” but with “cravings for literature” (927). If the population required self-gratifying stories and images focused on modern problems and personalities, they also needed to develop a taste for such portraits and narratives. So Whitman was compelled to rethink the interchange of “culture.”

A Sociology of “The People”

To fully grasp the conditions in which this cultural criticism emerged, we must place *Democratic Vistas* at the multiple scenes of its composition, between Washington, D.C. and New York in the 1860s. In the “bohemian” years preceding the opening shots of the Civil War, Whitman was hard at work during the day as a journalist with the Brooklyn *Daily Times* and carousing with writers, actors, and artists at night in Pfaff’s Cellar in Manhattan. In December of 1862, he abruptly departed New York to search for his allegedly injured brother George on the frontlines of northern Virginia. During the journey, he witnessed the grim toll the war took on the beautiful, athletic bodies he celebrated in verse. Whitman volunteered to care for wounded soldiers in the makeshift hospitals springing up around Washington, the city he remained in for the better part of the next decade.

Once in Washington, Whitman secured a clerk position at the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1865 through his friend, the Boston author and abolitionist William Douglas O’Connor. Following his infamous dismissal by department Secretary James Harlan, he landed

another government job soon after with O'Connor's friend, Attorney General James Speed. "The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication," O'Connor's defense of *Leaves* in the wake of the Harlan scandal, reinvented Whitman's literary identity, transforming him from "one of the roughs," the vagabond poet of New York's Bowery, into the compassionate nurse of wartime Washington, a wise and gentle bard of democracy.

The capital also changed rapidly in this period, undergoing massive development and centralization. The expansion of the Federal government during the war only intensified. Notwithstanding the renewed cultivation of Whitman's poetic celebrity in the late 1860s, he was, as Ed Folsom notes, "listed in the D.C. directory, not as a poet, but as one of the countless bureaucrats," an essential aspect of his postwar identity.⁴⁴ Whitman was joined in Washington by a deluge of writers and reformers, including O'Connor, John S. Burroughs, James Redpath, Henry Clapp, and Lester F. Ward,⁴⁵ among other radicals and bohemians who descended upon D.C. to work as government officials on the wings of the reform era's "institutional spirit."⁴⁶ This "spirit," as David Reynolds put it, oversaw the influx of associations pushing for practical improvements in government policy to mitigate social suffering and circumvent the more radical alternatives then receiving a hearing among the populace.

It was from the fountainhead of the new social science theories that Whitman fetched a notion for democracy as a "progressive conception," a kind of positive liberty he dubbed humanity's "Higher Progress."⁴⁷ For Whitman, once the country secured economic and political progress, the "respectability of labor" and the institutions to ensure that the population was "law-abiding, orderly and well off," it must set about the "true revolutions," those of the "interior life, and of the arts."⁴⁸ In fact, Whitman's own experiences in Washington act as something of a test case for how leisure might allow an individual to develop a sense of fullness, for the relatively free space and time afforded the poet to travel, write, read, and publish during his bureaucratic posts allowed him to make significant theoretical connections between leisure, labor, and culture.

In *The Evolution of Walt Whitman*, Roger Asselineau recounts

the poet's Washington years as a subtle transformation from beleaguered author to "happy bureaucrat."⁴⁹ Whitman had "never before been settled," according to Asselineau, bouncing between a variety of newspapers, professions, and properties before planting himself in the capital where he finally "consented to become a civil servant" (117). In a September 1868 letter to veteran Byron Sutherland, Whitman acknowledged his "excellent health" in Washington, a life of leisure that had left the poet "as fat and brown and bearded & sassy as ever."⁵⁰ There he enjoyed a steady income and a stable, less demanding work schedule, which gave him ample time to read, chat, walk about the town, and have dinner with friends, before returning to his warm, lit office in the evening to write.⁵¹ Indeed, for Whitman, Washington proved a peculiar blend: a middle-class life purchased by the rigid hours and mundane realities of an actually-existing democracy.⁵² This combination of leisure and funding permitted Whitman to become, for the first time, something of a professional writer. Due in part to the stir incited by the "Good Grey Poet," Whitman had never been more popular, and he began to "manage his career with the adroitness of a Gilded Age entrepreneur."⁵³ He published regularly in periodicals and anthologies,⁵⁴ and, according to Edward Grier, received "the rate paid by both the *Atlantic* and the *Galaxy* to well-established poets."⁵⁵ In constant epistolary exchanges with editors, Whitman sent off new pieces and negotiated prices and publication dates; his copyist's desk doubled as a professional office. The clerkship position also allowed Whitman to take regular leaves of absence to travel, specifically to New York where he could oversee his works' printing and sales. The essays that comprise *Democratic Vistas* are among the first pieces that Whitman composed absent the hectic pace of deadline journalism or the precariousness of a self-publishing poet.

Throughout the 1860s and 70s, Whitman was drawn to New York primarily to deal with family issues, publications, and real estate ventures. Peter J. Riley established Whitman as something of a land speculator in antebellum New York, connecting his dealings in the housing market to the aesthetics of *Leaves of Grass* to illustrate how the managerial aspects "involved in getting these structures off

the ground directly impinged upon the development of *Leaves*.”⁵⁶ The reconception of Whitman as a real estate entrepreneur departs sharply from the typical portrait of the aspiring carpenter caught between the dynamic energies of market life and the bygone fantasies of artisan independence. Rejoining Whitman’s actual work and leisure experiences—instead of class identity—to his poetics imbues the relative freedom he enjoyed as a bureaucrat with philosophical consequence, just as shuttling between New York and Washington shaped the absorptive, patchwork manner by which he composed *Democratic Vistas*.

Of course, it was the “crowds of the great cities” like New York and Washington which acted as models for the “People” Whitman had begun to articulate in “Democracy,” where he reflected on mixing it up with “these interminable swarms of alert, turbulent, good-natured, independent citizens, mechanics, clerks, young persons.”⁵⁷ Dissolving into and reemerging from the multitude was a process central to Whitman’s poetry, embodied in the explorations of his searching, enigmatic “I.”⁵⁸ Whitman reveled in losing himself in the intimate, physical connections across the swarm, but he also recognized each passerby as a unique figuration in a larger social tapestry, as a sociological profile. The crowds evoked in Whitman an amalgam of “dejection and amazement,” as none of the country’s “talented writers or speakers ... have yet really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work for them,”⁵⁹ and since “taste, intelligence and culture, (so-called,) have been against the masses” historically, any American literary program must set the “ungrammatical, untidy” nature of the crowd⁶⁰ against “the feudal and dynastic world over there, with its personnel of lords and queens and courts.”⁶¹ With this stroke, Whitman linked literary form to social class and political virtue. Unlike aristocrats and capitalists, working people are disorderly like free verse, unfit for kings and court poets and even genteel writers and modern monopolists. Whitman again engaged with social relations in prose as he had in verse, by projecting reconciliation into the future, postulating class divisions as a grand cultural history departing from the caste systems of feudal Europe and advancing towards a middle-class, egalitarian future in the United States, when the working-class,

rough-and-tumble “crowds” were to finally become “The People.”

“Personalism” and the Cultural Sciences

In May of 1867, just months before the publication of “Democracy,” an ambitious devotee named Charles Wingate, a civil engineer and sanitation reformer, sent a letter to Whitman’s office in Washington. Wingate aspired to be “a conscientious writer for the present American public,” and asked Whitman of the “true need of the American people as regards literature.”⁶² The line of questioning sets up as something like a preemptive interview for *Democratic Vistas*. He asked, “in what way should the young writer seek to prepare himself” for American readers:

Should he recur to the Past, and seek in the master’s [sic] of Antiquity those grand ideas which though used by generations are not yet exhausted; should he study history and endeavor to gather from experience what the tendency & need of the world is of the present; shall he study the thinkers of the present, the Mills’, Buckles’, Spencers’, Tennysons’ etc and see what they have gathered as the results of past & present experiences or finally shall he abandon books altogether and plunging into the vortex of human life, strive by actual contact with the people to find what they desire, and how to supply their want?⁶³

Whitman received this letter regarding the principles of a national literature at the very moment he was effectively answering the enquiries in prose. The catalog of alternatives posed above—to mimic the best of what has been said, to join in modern intellectual discussions, to document the desires of the people—represent the range of notions embodied by “culture” in the mid-nineteenth century, and Whitman moved between all of these diverse registers in the *Vistas* essays.

