

NOTES

WHITMAN'S "ELECTION DAY, NOVEMBER, 1884"

"Ma! Ma! Where's Pa?
Gone to the White House,
Ha! Ha! Ha! . . ."

"Blaine, Blaine, James G. Blaine,
The continental liar from the state of Maine,
Burn this letter! . . ."

The poetry of the people? Such campaign verses were on the lips of all too many Americans during the Presidential election season of 1884. If ever six lines could be said to sum up the potential (or perhaps essential) griminess of American popular democracy, they would be these. Even by the lowly standards of late-nineteenth-century political campaigns, the Democratic-Republican war during the autumn of 1884 was particularly tawdry: Democrat Grover Cleveland spent a good portion of the campaign dealing with Republican revelations that the illegitimate son of a certain Miss Halpin in Buffalo, New York, was Cleveland's own; Republican James Blaine spent an equal portion refuting Democratic charges that he had used his position as House Speaker for his own pecuniary gain. Cleveland was physically assaulted in Albany; Blaine was branded a "political prostitute" by the normally stodgy *New York Times*. It was a campaign whose turning point came with an anti-Democratic slander—the Democrats as the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion"—not actually coined by Blaine but associated with him, and responsible for his loss of crucial Roman Catholic support. The candidates spent little time addressing the profound problems of post-bellum America: explosive tensions between capital and labor, growing unrest of Southern and Great Plains agrarians, the development of what one modern cultural historian has described as two fundamentally different definitions of the American spirit.¹ It was an election in which, perhaps appropriately, significant numbers of potential Republican voters in key states didn't vote—as many as 45% of the Republicans in that traditional stronghold of political participation, Massachusetts, and 21% in the G.O.P. homeland of Illinois.²

One of the non-voters in that election was Walt Whitman, the one-time master of editorial-page hyperbole, the ex-Locofoco Democrat enthusiast, the ardent Free Soiler and Lincoln devotee. But his impassioned party allegiances had dwindled to a dispirited wavering: "I hardly seem in line with the Republican party any more," he said, noting that the Democratic alternative was "Almost as bad—almost."³ When asked if he still called himself a Republican, he sighed, "God help me, no. I suppose I don't call myself anything. . . . I can't enthuse any more over politics—the issues do not provoke me to enthusiasm. . . ."⁴ However fervent his ante-bellum political involvements had been, Whitman made increasingly frequent and graphic acknowledgments in his post-bellum notes and essays that American politics were devoid of legitimate issues, responsible candidates, and genuine concern for American ideals. In his 1871 *Democratic Vistas*, for example, he spoke of the "antics of the parties and

their leaders, these half-brain'd nominees, the many ignorant ballots, and many elected failures and blatherers."⁵ His more private remarks of the 1880s were despairing not simply about the political parties, but about "the people," whom Whitman in *Democratic Vistas* had distinguished from their corrupt leaders. In June 1888 Whitman complained:

... how contemptible is the enthusiasm of the average voter—his sad sickening, depressing talk of 'my man,' 'my man,' 'my man.' Our politics need a big lift to some higher plane—a big lift: probably will not get it until some more important issues make the lift worth while.⁶

While some of Whitman's old-line progressive colleagues saw the self-styled, reform Democrat Cleveland as a beacon of light in 1884, Whitman did not appear to share his friends' enthusiasm. Again he wavered: just before the election, he told a reporter from the Philadelphia *Press* that he intended to vote for Blaine despite his respect for Cleveland, but after the election he recalled that "I did not vote but would have voted for Cleveland if I had voted at all," even though "I rather like Blaine—perhaps prefer him. . . ."⁷ Three years into the first Cleveland term, Whitman would compliment the President on his low-tariff policies (Cleveland, in turn, was an open admirer of Whitman's work),⁸ but a note written on 31 October 1884 reveals the fundamental sourness of Whitman's campaign mood:

The political parties are trying—but mostly in vain—to get up some fervor of excitement on the pending Presidential election. It comes off next Tuesday. There is no question at issue of any importance. I cannot 'enthuse' at all. I think of the elections of 30 and 20 years ago. Then there *was* something to arouse a fellow.⁹

Curiously, however, it was the occasion of this 1884 election that produced Whitman's only full-length poetic tribute to the American ballot ritual. In "Election Day, November, 1884," originally published in the Philadelphia *Press* during the final weeks of the campaign (26 October) and later incorporated into *Leaves of Grass*, the poet identified the electoral process as an American attribute greater than Niagara Falls, Yosemite, Yellowstone, or any other natural wonder. At the time the poem was published, he claimed that, even though he could not force himself to care a great deal about the election, he did "like well the *fact* of all these National Elections," and thus had written the poem.¹⁰ But where is the anxious, doubting, despairing—and altogether realistic—Whitman in this poem? Where is the Whitman who pleads for an entirely *new* politics? In "Election Day," we find only oblique hints of the sharper side of Whitman's political thought.

