

“CULTURE” OR DEMOCRACY: WHITMAN, EUGENE BENSON, AND *THE GALAXY*

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IN THE IMMEDIATE POST-CIVIL WAR YEARS no American magazine was more important to Walt Whitman than *The Galaxy*, a New York monthly founded in 1866 by the brothers William Conant Church and Francis Pharcellus Church.¹ In December of 1866, *The Galaxy*, which set out to become a lively, cosmopolitan alternative to Boston's *Atlantic*, published John Burroughs's "Walt Whitman and His 'Drum Taps,'" an essay of critical importance in establishing the poet's reputation. Four poems by Whitman appeared in its pages: "A Carol of Harvest" (September 1867), "Brother of All with Generous Hand" (January 1870), "Warble for Lilac-Time" (May 1870), and "O Star of France" (June 1871). Perhaps even more important, *The Galaxy* published "Democracy" and "Personalism," the first two of the three divisions of *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Whitman's powerful vision of political and cultural democracy and American literary nationalism. As Edward F. Grier has written, "Whitman's position as a *Galaxy* author was important to his personal fortunes and his literary reputation. *The Galaxy* was respectable, it was popular, and it paid generously."² It also provided a venue where Whitman could join with other writers in exploring the meaning of literary nationalism and cultural democracy for the new era.

Here I will examine that process of exploration through a consideration of Whitman's literary relationship with another prominent *Galaxy* writer, Eugene Benson (1839-1908), a painter, art critic and wide-ranging critic of culture who published seventeen articles in the magazine in the years 1866-1869.³ A self-styled "literary frondeur"—that is, a writer who "affronts, defies, or rails at something which time or custom has made respectable"—Benson sought to carry into the Gilded Age the pioneering cultural criticism of such writers as Thoreau, Parker, and Emerson. Enlisting himself in Emerson's project of destroying the "smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times," he wrote confidently that "A few literary frondeurs in the army of American progress would break a great many vulgar mirrors in our industrial palaces."⁴ Even while tilting at "vulgar mirrors," Benson sought to formulate a democratic aesthetic philosophy that would be useful to writers and painters alike.

Benson reviewed contemporary American art for the *New York Evening Post*, where he signed his pieces "Proteus," and for the brash New York weekly *The Round Table*, where he was a regular contributor from its founding in December 1863 through May 1866. His articles for *Galaxy*, which provided him with the space to treat broadly cultural themes, included a free-spirited exposition of "The Pagan Element in France" (1:203-206), a defense of "George Sand and Her Works" (3:240-248; 618-624), an attack on the leveling effects of democracy, "Solitude and Democracy" (4:165-170), the penetrating pairing of "Poe and Hawthorne" (6:742-748), an examination of the discontents of mass culture, "Democratic Deities" (6:661-665), and an argument for democracy and nationality in "Literature and the People" (3:871-876). In a January 2, 1868 leader on "Literature Truly American," E. L. Godkin's *The Nation* identified Benson and Whitman as the two leading American exponents of American literary nationalism but contemptuously dismissed their ideas as "vague" and superficial.⁵

Benson and Winslow Homer were among a group of congenial artists who had taken studios at the New York University Building on Washington Square.⁶ The group included the genre and portrait painter Eastman Johnson. When Benson and Homer learned that Homer's "Prisoners at the Front" had been selected for the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1867, the two artists decided to travel to Paris. Following the successful sale of their works at the Leeds and Minor Gallery in November 1866, they booked passage the next month.⁷ Benson's time in Paris provided him with material for a series of articles on France, primarily for *Galaxy* but also for *The Atlantic*, which published his pioneering "Charles Baudelaire, Poet of the Malign" in February 1869.⁸ The art historian Lois Fink has written that Benson's articles on French culture "affirmed the sensuous quality in French art so often attacked in American criticism. Writing about Parisian life and art with knowledge and sensitivity, he made a major contribution to the maturing of art literature in this country. . . ." Benson looked to French art and literature not for models, but rather as a source of new ideas that would help to invigorate American practice.

The art historian Nicolai Cikovski has suggested that both as practical and cultural critic, Benson helped Homer and other contemporaries to think through the complex aesthetic issues that they faced and to do so in ways that proved invaluable to their practice:

Homer's art was formed not only by what he saw of other art . . . but as much, if not more, by what he thought and believed. That formation . . . was determined . . . by issues outside of and larger than the hermetic and mechanical issues of influence, by what might be called ideologically directed policy. . . . Hence . . . my . . . attentiveness to . . . the minor artist but important critic Eugene Benson, and the possibility that in Homer's formative years Benson represented in his presence what we have not custom-

arily believed Homer to possess: an artistic program and some significant measure of artistic and literary culture.¹⁰

Cikovski has argued as well that Benson's artistic program drew in important ways from the example of Walt Whitman:

Like Whitman, Homer rejected artistic precedent, propriety, correctness, and fineness, and instead of objects and their compositional arrangements being 'definitely told out' in his paintings, Homer purposely kept an openness and suggestiveness of form to 'tally' the shifting, unresolved, and perhaps never resolvable configurations of American national life, or as Benson described it, 'the hybrid and half-developed but virile civilization of our own land.' . . . And Benson—who knew of Whitman and what he represented—could have served as his interpreter. Writers who 'would face and report the myriad life of this most complicated age, . . . who aim to express life, who are most modern,' Benson wrote in 1866, in language much like Whitman's and as applicable, too, to a description of Homer's artistic posture, 'are flexible, varied, individual, independent. . . .'¹¹

However, before Benson could serve as Whitman's "interpreter," he himself had to work through a series of questions about the meaning and significance of Whitman's stylistic innovations—something that he did in the course of three *Galaxy* essays. Benson opened the first of these, "About the Literary Spirit" (July 1866), with the inflammatory comment that "How far the sense of conventional propriety is destructive to the vitality and the charm of the literature of the people, is not often considered by the eminently proper gentlemen who sit in editorial chairs, and shape the minds of publishers. And yet the most attractive literature to-day, as in all times, has the zest of forbidden things, and outrages the prejudices of highly respectable persons" (1:487). This would seem to be a perfect opening for a treatment of Whitman as an innovative poet. Yet, so caught up was Benson in his own role as *frondeur*, and so insistent was he on pushing his charge that in America "the literary spirit is subordinated to the scientific, or mercantile, or moral spirit, and is deprived of its free play" (1:488), that he was unable to recognize that quite apart from shocking the bourgeois, Whitman's startling stylistic innovations served a serious artistic purpose:

We have politicians that affront the average sentiment of the public; we have clergymen that outrage orthodox minds; we have poets that shock public taste; we have moralists that appall moral people; but we have not men of letters with the literary spirit that dare make literature the expression of an abundant and varied life. If they have reacted against formality and hypocrisy like Walt Whitman, like him, also, they are devoid of the literary spirit; if they have the literary spirit they strike their roots too deep into the past, like Hawthorne, and they leave untouched the social facts about them. (1:491)

Benson concluded the essay in Emersonian-Whitmanian terms by calling for "some creative, revolutionary genius, to emancipate American men of letters; for American men of letters dread expansiveness of feel-

ing in style; they are servile in taste, they are timid in the handling of vital social facts, and our serious writers have not originated any new literary form" (1:491). Ironically, this description of the "creative, revolutionary genius" would seem to apply directly to Whitman, but at this point the connection escaped Benson.

The publication in *The Galaxy* less than a year later of Burroughs's "Walt Whitman and His 'Drum Taps'" would prompt Benson to reconsider his position on Whitman. Containing the "first reliable biographical sketch of Whitman," Burroughs's essay, Gay Wilson Allen has noted, was "also the most intelligent of any criticism he had received up until that time."¹² Perhaps the most important feature of Burroughs's essay was his argument that the poet's radical formal innovations follow from and are the necessary instruments of his artistic purpose: "How he was led to adopt this style of expression, thoroughly versed as he was in the literature of the day, is uncertain. The most probable explanation is, that he felt hampered by the old forms and measures, and saw that if America ever came to possess a style of her own it would be in the direction of more freedom and scope—a feeling in which many of his contemporaries are beginning to share" (2:607). Since Benson had accused Whitman of lacking the "literary spirit," Burroughs may well have had Benson in mind when he remarked that "contrary to the hasty opinions of the critics, who mistook the personal element in his poems and their *unliterary* spirit (the spirit of nature and life is always *unliterary*) as evidence of the want of culture in their author, he is a man deeply learned in all the great literatures of the world" (2:609).

Further, in view of Benson's interest in finding appropriate modes of representation of the human figure in the context of a modern, democratic art, Burroughs's explanation of Whitman's treatment of the individual is apposite: "Also, in obedience to the true democratic spirit, which is the spirit of the times, the attention of the poet is not drawn to the army as a unit . . . but to the private soldier, the man in the ranks, from the farm, the shop, the mill, the mine, still a citizen engaged in the sacred warfare of peace" (2:611). Since Benson had presented himself as the outspoken champion of those artists who had the courage to break free from "old forms and measures," Burroughs's essay directly challenged Benson to recognize Whitman as precisely the "creative, revolutionary genius" for whom he had called:

The poet celebrates himself, that is, 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. This character he has mapped out in bold, strong lines, and in its interest has written his poems. Hence it is not for the man of to-day he has spoken; he has discarded the man of to-day as effete—has rejected his models and standards, and spoken for what he believes to be the man of the future. He must, therefore, have been well

prepared for the reception he has met with. Is it to be expected that current conventionalities will endorse him who seeks their overthrow? (2:608)

In "Literature and the People," published the next April, Benson, now instructed by Burroughs, reconsidered Whitman in the context of a concept—culture—that would figure centrally in *Democratic Vistas*. This concept, Benson recognized, had come to be used for ideological and political purposes, and so he set out to expose its destructive dimension: "When culture encases or deadens the heart, it is destructive to the literature of the people; it prevents the growth of letters for the people. . . . Its literature, or rather its critical effort, appeals only to a limited class, and when it is in the ascendent we have to acknowledge the presence and the hated tyranny of a class of men of letters who neither share nor understand the ideas and the facts which are dear to the people" (3:872). By way of contrast to the elite and exclusive ideal of high culture represented by the vogue in America of England's *Saturday Review*, Benson called for an inclusive and democratic "literature of the people," a literature grounded in "an intense sympathy with men and women" as exemplified, for example, in Rebecca Harding Davis's 1861 short story from *The Atlantic*, "Life in the Iron Mills." But such a democratic art, he wrote, had nothing to do with mere nationalism, the simple "flapping of the American eagle," which he also deplored (3:873).

Just as Whitman would balance the communal in "Democracy" with the individual in "Personalism," so now did Benson argue that the democratic theme in art, by itself, would not suffice. The "American idea," he insisted, must be tempered by "the artistic idea," which knows no nationality. The artistic idea he defined as "man's highest perception of life from the standpoint of the senses and the understanding" (3:873). It was from this perspective that Burroughs's discussion of Whitman's achievement now became particularly relevant. For Burroughs had presented Whitman as an artist who had combined the private and the public, the personal and the representative. Benson proceeded to develop a similar argument about the scope of all great writers, pointing out that the "great formative genius" also brings "literary emancipation and a national expression. It was Shakespeare in England; it was Goethe in Germany." That in turn led him back to Whitman: "But in this country at this time to whom shall we go? Is it Walt Whitman? We must accept the excellent appreciation and just discrimination of Mr. Burroughs' treatment of Walt Whitman, but we have misgivings, and we ask, what *is* Truth? Anything is better than the timid hesitation with which we wait for, and the full cry with which we follow, the lead of the English" (3:875).

Although he was not yet ready to accept Burroughs's argument that Whitman should be recognized as America's great liberating poet, the distinctive artist who at the same time encompassed the shared life

of the community, Benson did revise his estimate of Whitman, arguing that "Whitman in poetry, yes, in poetry" must be counted among those American writers who "have corrected us, moved us, liberated us." These writers—"Emerson in ethics; Godwin in journalism . . . Beecher in the pulpit"—have "touched very different keys . . . and each has recognized the closest connection between literature and the people. . . . But with the exception of Walt Whitman's work (and which cannot be truly estimated yet, for it may be more and it may be less than what contemporary advocates claim), the work of these men has been chiefly critical . . . and therefore is not sufficiently representative—does not contain enough" (3:375-376). Benson now recognized Whitman as a poet who just might be greater even than his champions had claimed.

Seven months later, in September 1867, Whitman made his first appearance in *The Galaxy* with "Carol of Harvest," later titled "The Return of Heroes," an elegiac tribute to the returning soldiers and their fallen comrades, a poem that takes up the theme of Winslow Homer's "The Veteran in the Field" (1865). In "Democracy," published that December, he claimed that the Civil War had proven for all time the absolute value of political democracy; then he developed a powerful argument for democracy as a literary idea as well: "Literature has never recognized the People, and, whatever may be said, does not to-day. . . . There is, in later literature, a treatment of benevolence, a charity business, rife enough; but I know of nothing more rare, even in this country, than a fit scientific estimate and reverent appreciation of the People—of their measureless wealth of latent power and capacity, their vast, artistic contrasts of lights and shades—and in America, their entire reliability in emergencies, and a certain breadth of historic grandeur, of peace or war, surpassing all the vaunted samples of the personality of book-heroes in all the records of the world" (4:920-921). With its call for a "literature of These States" as "a new projection . . . of the sole Idea of The States, belonging here alone," Whitman's essay provided an elaborate and forceful exposition of an idea that was already familiar to readers of *The Galaxy*, the idea of an egalitarian American literary aesthetic (4:931).