Three months after the publication of “Democracy,” Whitman wrote to the Church brothers about preparations for a new essay, “Personalism.” It sketched the “portrait of the ideal American of the future,” by “overhaul[ing] the Culture theory, show[ing] its deficiencies, tested by any grand, practical Democratic test.”⁶⁴ “Personalism” would shift focus from the ideal “People” and their absence in art to the processes of developing citizens’ “personalities” through cultural reception. Here Whitman argued that in the republican future,

national literature would “furnish the materials and suggestions of personality for the women and men of that country, and enforce them in a thousand effective ways.”⁶⁵ Literature was to replace the cultural custodians of the past, philosophers and the clergy, in shaping the identities of readers for the coming democratic society.

When Whitman stated his intention in “Personalism” to “overhaul the culture theory,” i.e., to advance literature as both a normative and generative force, he was entering a debate raging on both sides of the Atlantic—chiefly in response to Matthew Arnold’s recently-published *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold’s definition of culture as the “best which has been thought and said in the world” minted his work the *ur*-text of canonical elitism.⁶⁶ But what is too often lost in this sentiment is that Arnold’s cultural program for the “pursuit of our total perfection” was, in practice, a reform-minded response to the various “social problems” of fin de siècle Britain.⁶⁷ His high Victorian critique of partisan politics and class conflict warned of the ill effects that “ordinary popular literature” could have on the uneducated masses (49). He argued, instead, that “men of culture,” ethical liberals, must take it upon themselves to disseminate the “best knowledge and thought of the time,” since only a long-term transformation could bring forth a peaceful “atmosphere of sweetness and light” (49). For Arnold, “culture” was the ultimate mediator; above politics, it deigned to support laborers not by abolishing class hierarchy, but by welcoming them into the fold through an appreciation of the art and ethics of the aristocracy.

The concept of “culture” thus became a political watchword in the late 1860s, and Arnold’s work was widely discussed.⁶⁸ Whitman seized on the idea that culture could facilitate democratic progress. In the opening passage of “Personalism,” however, he challenged Arnold’s core tenets, for as culture was “now taught, accepted and carried out,” it was “rapidly creating a class of supercilious infidels.”⁶⁹ As far as Whitman could tell, Victorian culture had not produced the pursuit of “sweetness and light” that Arnold envisioned, but instead reproduced a hierarchy of arrogant cultural elites. Culture might be key to restoring moral order, but it could never just be handed down from above. Whitman’s theory instead aspired to force a “radical

change,” not necessarily to people themselves, but to the very category of culture – to extend to the nation a universal “programme” (524). His platform for cultural production and dissemination would reach farther than the refined “parlors or lecture-rooms,” and focus instead on “practical life” and the “formation of a typical personality” for the “high average” of the masses (524). In his redefinition, authors or orators would only “supervise [culture], and promulge along with it, as deep, perhaps a deeper principle” (547). This “deeper” democratization of culture was twofold. First, it would center the stories and characters of average working lives in the United States. Second, to “supervise” and “promulge” culture, it would recognize and encourage the *telos* underpinning its operation and working itself out through historical political struggles. Here was culture not as a static syllabus of the finest written thoughts, but as an ever-changing process that “recast the types of highest personality from what the oriental, feudal, ecclesiastical worlds bequeath us,” allowing modern authors and readers to “promulgate [their] own new standard, yet old enough” (546). For Whitman, culture produced usable pasts, modifying “the old, the perennial elements” of the arts to democratic practices (546)—which rooted him firmly in the yet-unnamed traditions of the cultural sciences.

In “Personalism,” Whitman explained how the “cultural” sphere was the belated expression of the country’s democratic condition, the third and final stage following the “political”—embodied in the Constitution and legal freedom—and the “economic”—resulting in America’s technological advancement and relative prosperity. Finally, literature, the “native Expression spirit” of “American personalities,” would facilitate an attitude of autonomy to match those formal expressions (*DV*56). Literary critics have since hailed Whitman’s perceptive grasp of cultural analysis, reading, as he did, the historical essence of political regimes articulated through their given media. John Stephen Mack explained that, for Whitman, literature was “always in service of political and historical needs”—a shrewd location of artistic value in everyday experience which even anticipated the aesthetics of John Dewey.⁷⁰ But while scholars have long linked Whitman’s method to philosophies of his past (Hegel), present (Arnold), and future (Dewey),

there is, in retrospect, a continuous critical tradition that *Democratic Vistas* might also be said to belong to: the sociology of culture. This movement, born in the eighteenth century, organized by the nineteenth, and named in the twentieth, combined hermeneutics and aesthetics to “historicize” and examine national literatures.

As Raymond Williams explained in his landmark *Sociology of Culture*, this philosophical lineage—appraising politics through an era’s cultural productions—sought to explain social change through periodic ruptures in aesthetic forms.⁷¹ Whitman joined a distinguished roster, including John Ruskin, William Dilthey, Johan Herder, and, perhaps its principal matrix, Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. While Vico (1668-1744) was a minor figure in the nineteenth-century canon (he was only later revived as a forerunner to modern sociology), his technique, outlined in the *New Science* (*Scienza Nuova*) in 1725, proved significant by reconstituting the study of metaphysics from abstract speculation to historical examination, setting the preconditions for writings like *Democratic Vistas*. As historians of sociology Jessie and Luther Bernard maintain, it was Vico who “uncovered the basic nature and function of culture by showing how one age perpetuates itself in the next and how each succeeding age transforms the past sufficiently to secure progress.”⁷² With the *New Science*, Vico endeavored to sketch “an ideal history traversed in time by the history of every nation, in its rise, progress... decline and fall.”⁷³ As a consequence, his “new” scientific method replaced deduction and necessity, the core principles of philosophical rationalism, with inference and contingency. Existence was no longer depicted through purely speculative thought, but by observing the products of historically-lived experience—namely the stories human groups have told to and about themselves.

For Vico, civilizations evolved in recurrent cycles (*ricorso*), with each age displaying distinctive political and social features typified in the master tropes of their respective cultures. As a result, analysis in the *New Science* begins in ancient Greece with the epic poetry of Homer. Vico discerned the essential patterns of Greek national conduct, institutions, and traditions in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, narrative quests that came to represent the *zeitgeist* of the Greek

people; “Homer” was a synecdoche for their shared culture. The method ushered in by the *New Science* thus provides a valuable background for understanding *Democratic Vistas*. Again, Whitman’s analysis emerged at the moment this kind of “science of society” was ingrained as the bedrock of reform movements, and *Vistas* not only parallels Vico’s methodology, but often echoes his content, as in this passage from the 1871 pamphlet:

the genius of Greece, and all the *sociology*, personality, politics and religion of those wonderful states, resided in their literature ... , that what was afterwards the main support of European chivalry, the feudal, ecclesiastical, dynastic world over there—forming its osseous structure, holding it together for hundreds, thousands of years, preserving its flesh and bloom, giving it form, ... and so saturating it in the conscious and unconscious blood, breed, belief, and intuitions of men, that it still prevails powerful to this day, in defiance of the mighty changes of time.⁷⁴

The interesting use of the term “sociology” here—which Whitman employed in *Democratic Vistas* for the first time in print—grants the text a scientific-sounding authority, flagging the anthropological stage theory of development so in vogue in the nineteenth century, and, at this moment, attached most popularly to French philosopher Auguste Comte, the international “inventor” of sociology. History for Whitman was always progressive, even when progress involved the perpetual “return” of previous historical imagery. Phases of the past existed in the present as tokens of a former journey or pockets of resistance to the future, as when Carlyle voiced the last gasp of High Feudalism against the inevitability of democracy. The structures of feudalism that undergirded Shakespearean drama and the decadent monarchies that lurked behind the British Romantics supplied the resources against which political democracy would wrestle before adhering to new cultural forms. As stated in *Vistas*, all acceptable models of the past—from Egyptian gods to Adam and Eve to Goethe’s Faust—though shaped by “orientalism, feudalism, through their long growth and culmination,” are “bequeathed to America as studies,” and must in a sense “return,” or be re-read as egalitarian narratives and figures “typical of democracy” (*DV* 35).

Here one is reminded of the anthropologist Ruth Benedict—to whom *Democratic Vistas* was later bequeathed as a study in the cultural sciences—who, in *Patterns of Culture*, echoed Vico-cum-Whitman's idea that the historical succession of “great art-styles” occurs “also in cultures as a whole.” Though focused on the customs of indigenous peoples, Benedict recognized that the fundamentally human “behavior directed towards getting a living, mating, warring, and worshipping the gods” depicted in art is also “made over into consistent patterns in accordance with unconscious canons of choice that develop within the culture.”⁷⁵ In other words, the values and activities represented in the aesthetic field of a people are reflective of social norms and political desires developing in that culture more widely.

Whitman had this understanding of the historical agency of literary art at the back of his literary efforts even decades before *Democratic Vistas*. As an early outline of ideas for a potential “Poem of Wise Books”—or “Poem of the Library”—suggests, he was long scouring past “sociologies” for compositional strategies. At the top of that notebook page, Whitman listed:

Poem of Wise Books

Poem of the Library — (bring in all about the few leading books.

Literature of Egypt,

Assyria

Persia

Hindustan

Palestine

Greece—Pythagoras Plato—Socrates—Homer—Iliad Odyssey

Rome,—Virgil

Germany—Luther

Christ Bible Shakespeare Emerson Rousseau—(NUPM 266)

So a major theme of his late prose was already here in formation. Whitman's library poem looked to catalog a narrative of national histories and development, from the cradle of civilization to its republican progeny.

In this sense, Whitman recognized the political power of the “few leading books” and attempted to trace cultural evolution in its textual

deposits. After a break in the page, he planned the poem's completion:

(Poem of the Library

—first a respectful word to those who in ancient times, and in all times, in unknown nations, have written wise words, or taught them—/
wisdom comes mostly back to the projecter, teller—no matter if no record—
All my poems do. All I write I write to arouse in you a great personality.
(NUPM 267)

Whitman allows cultural history to fill in even for the great ideas and stories not preserved in the library—those “unknown” to contemporary society. For Whitman, culture was not just the “best” of what has been recorded, but it involved a localized practice of “coming back,” of “telling” and “projecting” in reception. In *Democratic Vistas*, he once again acknowledged that a modern literature made available to the people must “permeat[e] the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief,” so that it “radiat[es], beget[s] appropriate teachers, schools, manners” (DV 5-6). And these figures of “permeation” and “radiation” were already shifting the significance of “culture” from product to process, creation to reception, and from authors to readers.

Orbic Literature and a Sociology of Reading

A week before *Galaxy* was set to run “Personalism,” Whitman sent the essay to be reviewed by Bronson Alcott, along with a letter promising “another article,” this one “addressing itself mainly to the question of what kind of Literature we must seek, for our coming America... the three articles (to be gathered probably in book)” (Corr 2:29). We cannot be sure what Alcott or any other reader thought of Whitman’s call to “the literary classes” (Corr 2:30), since the essay only made it into print as the conclusion of that then-probable book. According to Whitman, “Orbic Literature” would provide his most comprehensive theory on the relationship between politics and literature. As Burroughs revealed in a letter to a friend: with “Orbic Literature,” Whitman was to “bring his heaviest guns to bear.”⁷⁶

Indeed, Whitman fired shots once more at the state of the union's literature, aiming the future of the republic on the cultivation of strong, independent readers. He first explicated the politics behind his concept of self-reliant reading in the "Orbic Literature" section, describing the "process of reading" as "an exercise, a gymnast's struggle," stating further that "the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or 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."⁷⁷ A truly democratic culture does not turn on the intellectual elite, so its cultural theory must emphasize universal participation over passive representation. Whitman again solicited the Church brothers to print "Orbic Literature" in *Galaxy*, offering them exclusive rights to the "third & concluding" article. He overestimated demand, however, for despite his best attempts, the *Galaxy* turned it down.⁷⁸ So Whitman accepted his returned manuscript and went to work on the book.

Scholars seldom discuss this unpublished section of *Democratic Vistas*, although the essay, notes, and outlines exist in a variety of manuscript versions. Edward Grier assumed the text was simply inserted as the conclusion to the 1871 pamphlet. He contends "that the last twenty pages of *Democratic Vistas* . . . are practically identical with 'Orbic Literature.'"⁷⁹ More recently, Arthur Wrobel noted that while "textual variations are evident" in the several versions of *Vistas*, the "additions and deletions, however, are minor and do not alter Whitman's purpose."⁸⁰ These assessments trust that a text composed over a four-year stretch, pieced together from altered essays and reprocessed notes, was preconceived in its final form. As a result, critics have overlooked how some of the ostensibly minor changes made throughout the process reframe Whitman's project, or, in the very least, paint a fuller picture of its arrangement.

In fact, in the period following that rejection letter, Whitman added new quotes, data, and terminology from popular reform movements to emphasize the analytical nature of *Democratic Vistas*, and to imbue it with the cultural capital of a social science. I would argue that one such inclusion—Whitman's citation from the "librarian of

Congress in a paper read before the Social Science Convention at New York, October, 1869”—refashioned the essay to intervene explicitly in the period’s major debates on literacy and “proper” reading (*DV* 67). The fourth annual convention of the Association took place more than a year after Church’s rebuff, and the lecture cited on “The Public Libraries of the United States” no doubt enticed Whitman, as it received positive reviews in a number of national outlets before a full transcript of the conference proceedings was made available in the *Journal of Social Science*. Whitman might have imagined that in boosting the opinion of Ainsworth Rand Spofford, the head of the Library of Congress during Reconstruction and a respected authority on books and reading, he amplified his own theory of “gymnastic” reading on the pages that followed.⁸¹ Spofford, a pioneer in public library organization and maintenance, published numerous guides on libraries, books, publishing, and reading; in the process, he helped shape the modern discipline of library science.

Spofford, though, was a lifelong and vociferous critic of Walt Whitman and his poetry, and their fraught relationship casts Whitman’s citation as a curious one. Because of their history, Harold Aspiz suggests that the borrowed quote was “not relevant” to *Vistas*.⁸² Yet its placement before the alleged “Orbic Literature” section cannot be insignificant: “The true question to ask respecting a book, is, *Has it helped any human Soul?*” Whitman swiftly expounds, calling it the “hint, [the] statement,” that “the great literatus, his book,” “are to be first tried by their art qualities, their image-forming talent,” but to be considered “first-class works” only when “tried by their foundation in, and radiation . . . of the ethic principles, and eligibility to free, arouse, dilate” (*DV* 67). In other words, the value of a work is judged in its reception, in the effect on its readers. Form endows the initial experience, but literary and political success are gauged, in the end, at the level of sociology.

The Poetics of Public Libraries

The career trajectories of Whitman and Spofford—nineteenth-century America’s prime poet and librarian—actually exhibit a number

of intersections and rifts, a testament to the sinuous nature of the period's own "culture wars." Spofford (1825-1908), born to a wealthy New Hampshire family, was raised on the intellectual currents of Boston abolitionism and Concord transcendentalism. After abbreviated studies at Amherst, he moved to Cincinnati, where he worked as editor of the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* before opening a bookshop. Like Whitman, Spofford had decided mid-life to devote himself to literature. He organized a variety of reading groups and literary clubs, and even lured his intellectual hero Emerson out to Ohio for a lecture series during the 1850s. As a result of Spofford's diligence, Cincinnati grew into something of a western outpost for Transcendentalist thought, and Emerson, who apparently "enjoyed these experiences and profited financially from them," became Spofford's close friend.⁸³ As an editor and bookseller, Spofford assumed the role of a cultural ambassador to the West, mediating the mounting discussions over the fledgling institution of American literature. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he headed to Washington, D.C., as a war correspondent for the *Commercial* and soon after entered a post at the Library of Congress. He earned the position of Assistant Librarian in 1861 and, three years later, was tapped to head the Library. As a national steward of culture, Spofford promoted the idea that great literature and proper reading could suture the United States in the aftermath of war. He never shied from flexing institutional muscle to advocate for policy reform to this end.

But the postwar scene of national letters was a cultural battlefield of its own, and, for Spofford, Walt Whitman was prime target. Spofford published several attacks on Whitman and his work throughout the latter half of the century, a hostility Harold Aspiz traces to their mutual connections to Emerson—a sort of struggle over the future of Transcendentalist culture. Regional politics and social class played a decisive role in the clash as well. On the face of it, Whitman, the former Brooklyn-based printer from the lower middle class with a literary identity fashioned after the New York rough, jarred with Spofford, a cultivated, college-educated New England professional. In a somewhat stranger reality, while Whitman fancied the promise of a rustic, self-ruling West, he spent

virtually his entire life in the urban centers of the Mid-Atlantic. Spofford, on the other hand, worked tirelessly to retain a Brahmin cultural identity even as he set up shops in Ohio before returning east to work as a government bureaucrat. Above all of this, the major bone of contention for Spofford—one precept he never wavered on—was his puritanical morality, an ethics he faithfully policed as author and librarian.

Spofford was an impassioned and adversarial editor at the *Daily Commercial*, though his opinions were veiled behind a pseudonym used to attack politicians and authors: “Sigma.”⁸⁴ In 1859, “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” received an acerbic review by this “Sigma,” who assailed Whitman for lacking morals and form: “what we complain of in Walt Whitman, aside from that gross and obtrusive animalism which disgusts all intellectual men, is his utter contempt for expression, and the formless and apparently aimless character of his productions.”⁸⁵ Spofford’s appraisal spotlights what historian Carl Ostrowski calls the “ideology of reading,” a moral movement among Gilded Age librarians to influence the reading habits of the American population.⁸⁶ According to Ostrowski, Spofford and other public librarians worked to “steer readers away from morally questionable or aesthetically inferior books and toward ‘other and improving reading,’” often using the platforms of the social science movement to produce editorials, articles, and papers (72). And still, as dissimilar in taste and tone as two writers could be, in their will to cultivate good, morally-disciplined readers, Spofford and Whitman were wholly united.⁸⁷

It should also come as no surprise that Whitman was drawn to reports from social science organizations, nor that he appropriated ideas from their articles to empower his conception of a democratic reading. The American Social Science Association (founded in 1865) was at the time steadily gaining favor among public intellectuals. The *Christian Advocate* celebrated its 1869 convention as a “people’s university,” praising especially “the well-known able librarian of Congress Mr. A. R. Spofford,” whose lecture on the history of public libraries “contain[ed] valuable suggestions as to their contents, management, catalogue, etc.”⁸⁸

The potent blend of moral philosophy and scientific spirit on display in Spofford's lecture forecasted the creation of the American Library Association (ALA), the group that would institutionalize a new social science of reading—and, in the process, raise the figure of the public librarian to the height of Whitman's poet as a moral guide to the future of American letters. In 1876 the ALA was formally founded to "provide leadership for the development, promotion and improvement of library and information services."⁸⁹ The rhetoric undergirding the new profession was hoisted directly from the social sciences, and the references to development, improvement, and universal access were all the same slogans Whitman employed in *Democratic Vistas*. Wayne Wiegand stressed the shared pedigree and concerns joining the social sciences to the public library movement, claiming that the ALA "believed that public exposure to good literature would inevitably lead to a better informed, more orderly society."⁹⁰ Lora Dee Garrison contends that public librarians shared with social scientists the will to alleviate economic misery and re-instill a moral strength to the nation by "extending self-culture to the lowliest of Americans."⁹¹ The first generation of professional librarians were, like Whitman, "reared in the period of optimism," as Garrison puts it, and thus took to librarianship with an evangelical zeal.⁹² If Whitman's secular jeremiad posited the poet, the "divine literatus" (*DV* 6), as the moral savior of the degenerated Gilded Age, Spofford and his cohort saw the public librarian fulfilling the same role.

As the ALA branched from the American Social Science Association, it launched a magazine, *Library Journal*, held annual conventions, and printed technical manuals designed to influence reading habits and aid librarians. Melvil Dewey, a founding member, published a proclamation on "The Profession" in the journal's first volume, dreaming of the day when the librarian would "largely shape the reading, and through it, the thought of his whole community."⁹³ Samuel Green penned a similar piece on the librarian's cultural capital, admitting that while "it is important to have a democratic spirit in dealing with readers in popular libraries, the librarian is not, of course, to overlook the neglect of deference which is due him."⁹⁴ Dewey and Green's democratic authoritarianism crystallized a contra-

diction at the core of their altruism. Reading was democratic, open to all in principle; but the librarian, as the last bastion of good taste in a vulgarizing culture, functioned as an aristocrat in republican's clothes.

This political-cultural contradiction is at the very core of the era's "ideology of reading," which, as Wayne A. Weigand summarized, featured a number of creeds: "read with purpose,' read systematically and widely,' [and] 'digest what you read,'" but always "read with discrimination."⁹⁵ Indeed, Spofford was quite explicit when staking out his ground over cultural taste. He argued that "[l]ibrary providers are," like responsible guardians, "bound to furnish wholesome food for the minds of the young who resort to them for guidance"—"good taste" was inherently connected to "good morals."⁹⁶ Though, on its face, nothing could seem more foreign to Whitman's "gymnastic reading" than Spofford's ideology, Whitman's ideas for a national literature could sound, at times, equally moralistic. David Reynolds even impugned Whitman's "fantasy of a 'class of bards' taking over America" as "analogous to the conservative notion of the American Social Science Association that a chaotic America must be directed by so-called best men."⁹⁷ It is here, then, at the intersection of politics and morality, where Spofford and Whitman's allegedly inclusive principles are put to the test, and where a comparative review of their seemingly conflicting reading philosophies, in "Public Libraries of the United States" and *Democratic Vistas*, is illustrative.

Like *Democratic Vistas*, Spofford's brief history of the establishment of public libraries in the United States situated changing notions of literary value in a narrative of cultural development and national expansion. Most crucially, as the cited section suggests, both Spofford and Whitman were in accord on the basic issue: that the most important test for literature was its moral upshot. Spofford's account begins in the familiar language of frontier expansion, asserting that the country's initial libraries represented "the first ray of intelligence that streams from the world of letters upon the untrodden wilderness of America," before tracing the development of college and public donor libraries from settlements in colonial Virginia to Harvard College to the first public library created in New York

in 1700.⁹⁸ The narrative frame thus mirrored Whitman's cultural histories, both driven by illimitable progress. Spofford observed that New York's Society Library "migrated five times, improving its quarters with each removal," only to be outdone by the "gradual increase" of the Library of Philadelphia, begun with the "industry and zeal of the illustrious Franklin" (95-97). He buttressed these depictions of industry and growth with empirical surveys of the republic's leading libraries, which, as Spofford noted "exhibit[ed] a gratifying progress in all the larger collections and commemorating the more advanced and vigorous of the new libraries" (106). Just as Whitman staged the march of democracy through the political, economic, and cultural spheres of civilization, Spofford tied the advance of public libraries to the evolution of republicanism.

Betraying a certain national anxiety of the library's role as a cultural depository, Spofford also positioned Europe as the central antagonist to be usurped by American innovation. He lamented the "one great advantage [of] European libraries," that they contain "the stores of ancient literature which the accumulations of the past have given them," while U.S. establishments had "nothing at all as a basis" (105). Yet because American libraries contained "nothing" of ancient works, their catalogs and institutional visions were unavoidably modern. Spofford confessed that while "no library in America has yet reached 200,000 volumes, there are more than twenty in Europe," only to then qualify that these institutions are "merely repositories" of "medieval literature" (105). Librarians owed a certain deference to European cultures, but if the library's ultimate aim was to advance the interests of its patrons, then the United States represented a future with the space and resources to build themselves out from a scarcity of models, free from the burden of aristocratic values and types.

Concern with the here-and-now, coupled with the perpetual expansion and inclusion of American collections, imbued the history of public libraries with a democratic attitude, not unlike the principle at the heart of *Democratic Vistas*. For Whitman, economic and political freedom could be secured only through the cultivation of a self-proficient public. Spofford agreed to the extent that "public

books are just as important to the general welfare as public lamps,” and thought libraries should be “open to the people as a matter of right” (108). The library was to be the modern agency charged with spreading democratic culture and developing a taste for literature among the populace. So he concluded with a call to expand the public system, for “creating libraries proceeds upon the principle that intellectual enlightenment is as much a concern of the local government as sanitary regulations or the public morality” (108). Spofford’s lecture took after the *Vistas* essays in the rather conservative (though not necessarily elitist) notion that social reform must be more than legislative. It must take root and transform individuals in a way that only deep, proper reading habits could achieve. But that program was only possible if, as Whitman had indicated, the “category of culture” was universalized. Spofford finally surveyed the Library of Congress, which, in principle, was “freely open, as a library of reference and reading, to the whole people” (102). The nation’s foremost library welcomed all books to its shelves and all readers to its rooms. Spofford took direct policy action based on this standard, too, supporting the national copyright deposit law of 1870, which secured for the Library of Congress all publications submitted for copyright protection in the country. As he defended the law in his lecture,

the Library of the Government must become, sooner or later, a universal one. As the only library which is entitled to the benefit of the Copyright Law, by which one copy of each publication for which the Government grants an exclusive right must be deposited in the National Library, this collection must become annually more important as an exponent of the growth of American literature. (102)

Spofford looked to turn the public library into a training ground for a national literacy and literary tradition. The spirit of inclusion turned on his faith in reception to continually transform the significance of reading, since the “trash” of today may, “next year, turn out to have a wholly unexpected value” (111). Such conviction from the fiery adversary of indecent literature seems paradoxical, but what Spofford accepted here was the inevitability of historical contingency—the same that powered the cultural sciences, from Vico to Whitman.

In fact, Spofford applied the same ideals of cultural sociology to his library advocacy. Because all literature is “largely occupied with the questions of the day” it becomes “representative” to the extent that it “accurately reflects the spirit, the prejudices, and the personalities of a time which has passed into history” (99). Just as Whitman had delineated “culture,” Spofford understood literature to be emblematic of an era’s informing spirit. Echoing Whitman’s justification for making cultural pasts usable, Spofford argued that in an inquiring liberal society, the “development of human intellect in any particular period” assumes a utilitarian consequence, and so “all books are, or may become, useful.”⁹⁹ For Spofford and Whitman both, literature encased the intellectual spirit of the past as deposits of its cultural evolution (99).¹⁰⁰

It was Whitman’s deep appreciation for the historicity of reading that made his “culture theory” unique. In *Democratic Vistas*, the act of reading is intertwined in a grand narrative of culture, threading the practice through the nation’s “bequeathed libraries” with their “countless shelves of volumes, records” containing “personal models of the past” (*DV* 76). In their immediate, humanistic response, perceptive readers recognize that imagery and stories “with reference to humanity under the feudal and oriental institutes” offer valuable “insight to ourselves,” but that these representations, born from former epistemes, must still be “re-written, re-sung, re-stated, in terms consistent with the institution of these States” (*DV* 76-77). “Gymnastic reading” demanded practice and the persistence to reinvent culture from distant times and spaces within and for the contemporary moment.

Of course, Spofford also acknowledged that reading carried political implications—both timely and timeless in nature—since “those sentiments of human sympathy, justice, virtue, and freedom, which inspire the best poetry of all nations become sooner or later incarnated in their institutions.”¹⁰¹ Poetry, in particular, conveyed not only significant lessons to its readers, but had, through history, come to express the belief systems of a people. For his part, Spofford was willing to tread halfway with Whitman. He allowed for historical deviations in public “taste,” but he made clear the kind of poetry he

saw fit (and unfit) for America's moral posterity during an address at the 1891 convention of the Modern Language Association—a lecture later published as “Characteristics of Style.” From the then-forming national canon, Spofford extolled the “beautiful realism” of Whittier, the “vivid coloring” of Longfellow, and the “vivid imagination” of Poe, but once more derided Whitman.¹⁰² He restated the cardinal sins of *Leaves of Grass* in form and in ethics, blasting the poet's “extraordinary rhapsodies upon man, nature and the world” and the “tedious categories or catalogs of animate or inanimate things,” still assailing the “wanton breach of all the laws of reticence and modesty in his writing, his gross and defiant animalism” (20). *Leaves* lacked the aesthetic and virtuous qualities of an enduring literature—the reason, ultimately, that “the popular sense is just, which refuses to accept Walt Whitman as a great poet” (20). That the reading public shunned Whitman was proof enough that the filtering processes of good taste were a success and that no library—outside of the collection at Congress with its purely historical appeal—ought to be obliged to carry *Leaves of Grass* for its patrons.

While Spofford claimed the canon as meritocratic, he accepted librarians as the noble force elected to guide the system, Whitman, on the other hand, recognized “taste” was socially constituted and temporally provisional. In another notebook item, he deliberated: “[a]lways any great and original persons, teacher, inventor, artist or poet, must himself make the taste and by which only he will be appreciated or even received” (NUPM 149). Whitman perceived the irony of the public library's promise to act as both an inclusive repository and record of “culture,” since, as an institution, it operated from a conservative cast of mind, safeguarding the best of what has been said, while warding off innovation. So as librarianship rose to the status of a social science during Reconstruction, Whitman designed a new piece demanding that libraries—the bodies now charged with preserving cultural traditions *and* fostering democratic attitudes—heed his work. “Shut not your Doors to me proud Libraries” first appeared in the 1865 *Drum-Taps* and was reprinted in the “Drum-Taps” section of the 1867 *Leaves*. In all versions, it commenced with an imperious yawp:

SHUT not your doors to me, proud libraries,
For that which was lacking among you all, yet needed most, I bring;
A book I have made for your dear sake, O soldiers,
And for you, O soul of man, and you, love of comrades;
The words of my book nothing, the life of it everything.¹⁰³

Whitman once more assumed the voice of his book to commemorate the still fresh and profound sacrifices of the country's soldiers, to declaim America's literary value and political merit, and, finally, to enter his work into the incipient pantheon of national literature. He defied the librarians of the postbellum U.S. who might object to his aesthetic conventions. Presaging the ideals expressed in *Vistas*, Whitman suggested that form and content mean little compared to the "spiritual" life a book breathes into its readers, and vice versa.