In the parenthetical line 6 (throughout his life, Whitman often laced his more provocative observations in parentheses), Whitman is careful to distinguish between the "chosen" and the act of "choosing"—it is not the winning candidate that is the "heart" of the democratic achievement, but rather the "quadriennial choosing" itself: "(The heart of it not in the chosen—the act itself the main, the quadriennial choosing). . . ."¹¹ After all, Whitman may be intimating, the "chosen" just might turn out to be one of those "half-brain'd" souls to whom he referred in *Democratic Vistas*. In yet another parenthetical aside (lines 9–10), he juxtaposes the election's "swordless conflict" with Roman and Napoleonic wars: "(a swordless conflict, / Yet more than all Rome's wars of old, or modern Napoleon's:). . . ." These allusions carry some haunting connotations regarding the history of democracy (Rome and Napoleonic France are, of course, both classic examples of democratic principles gone sour), and

Whitman thus manages to offer a veiled warning about the course of American democracy: the much-vaunted *contrast* between the Old World and the New could, if we're not careful, turn out instead to be a *parallel*.

Whitman comes closer to admitting his doubts openly in lines 11-12, where he not only raises the spectre of "ill humanity," not only employs a particularly hard-hitting term ("dross") in reference to all the items that are "welcome" in a campaign, but inserts a question mark after the positive reference to "wine" (presumably the wine of democracy) being "fermented" in the course of campaign battles:

Or good or ill humanity—welcoming the darker odds, the dross:
—Foams and ferments the wine? it serves to purify. . . .

How would one deal with the dross should the fermentation not take place? Additionally, the poem's penultimate line contains a suggestive bit of tension: "These stormy gusts and winds waft precious ships. . . ." If, as Whitman describes, the "gusts and winds" are "stormy," and if the political ships are "precious," then the possibility that these ships might be blown off course or destroyed en route to the promised land would seem particularly worrisome. The verb "waft," with its gentle connotations, is certainly appropriate for the image of "precious" vessels, but it does not fit neatly with the image of a "stormy" force.

All Whitman's doubts, however, remain little more than hints. In the end, he affirms that the dialectical forces of American history are progressive in effect. The pleasant metaphor for the electoral process (the "snow-flakes" of the ballot shower) gives way briefly to a more disturbing image ("stormy gusts and winds"), but in the closing line a confident calm returns: "Swell'd Washington's, Jefferson's, Lincoln's sail." Sails of heroic ships (appropriately, for Whitman's purposes, those of a Federalist, Democratic, and Republican ship, respectively) have been swelled in the past by the winds of American elections, and, presumably, similar good turns of fortune could occur again. Cleveland or Blaine as another Jefferson or Lincoln? Whitman keeps the possibility open. The poem certainly finishes with a much sunnier view of American politics than the poem he wrote when he was more personally involved in and "enthused" about elections: "What a filthy Presidentiad!" he had complained in "To the States, To Identify the 16th, 17th, or 18th Presidentiad." In this uncharacteristically vituperative late-1850s poem, Whitman's sarcasm had been undisguised: "Are those really Congressmen? are those the great Judges? is that the President?" (LG 278) Instead of wafted democratic ships, Whitman at that time—after a decade of Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan—found only "scum floating atop of the waters." But in 1884, in the midst of America's dirtiest campaign, Whitman's rhetoric turned heroic instead of cynical.

To have allowed his harsher realism to play a larger role in "Election Day," to have bewailed the shortcomings of American democracy, Whitman would have needed to abandon the characteristic persona that had emerged throughout most of *Leaves of Grass*—the celebrant of mass activities, the non-judgmental observer, the poet who, as he promised in "Song of Myself," is "no stander above men and women or apart from them." (LG 52) Accordingly, Whitman chose to reaffirm democratic myth—a choice as problematical as myth itself. His reaffirmation might be defended because it served to remind American society of cultural continuities. But in another sense it was counter-productive, for it ignored the very real possibility that, by 1884, the gap between American principle and American practice was more significant than

the *existence* of American principle. (The gap was sufficiently significant, indeed, to keep Whitman from making any serious effort to get to the polls.) Whitman may have hoped, in "Election Day," for another Jefferson or Lincoln, but he failed to take the first step in promoting one—namely, distinguishing for the public (in his most public and cherished forum, poetry) authentic Jeffersonianism or Lincolnism from poor substitutes. By the 1880s he had lost the enthusiasm that twenty years earlier had inspired him to make—clearly and with passion—those very kinds of distinctions.

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1 See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), especially pp. 70–100.

2 Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1933), 177–178.

3 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1905, rpt. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1961), 1:341.

4 Traubel, 1:373, 386.

5 Floyd Stovall, ed., *Prose Works 1892* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 2:399.

6 Traubel, 1:386.

7 See Edward Grier, ed., *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 4:1204; Traubel, 1:147.

8 See Edwin Haviland Miller, ed., *The Correspondence* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 3:348n.

9 Grier, 4:1204.

10 Grier, 4:1204.

11 Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, eds., *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 517. All quotations from *Leaves* are from this edition.

WHITMAN'S "OVERSTAI'D FRACTION": SECTION 38 OF "SONG OF MYSELF"

Although not so well-known as "that two-handed engine at the door" in "Lycidas," it nevertheless remains a crux of some importance: what does Whitman mean in Section 38 of "Song of Myself" when he says enigmatically, "I resume the over-staid fraction"?

The question is significant, since it concerns a central passage in the poem, one that begins in collapse and ends in restoration and recovery.² The poet has been overcome by feelings of weakness, worthlessness, and error. "Enough! enough! enough!" he cries out: