REVIEWS

WALT WHITMAN. *Democratic Vistas: The Original Edition in Facsimile.* Ed. Ed Folsom. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010. lxvii + 143 pp.

Ed Folsom opens his introduction to the facsimile edition of *Democratic Vistas* by observing that Whitman's "powerful and evocative title . . . is much better known than the essay it names." This new edition offers at least some hope that the work itself might gain a little ground in the competition. With fifty thorough pages of historical and textual annotations, a judicious selected bibliography, and a rich introduction that both contextualizes and problematizes Whitman's meditation on the future of democracy, Folsom has constructed a package that makes the original essay more accessible and its relevance to our own contemporary democratic anxieties (especially those concerning race and class) more clear.

For careful readers, of course, Whitman's ambitions in *Democratic Vistas*, while not exactly crystalline, have never been a complete mystery. Troubled by the social dislocation and political corruption that marked post-Civil War America—and especially Thomas Carlyle's commentary that such developments were the consequences of emancipation and democratization—the poet effectively insulated democracy from criticism by redefining it as a program for personal, cultural, and spiritual reform. For Whitman, democracy became less a political process than an interrelated set of educative practices requiring the stewardship of enlightened democratic poets. And since its fruition was forever in the future, it could not be held accountable for the maladies it exists to remedy. So, while he continues to insist that democracy and America are synonyms, Whitman's angst about the real America has forced him to separate it categorically from the "theory" it purports to realize. This is not to say that Whitman's vision in *Democratic Vistas* can be dismissed as merely an attempt to rationalize the apparent failures of American democracy. Indeed, as Folsom puts it, Whitman's "genius" was likely his ability to shift the focus to America's future: "Had Whitman simply engaged the problems America was facing in the late 1860s about reuniting the nation and granting civil rights to freed slaves, his essay might well have ended up being an interesting historical piece but not the enduring cultural document it has become." Still, the conflicted motivations that both inform and muddle Whitman's vision, together with its sheer complexity and the poet's own idiosyncratic prose have rendered a document too apparently difficult for undergraduate survey courses.

Folsom's annotations, I think, go about as far as possible in making *Democratic Vistas* more accessible to a wider range of readers. But it is his introduction that brings the work to life. Titled "The Vistas of *Democratic Vistas,*" Folsom's study is not concerned with interpreting Whitman's text (a task well handled in the works he has included in the selected bibliography), but instead with situating it within the poet's deeply conflicted—but essentially racist—

attitudes; attitudes that may fairly be said to parrot those of the turbulent post-Civil War American culture, while not being completely controlled by it. (This is a moral point. To his great credit, Folsom does not flinch in either his depiction of Whitman's racism or that of his milieu, rigorously documenting both. He thus makes it more difficult for Whitman apologists to exonerate the otherwise far-seeing visionary by reducing him, in this one instance, to the pathologies of his times.) If there had been any doubts as to the extent of Whitman's racist thinking, Folsom puts them to rest. Orchestrating a great wealth of textual evidence—some familiar, some not—Folsom shows us a Whitman deeply anxious about the perceived dangers black suffrage posed for American democracy. In one telling passage that he later deleted from *Democratic Vistas*, for example, Whitman frets about the daunting challenge of absorbing the infusion of "a powerful percentage of blacks, with about as much intellect and calibre (in the mass) as so many baboons." It's a task, he claims, analogous to—though "much harder" than—the process of integrating "the millions of ignorant foreigners" over the previous fifty years.

Whitman's disconcerting attitudes on race are clearly at odds with the vastly more subtle and enlightened sensibilities he puts to work in *Democratic Vistas*. But it's not the irony of that juxtaposition that immediately concerns Folsom. For him, the real mystery (or, perhaps, marvel) is that such attitudes are entirely missing from the text. And as Folsom frequently suggests, Whitman's decision to excise such attitudes from the text has not only protected it from scorn, but cleared the way for the favorable critical appreciation it increasingly enjoys. There is little to no evidence as to why Whitman would have sanitized the text of his own racism. It seems appropriate, then, that Folsom does not attempt much of an explanation beyond casually musing that it "is as if he knew that his own personal racial biases had no place in work that was looking toward a transformed democratic future, when such biases would presumably be a thing of the past." Perhaps—after all, Whitman was a jealous steward of his own reputation.

What intrigues me, however, is not so much that racism seems to be absent in *Democratic Vistas*, but the ingenious—albeit convoluted—shaping pressure its cryptic treatment may have exerted on the work. It seems to me that Whitman has not so much removed race, but, effectively, redefined it as a class-based pathology—a move that made it amenable to the sort of democratic reconstruction he was attempting to theorize. This is suggested, I think, in the subtle contradiction in his attitude towards blacks expressed in the passage deleted from *Democratic Vistas* quoted above: in ontological terms Whitman represents them as subhuman—"as so many baboons." But in pragmatic terms, they become not animals, but *educable* beings, just as the "millions of ignorant foreigners" that, Whitman knew perfectly well, constituted the common "People" he famously valorized. In *Democratic Vistas*, the baboons disappear to make room for the colorless class of people upon whose capacity for reconstruction the future of democracy depended.

This would seem to be a rather curious logical shift. After all, as Folsom reminds us, Whitman explicitly claimed that *Democratic Vistas* was originally conceived as a response to Thomas Carlyle's attack on democracy in "Shoot-

ing Niagara," a racist diatribe in which Carlyle argues that extending the franchise to blacks would prove as destructive as shooting Niagara in a barrel. But while Whitman may have shared some of Carlyle's attitudes on race—and may have felt, as well, the same sense of urgency that animated Carlyle's critique—his deeper commitment was to the idea of democracy, an idea he treated as sacred. So disposed, then, he was probably incapable of believing that democracy itself might be the engine of social destruction—irrespective of his assumptions about blacks. But if it cannot be the cause of social ill, it could certainly be the cure. Hence, in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman's great insight is that the democratic process is an educative one, structuring exactly the sort of personal and social transformation his unarticulated racism made him believe was urgent.

None of this amounts to an apology for Whitman's disconcerting views on race. If *Democratic Vistas* was indeed partly motivated by his deeply flawed analysis of the problem of race, the most charitable reading of his treatment of that problem is that it amounts to tactical neglect. *Democratic Vistas,* does not, finally, give testimony to the enlightened sensibilities of the poet of diversity. Still, despite that failing—or, perhaps, because of it—it does give powerful testimony to the power of an idea. Whitman was wrong on the historical particulars, but absolutely right on the moral framework that must govern the grand sweep of history. Ultimately, it was his allegiance to the idea of that history that controlled the text. He may have believed that we began unequally, but this only intensified his sense that achieving equality was America's defining moral imperative. He saw this as a struggle. This new edition of *Democratic Vistas* reveals just how deeply personal that struggle was.

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