The concluding lines celebrated the distance of Whitman's text from the learned tomes of library vaults and gestured towards his new sense of reading:

A book separate, not link'd with the rest, nor felt by the intellect;
But you will feel every word, O Libertad! arm'd Libertad!
It shall pass by the intellect to swim the sea, the air,
With joy with you, O soul of man. (8)

This verse again links the historical, America's internecine struggle for freedom dressed in an international flair (the Spanish "Libertad"), to the personal freedom of a reading practice which consciously circumvents textual representation. By the 1870 *Passage to India* (later incorporated into the 1871-72 *Leaves of Grass*), the poem had its title shortened, to "Shut Not Your Doors, &c.," received substantial edits, and moved from "Drum-Taps" to the book's final cluster, "Now Finale to the Shore" (in "Passage to India"). Of the many changes Whitman made to the work, the most crucial was to the final line, which now read simply: "The entrance of Man I sing."¹⁰⁴ Finally, for Whitman, this was the song of democratic possibilities, a tune outlined here but composed in the future. He reinforced this formulation in *Democratic Vistas*, proclaiming that in "long ages hence, shall the due historian or critic" be able to write "an equal history for the democratic principle," for, at that moment, democracy will have

“fashioned, systematized, and triumphantly finished and carried out, in its own interest, and with unparalleled success, a New Earth and a New Man” (DV 34).

Conclusion

When Whitman’s democratic theory reached the next century through the pen of then Vassar undergraduate Ruth Fulton, she received and emphatically “returned” his message. She affirmed that the “theme of Democracy, from the very vagueness of its thought, is one which is admirably fitted to Whitman’s swelling phrases.”¹⁰⁵ While Fulton was crafting her essay on Whitman, she made a convenient new acquaintance: the distinguished naturalist and old Whitman comrade, John Burroughs. Burroughs was living in upstate New York, just across the Hudson River from Vassar. He was acting mentor to the Wake Robin Club, a Vassar group dedicated to environmental studies, and he often invited Fulton and other students to the countryside cabin where he examined native fauna, farmed various crops, and composed much of his nature writing.

Perhaps Burroughs, after learning of a budding literary scholar at work on a Whitman piece for the school paper, alerted her to “Walt Whitman and His ‘Drum Taps,’” an 1866 review where he too ruminated on the vital connections Whitman made between the universal ideal of a democratic culture and the individual development of one’s personality. Burroughs argued that, in his poetry, Whitman “uses himself, as an illustration of the character upon which his book is predicated, and which he believes to be typical of the American of the future.”¹⁰⁶ If Burroughs equipped future readers for Whitman’s premature verse, Fulton may have absorbed the methods of his self-constructed personality so fully as to set the groundwork for her forthcoming anthropology. In the seminal *Patterns of Culture*, when Fulton postulated a “great arc of potential human purposes” from which cultures formed the principles of their particular personalities, she was, in a sense, revolutionizing Whitman’s claims in *Democratic Vistas* for a social science progressively global in its scope.¹⁰⁷ Before basically founding the field

of modern anthropology as Ruth Benedict, the young Fulton had already decided that Whitman's "influence is profound," because his book satisfied that "true test" of culture: it "stirs our highest emotions, widens the circle of things beautiful, and calls into play the forces of our moral natures."¹⁰⁸ Although contemporary scholars continue to discuss the ample and profound influences of Whitman's reception among his "poets to come," a fascinating thread remains between the methods of this poet and the coming social sciences.

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NOTES

- 1 Ruth Fulton, "Walt Whitman," *Vassar Miscellany* 37 (March 1908), 304.
- 2 Michael Robertson termed this "large, diverse, loosely affiliated international group" of Whitman supporters "disciples," as they encountered Whitman's words as prophecy more than poetry (*Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008], 5). In a related article, Robertson described the disciples' official body—the Walt Whitman Fellowship International—as a space for a "significant number of North American cultural radicals" to hone the concepts associated with the politics of the Progressive Era ("Reading Poetry Religiously: The Walt Whitman Fellowship and Seeker Spirituality," *American Religious Liberalism*, ed. Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012], 18). Thus, around Whitman's name formed a network of veterans from the era's social movements, including NAACP co-founder William English Walling, anarchist radical Emma Goldman, civil rights lawyer Clarence Darrow, and sociologist Robert Park. For a thorough reception of Whitman's influence on the American left, see Bryan Garman, *Race of Singers: Whitman's Working Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
- 3 Margaret Mead, "Preface," from *Patterns of Culture* by Ruth Benedict (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), xiii.
- 4 Whitman, in Fulton, 306-307.
- 5 In the definitive history of the discipline, Luther and Jessie Bernard describe the "Social Science Movement" as the "mobilization by individuals seeking to use scientific method to solve the social problems resulting from industrialization" based upon the ideas of positivism, evolution, physiology, and Associationism, and arising from the scholarship of figures like Auguste Comte, Charles Fourier,

Thomas Carlyle, and Herbert Spencer (*Origins of American Sociology: The Social Science Movement in the United States* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1943], 3).

6 The “color problem” was a common, shorthand phrase used by social commentators to refer to how previously enslaved people would be incorporated into the nation following emancipation.

7 Ed Folsom, “The Vistas of *Democratic Vistas*,” in Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), xxxv. Hereafter *DV*.

8 Whitman, *The Correspondence*, 6 vols., ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961-1977), 2:38-39. Hereafter *Corr*. For more on *Democratic Vistas* as a call for a new democratic culture, see, for example, John Stephen Mack’s *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy*, Joli Jensen’s *Is Art Good for Us?: Beliefs about High Culture in American Life*, and James Perrin Warren’s piece “Reconstructing Language in *Democratic Vistas*” in *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, ed. Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994).

9 Bronson Alcott, *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepard (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938), 391.

10 “Walt Whitman’s Utopia,” *The Round Table: A Saturday Review of Politics, Finance, Literature, Society and Art* 6 (December 7, 1867), 370-371.

11 Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 130.

12 Harold W. Blodgett, “Democratic Vistas—100 Years After,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft in der amerikanischen Literatur*, ed. Karl Schubert and Ursula Müller-Richter (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1975), 128.

13 For an extensive survey of the text’s critical reception, see Folsom’s introduction, “The Vistas of *Democratic Vistas*,” in *DV* xv-lxvii.

14 On the question of black suffrage, Luke Mancuso contends that *Democratic Vistas* was “symptomatic of the larger cultural debates over the extension of the franchise . . . prior to the passage of the Fifteenth amendment” (*The Strange Sad War Revolving: Walt Whitman, Reconstruction, and the Emergence of Black Citizenship*, [Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997], 53-54). On the distinctive systems of governance, between republicanism and federalism, Scott Henkel restages the Whitman-Carlyle exchange as the “two competing values undercut[ing] or undergirding our ideas about democracy,” where Whitman argues for a “more direct democracy” (“Leaves of Grassroots Politics: Whitman, Carlyle, and the Imagination of *Democratic Vistas*.” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 27 [Winter 2010], 102-103). On *Democratic Vistas*’ relationship to nineteenth-century labor movements, Benjamin Kline Hunnicut claims that Whitman “offered unique insights, compiling lists of specific free activities that might ac-

tually constitute ‘a nobler culture’” (“Walt Whitman’s ‘Higher Progress’ and Shorter Work Hours,” *WWQR* 26 [Fall 2008], 93).

15 Besty Erkkila, *Walt Whitman: The Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 248.

16 Blodgett stressed Whitman’s reliance on “Hegel, in whose philosophy he found the reassurance that evil is always in process of losing its identity in the Absolute Good” (128), as did Reynolds, who contended that after the war Whitman “looked to outside systems such as Hegelian philosophy to resolve problems he had formerly tried to resolve in his poetry” (*Walt Whitman’s America*, 450). More recently, Thomas Haddox argued that “Whitman’s growing interest in the philosophy of Hegel, particularly evident in *Democratic Vistas*, suggests that he believes history in any meaningful sense to be at an end, . . . a position all too amenable to conservatism and complacency” (“Whitman’s End of History: ‘As I sat Alone by Blue Ontario’s Shore,’ *Democratic Vistas*, and the Postbellum Politics of Nostalgia,” *WWQR* 22 [Summer 2004], 4).