Whitman's "Democracy" may well have been the trigger for the leader on "Literature Truly American" in *The Nation* of January 2, 1868. This essay links Benson and Whitman with other unnamed writers who, "in the plenitude of a genuine love of country, and, it is true, in the plenitude of a lack of knowledge on almost all subjects, seem to have a notion that Columbus's discovery of America necessitated the invention of a new world of literature." *The Nation* concluded—somewhat inconsistently in view of its complaint that a belief in literary nationalism was in fact widespread—that there really "is little need of speaking about these classes of friends of an American literature, for they have

little influence and are disappearing with rapidity, and their works follow them with even pace."¹³ So much for Benson and Whitman!

In May of 1868, in "Personalism," Whitman returned to the subject of American literary nationalism. Far from "disappearing with rapidity" as *The Nation* would have it, this advocate of a democratic art advanced his argument with renewed energy, even though, as he confessed, in giving consideration to the concept of culture, he finds himself "abruptly in close quarters with the enemy. This word Culture, or what it has come to represent, involves, by contrast, our whole theme, and has been, indeed, the spur, urging us to engagement" (5:542). As we have seen, in "Literature and the People," Benson had taken up the theme with his attack on the restrictive notions of culture advocated, for example, by *The Saturday Review*.

In "Democracy" Whitman had responded directly to Carlyle's attack on political democracy in "Shooting Niagara." In "Personalism" he replied implicitly to the dismissal of literary democracy by such writers as the author of the leader in *The Nation* and to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867). Whitman explicitly responded to the pervasive imitation of things European by American writers and the fashionable public: "America, leaving out her politics, has yet morally and artistically originated nothing," he charged (5:541). He proceeded to insist on a redefinition of the very idea of "culture," on a "radical change of category," one that would lead to "a programme of culture, drawn out, not for a single class alone, or for parlors or lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life, the West, the working-men, the facts of farms and jack-planes. . . . I should demand of this programme or theory a scope generous enough to include the widest human area. It must have for its spinal meaning the formation 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" (5:542). Whitman was joined in his response by the Irish writer Justin McCarthy, who, in a March 1869 *Galaxy* article on "The English Positivists," offered a similar criticism of "culture" as a reactionary force, as an idea that "almost invariably ranked itself on the side of privilege. . . . The journals which are started for the sake of being read by men of 'culture' are sure to throw their influence, nine times out of ten, into the cause of privilege and class ascendancy. The 'Saturday Review' does this deliberately; the 'Pall Mall Gazette' does it instinctively." For this reason McCarthy gloried in the sudden appearance, coming "from the bosom of the universities themselves," of "a band of keen, acute, fearless gladiators, who throw themselves into the vanguard of every movement which works for democracy, equality and freedom" (7:381-382).

Just as Burroughs's essay had its effect on Benson, so too, it appears, did "Democracy" and "Personalism," which contained Whitman's

own explanation of his aesthetic philosophy in these two essays. In November 1868, in "Democratic Deities," Benson considered the possibilities for distinguished artistic expression in a mass democracy and market economy. After noting the leveling tendencies in American life, the confusion of the political principle of democracy with the dominance of the average taste in aesthetic matters, he asked if art in America could avoid sinking to the lowest common denominator. Benson the *frondeur* railed against the worship of "our absolute average mind, which we believe is the object of our institutions, the reason of our being, the end of our development!" (6:663). But having identified the problem, he cited the example of Whitman as embodying the promise of democratic art: "O Democracy! is it to this poor figure that you have come at last? And is the average man your only claim upon our gratitude? Your advocate and poet, Walt Whitman, is *not* an average man. He is the superb illustration of, and an exception in, your life. Yet only upon your strong bosom, nursed in your generous and universal life, could he have been grown" (6:663). In this argument Benson reflected Whitman's own statement in "Personalism" that "culture" in America should promote "the high average of men."

Benson still had something of a score to settle with E. L. Godkin, whose *The Nation* had attacked him and Whitman as exponents of literary nationalism. His response came in June 1869, in "E. L. Godkin of the 'Nation,'" published as part of his *Galaxy* series on "New York Journalists." Much as *The Nation* had attacked Benson and Whitman for their advocacy of a "literature truly American," Benson related Godkin's limitations to the rigidity of his English style, an attempt to bring into America the exclusiveness of *The Saturday Review*: "In truth he is wholly English, unmitigated in, and adequate to, the treatment of every question from the matter-of-fact point of view and with all the verbal forms of fairness and conscientiousness, which impose only on what one may call the English mind, which is fatally limited, and, in spite of itself, unjust and arrogant. Deep in its prejudices and deliberate in its brutality, by quietness, and hardness, and coldness, it flatters itself with the pretension of being unswayed by emotions, when only a generous emotion could lift it over its inveterate aversions. . . . It sooner or later drives out every feminine or *frondeur* intellect, and makes the misery of every fine and uncalculating and impressionable nature" (7:869-870).

Sometime later in 1869 Benson and the editors of *The Galaxy* parted company. In the face of increased competition, *The Galaxy* became more cautious and, Benson felt, conventional—a move that the combative Benson protested in letters to the Church brothers. By 1873 he had become an expatriate, eventually settling in Italy, first in Florence, then Rome and later in Venice, where he died in 1908. Sadly, Benson lost

direct touch with American life and artistic expression, which previously had so fully absorbed his attention. Late in 1876 he received a gift of Whitman's collected writings, which moved him to pay homage to the poet in a letter written from Rome on January 1, 1877. This previously unpublished letter provides a fitting conclusion to the Benson-Whitman relationship.

Rome. Jan. 1st 1877.
Palazzo Albani.
22 Quattro Fontani.

To Walt Whitman.

Dear and great Poet,

Let me greet you. Happy New Year to you. Your poems have come to me anew—here in Rome—and have revived and deepened my consciousness of great things, of beautiful things, of everything that lives. In writing to you at this late time (for I knew your poems many years back) I do what I have often wished to do: Thank you. Christmas Day brought me a present of all your writings—original editions—and hence this movement of love and admiration towards you.

It is fine to have your words, your brave sweet words, here where old Rome crumbles and new Rome grows; it is fine to have your visions of the States, of men and women in our land, while I am close to the Coliseum, not far from the Pantheon and the Appian Way. I shall write. Your poems are an Appian Way for the triumphal thoughts of the American, and you celebrate a theatre of action greater than Rome's Coliseum in celebrating our wide land. I shall hope for the chance to say publically what I now write to you. I have been several years in Rome—I have my studio here—for I am a painter. I trust that the time may come when, before this year has gone—I may have the pleasure of seeing you.

Faithfully Yours,
Eugene Benson¹⁴

There is no record that Benson wrote about Whitman in any additional essay that he here mentions. So far as I know, Benson, who with Whitman had been a leader in the work of defining the principles of a "literature truly American," never returned to America. Benson continued to paint, but since he exhibited primarily in England, he soon was forgotten in his native land.¹⁵

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NOTES

1 Studies of *The Galaxy* include Justus R. Pearson, Jr., "Story of a Magazine: New York's *Galaxy* 1866-1878," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 61 (May 1857); Frank Luther Mott, "The *Galaxy*," *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938, 3:361-381; and my "The *Galaxy* and American Democratic Culture, 1866-1878," *Journal of American Studies* 16 (April 1982), 69-80.

2 "Walt Whitman, *The Galaxy*, and *Democratic Vistas*," *American Literature* 23 (November 1951), 332-350. I treat Whitman's relationship with *The Galaxy* in "Whitman

and the Magazines: Some Documentary Evidence," *American Literature* 44 (May 1972), 222-246.

3 For Benson, see the entry by H[elen] W[right] in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, 2, 204-205 and my "Between Romanticism and Realism: The Curious Career of Eugene Benson," *American Literary Realism* 14 (1981), 242-261. Mabel Dodge Luhan describes his life in Italy in *European Experiences* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), 290-300.

4 "Literary Frondeurs," *Galaxy* 2 (September 1866), 78-83. Future references to *The Galaxy* will be given by volume number and page in the text.

5 "Literature Truly American," *The Nation* 6 (January 2, 1868), 7.

6 Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 120-129.

7 Jean Gould, *Winslow Homer* (New York: Bramhall House, 1962), 88.

8 *The Atlantic* 23 (February 1869): 171-177. For a discussion of the essay's significance, see James S. Patty, "Baudelaire's First American Critic: Eugene Benson," *Tennessee Studies in English* 2 (1957), 65-71.

9 Lois Fink, "American Artists in France, 1850-70," *American Art Journal* 5 (Nov. 1973), 44. This article includes a reproduction of Benson's self-portrait of c. 1863.

10 Nicolai Cikovski, Jr., *Winslow Homer* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1990), 8.

11 Nicolai Cikovski, Jr., "The School of War," in Cikovski and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 31. The quotations from Benson are from "Literature and the People" (3:871) and "About the Literary Spirit" (1:492).

12 Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 375.

13 *The Nation* 6 (January 2, 1868), 7.

14 Carolyn Wells Houghton-Whitman Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

15 It is a pleasure to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of Jochen Wierich, a graduate student in American studies at William and Mary.