17 *DV* 40.

18 Erkkila, 252.

19 Art historian Joli Jensen considers *DV* a theory of “redemptive art,” which she calls “instrumental” since Whitman imagined “that the arts have the power to transform individuals (and thereby society) only if we want and need something very different from what they already are” (*Is Art Good for Us?: Beliefs about High Culture in American Life* [New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002], 30). John Stephen Mack explains how, for Whitman, imaginative literature’s role is to “promulgate the cultural assumptions that govern social life” (*The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002], 137).

20 Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 112.

21 James Perrin Warren, “Reconstructing Language in *Democratic Vistas*,” *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, 82.

22 Morton Schoolman, *Reason and Horror: Critical Theory, Democracy, and Aesthetic Individuality* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 238.

23 Harold Aspiz, “The Body Politic in *Democratic Vistas*,” in Folsom, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays*, 105.

24 As the epitome of Britain’s intellectual elite, Carlyle wished “the entire Population could be thoroughly drilled; into cooperative movement, into individual behavior, correct, precise, and at once habitual and orderly” (*Shooting Niagara: And After?* [London: Chapman and Hall], 46).

25 Edward F. Grier, “Walt Whitman, the Galaxy, and *Democratic Vistas*,”

American Literature 23 (November 1951), 332.

26 Alice L. Cooke, "Walt Whitman as a Critic: Democratic Vistas with Special Reference to Carlyle," *Walt Whitman Newsletter* 4 (1958), 94-95.

27 Whitman, "Democracy," *The Galaxy: A Magazine of Entertaining Reading* (December 1867), 920.

28 Whitman, "Democracy," 927.

29 Whitman showed persistent deference to Carlyle in the text's notes. In manuscript drafts of "Democracy," he disclosed that his article was "not by any means intended as a formal rejoinder & answer to Mr. Carlyle," since the latter had simply "presented his plan of repair,—his idea of strengthening, & revivifying" (*Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier [New York: New York University Press, 1984], 854). Hereafter, *NUPM*. In the 1871 pamphlet, Whitman excised the passages attacking Carlyle and softened the satire critical of *Shooting Niagara*. He also included a footnote to reiterate his original agreement, confessing that he was "roused to much anger" by Carlyle's insults of the "theory of America," but, after reflection, saw "Shooting Niagara" as a study of "judgments from the highest feudal point of view" (*DV* 18).

30 Whitman mocked Carlyle's alarmist tone regarding the unpreparedness of the "Nigger Cushee," the democratic dangers of "swarmery," and the "Niagara leap" of emancipation, and he rebuked the rhetoric of "Shooting Niagara" as "comic-painful hullabaloo and vituperative cat-squalling" ("Democracy," 926). Yet, while Carlyle's essay criticized the United States for black suffrage, Whitman's "Democracy" was tragically quiet on voting rights and racial equality; see Folsom, "Vistas," in *DV*.

31 Whitman, "Democracy," 919.

32 Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3.

33 A.H. Halsey, *A History of Sociology in Britain: Science, Literature, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

34 Sanborn, a committed abolitionist, was a career reformer with deep roots in American Transcendentalism. Following the war, he organized ASSA conventions, edited the *Journal of Social Science*, and became friends and correspondents with Whitman. By the end of the nineteenth century, Sanborn became a staunch defender of labor rights and a proponent of Horace Traubel's ethical socialism. He brandished his radical credentials by publishing a number of articles on Whitman for the *Conservator*, like "Whitman's Example in American Society," where he seized on the poet's biography to criticize monopoly capitalism and the "snob-bish and wholly un-American pursuit and enjoyment of material wealth [in] our dwindling and Mammon-worshipping age" ("Whitman's Example in American Society," *Conserving Walt Whitman's Fame: Selections from Horace Traubel's the*

Conservator, 1890-1919, ed. Gary Schmidgall [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006], 176). Thus, Sanborn's politics matured along with Whitman's body of work.

35 L.L. and Jessie Bernard, 527.

36 "Social Science," *The Independent. Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* (October 24, 1867), 4.

37 Whitman, "Democracy," 926.

38 David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 175-176.

39 Richard Pascal, "'Dimes on the Eyes': Walt Whitman and the Pursuit of Wealth in America," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44 (September 1989), 146.

40 Marie Howland, "Possibilities of Economy," *The Galaxy* 1 (August 15, 1866), 720.

41 William T. Strong, "The Study of Social Science," *Journal of Social Science, Containing the Proceedings of the American Association* 4 (1871), 1.

42 Of course, Whitman's most intensive engagement with labor struggles came in a never-delivered lecture written in the late 1860s, "The Tramp and Strike Questions." There he repeated that the era's pressing issue was "not the abstract question of democracy, but of social and economic organization, the treatment of working-people by employers." Whitman positioned the country's affluent monopolists against "the People" and mapped these social coordinates on to his accustomed national-historical thesis, asserting that: "in Europe the wealth of today mainly results from, and represents, the rapine, murder, outrages, treachery, hoggishness, of hundreds of years ago," a legacy of inequality encroaching on the American present. To defend workers' rights was to protect a cultural principle transferred through state histories. Whitman restaged the conflict between capital and labor as that of the British monarchy against the country's founders, asserting that the "American Revolution of 1776 was simply a great strike." Reforming the corrupted conditions of the Gilded Age economy was not just a matter of restoring the lost values of American republicanism, but of rejecting the invading features of the monarchical past (Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan [New York: Library of America, 1996], 1088-1089).

43 Whitman, "Democracy," 928.

44 Folsom in *DV*, xxxi.

45 Lester Frank Ward, considered the "father" of American sociology, published the groundbreaking *Dynamic Sociology* (1883) during his time in Washington. Ward, who became the first president of the American Sociological Association in 1906, picked up *Leaves of Grass* late in life, and he apparently found Whitman to

be a “man of fearless thought” (Emily Palmer Cape, *Lester F. Ward, A Personal Sketch* [New York: G.P. Putnam’s and Sons, 1922], 53). Cultural historian Van Wyck Brooks imagined Whitman’s poetry among the first places where sociologists-to-come like Ward encountered the idea of evolution. He maintains that Whitman “absorbed the discoveries of science and the dawning conception of evolution, of the gradual emergence of life from the primitive chaos,” transmuting them into “the feeling of ‘cosmic continuity’ that was much in the air of the time and largely inspired the sociology of Lester F. Ward” (*The Times of Melville and Whitman*, [New York: E. P. Dutton, 1947], 177, 184).

46 Reynolds, 451, 455.

47 DV 56.

48 DV 56-57.

49 Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* (Iowa City: University Of Iowa Press, 1999), 177.

50 Corr 2:44-45.

51 As an Interior Department copyist, he started at a salary of \$1,200 per year, which was raised to \$1,600 in 1866 (Reynolds, 455, 475).

52 When Whitman wrote to New Yorkers in this period, he often documented the monotony of Washington life with afflicted gratitude. In a letter to Anson Ryder, Whitman indicated that he was “leading a quiet, monotonous life, working a few hours every day very moderately” (Corr 2:76). In a note to Alfred Pratt, he admitted “nothing very new” or exciting in D.C. now that “the war is over” (Corr 1:345-46). His internal conflict surfaced in a pair of letters to Abby Price, one where he depicted office labor as “very monotonous” (Corr 2:83), in another he confessed to find work “mild & agreeable, & the place one remarkably well suited to a lazy, elderly, literary gentleman” (Corr 1:318). In letters to “Broadway” Jack Flood, a streetcar conductor, Whitman complained that D.C. was “quite small potatoes” and “a stupid place compared to New York,” and even though he enjoyed “plenty of leisure time” to take in the “large & grand” government buildings and “fine scenery around Washington,” he admitted that “the oceans of life & people” were ultimately “lacking here” (Corr 2:69-70, 74-75).

53 Reynolds, 450.

54 Asselineau, 177-179.

55 Grier, “Walt Whitman,” 336.

56 Peter J. Riley, “*Leaves of Grass* and Real Estate,” *WWQR* 28 (Spring 2011), 164.

57 Whitman, “Democracy,” 930.

58 For a discussion of *Leaves of Grass*’s parallels to nineteenth-century “crowd

psychology,” the offshoot of evolutionary biology and social science, see Christian Borch, “Body to Body: On the Political Anatomy of Crowds,” *Sociological Theory* 27 (September 2009), 271-290.5

59 Whitman, “Democracy,” 930.

60 It was this aspect of the “People” that gave Carlyle fits, but also rankled contemporary reviewers. The *Round Table* chastised Whitman for overstating the heroic tendencies of the “People,” and for neglecting to mention the “spitting, swearing, roaring, reeking, reeling ruffians that fill our streets” and, even worse, “our polls on elections” (“Walt Whitman’s Utopia,” 370).

61 Whitman, “Democracy,” 920.

62 Charles F. Wingate to Walt Whitman, May 19, 1867. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org, ID: loc.02001).

63 “Charles F. Wingate to Walt Whitman.”

64 *Corr* 2:18.

65 Whitman, “Personalism,” *The Galaxy* 5 (May 1868), 540.

66 Mathew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (Smith, Elder, and Company: London, 1869), viii.

67 Arnold, viii.

68 *The Radical* published a particularly notable review, in that it placed *Culture and Anarchy* in the context of American politics, virtually duplicating the language and tone of Whitman’s “overhaul.” The author proposed that a democratic society must reconsider the “problem of culture in its more positive aspects,” since only a culture “[a]ppplied to human nature in the present age,” could “mark the advent of the PEOPLE,” and spread broadly the “belief that every life has a value that can be increased” (“Culture,” *The Radical* 1 [1868], 336).

69 Whitman, “Personalism,” 542.

70 Mack, 139.

71 Raymond Williams, *Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 20-21.

72 L.L. and Jessie Bernard, 21.

73 Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico. Translated from the Third Edition (1744)*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1948), 348-349.

74 *DV* 7, italics mine.

75 Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 48.

76 Clara Barrus, *Whitman and Burroughs: Comrades* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,

1931), quoted on 51.

77 DV 76.

78 Amusingly, Church blamed poor timing in the rejection notice, avowing that the July issue “ought to be a light number for Summer reading: this is an article that requires thought; cannot be read on cars &c, & ought to appear in soberer weather” (Francis P. Church to Walt Whitman, May 15, 1868. Available on the *Whitman Archive*. [WWA ID: loc.01288]).

79 Grier, “Walt Whitman,” 347.

80 Arthur Wrobel, “Democratic Vistas,” in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, ed. J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 176.

81 Here I am employing Whitman’s understanding from *Democratic Vistas*—discussed on the previous page—that reading, in its “highest sense,” is a “a gymnast’s struggle” capable of forming “a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-train’d, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers” as a new theory of literacy, referred to as “gymnastic reading” hereafter (DV 76).

82 Harold Aspiz, “Whitman’s Literary Enemy: A. R. Spofford,” *Walt Whitman Review* 28 (June-December 1982), 94.

83 Aspiz, “Whitman’s Literary Enemy,” 92.

84 John Y. Cole, ed., *Ainsworth Spofford: Bookman and Librarian* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1977), 29.

85 Sigma, in Carl Ostrowski, “‘The Choice of Books’: Ainsworth Rand Spofford, the Ideology of Reading, and Literary Collections at the Library of Congress in the 1870s,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 45.1 (2010), 70. Recognizing any press as good press, Whitman reprinted the attack in *Leaves of Grass Imprints* to promote the 1860 edition of his book.

86 Ostrowski, 71.

87 Whitman and Spofford also shared celebrity around Washington at this time, and, on a number of occasions, corresponded regarding the editions of *Leaves of Grass* deposited at the Library of Congress. In a surprising and ultimately telling anecdote, Spofford even once published a complimentary editorial on Whitman under the “Sigma” appellation. In a column titled “Washington Gossip” in the *New York Evening Mail*, he observed the occasion of “Walt Whitman’s return to town and to his desk in the Attorney General’s Office,” since the poet had become an integral part of the urban scene, “moving around in the open air,” “[l]iving so largely out of doors,” a “well-known . . . sight to all citizens.” In lieu of the indecent poet, loose in morals and poetic form, here was Whitman as the large, expansive man of the city, sympathetic and indiscriminate as “any day he may be

noticed walking, observing, listening to, or socially talking with all sorts of people, policemen, drivers, market-men, blacks, or dignitaries; or, perhaps giving some small alms to beggars, the maimed or organ-grinders; or, stopping to caress little children, of whom he is very fond.” Here was the representative poet required for Reconstruction; optimistic, welcoming, for the “older he gets, the more cheerful and gay-hearted he grows,” and reform-minded, taking a “deep interest in all of the news, foreign and domestic.” Thus, the capital, with its “wide space, great edifices, the breadth of our landscape, the ample vistas,” was, “above all others, the one where Walt Whitman fitly belongs” (“Washington Gossip.” *New York Evening Mail* 27 [October 1870], 1).

88 B. K. Pierce, “American Social Science Association,” *Christian Advocate* 44 (1869), 345.

89 In fact, the history lesson offered in Spofford’s speech was based on the reports of Justin Winsor, the Superintendent of the Boston Public Library. In that year, Winsor called for some “formally organized society of librarians” with the support of the American Social Science Association. In 1876, he helped found the American Library Association (Wayne Wiegand, *The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876-1917* [Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986], 4).

90 Wiegand, 12.

91 Lora Dee Garrison, *Apostles of Culture: Public Librarians and American Society, 1876-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 42.

92 Garrison, 42.

93 Melvil Dewey, “The Profession,” *Library Journal* 1 (June 30, 1877), 6.

94 Samuel Green, “Discussion,” *Library Journal* 7 (1882), 201.

95 Wayne A. Wiegand, in Ostrowski, 71.

96 Ainsworth Rand Spofford, *A Book for All Readers Designed as an Aid to the Collection, Use, and Preservation of Books and the Formation of Public and Private Libraries* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1900), 19-20.

97 Reynolds, 483.

98 Spofford, “The Public Libraries of the United States: A Paper Read at the General Meeting of the Association, at New York, October 26, 1869,” *Journal of Social Science, Containing the Proceedings of the American Association* 2 (1870), 92.

99 Spofford, “The Public Libraries,” 99.

100 Yet for both, while all texts are politically or academically serviceable, not all literature was universally ethical or “good.” When it came to literary taste, Spofford acknowledged the existence (and necessity) of a meritocratic canon: “the

books of every period tend continually to find their proper level ...[;] [n]o permanent rank in the hierarchy of letters is ever settled by chance, any more than by excommunication” (“The Public Libraries,” 112). Spofford’s cautious hedging on the principle of inclusion had a practical component. Outside of Congress, most private and public libraries contained limited funds and insufficient shelves. Even though the democratic philosophy of librarianship proposed self-sufficiency, it made economic sense to articulate and publicize a discriminating list of the best books. According to Ostrowski, Spofford’s “adverse judgments about the cultural value of popular literature” ended up in such manuals and reading guides published beyond his post at Congress (71).

101 Spofford, *A Book for All Readers*, 9-10.

102 Spofford, “Characteristics of Style,” *PMLA* 7 (1892), 19-20.

103 Whitman, *Drum-Taps* (New York, 1865), 8. Available on the *Whitman Archive*.

104 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Washington, D.C., 1872), 118..

105 Fulton, 308.

106 John Burroughs, “Walt Whitman and his ‘Drum Taps,’” *Galaxy* 2 (1866), 608.

107 Benedict, 237.

108 Fulton, 309.