

SINGING ONESELF OR LIVING DELIBERATELY: WHITMAN, THOREAU, AND INDIVIDUALITY

Luke Philip Plotica
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Virginia Tech

WPSA 2016 Working Draft—Please Do Not Cite or Circulate

It is for want of a man that there are so many men. It is individuals that populate the world.

Henry David Thoreau, “Life without Principle” [1863]

The average man of a land at last only is important.

Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* [1871]

Although separate embodiment and consciousness are inescapable facts of human existence, the idea that each human being is an *individual* with experiences, thoughts, dignity, rights, purposes, a story, and a personality all her own is a more recent and controversial development. Philosophers and intellectual historians trace the roots of this concept as far back as classical Greece and early Christianity¹, though scholarly consensus today maintains that the individual is a creature born of Western civilization since the Middle Ages.² If this modern concept was born from the ashes of feudalism, it came of age in the nineteenth century. It is in this century that we find the first great, self-conscious champions, not merely of the individual knower or agent (as we find variously in Montaigne, Descartes, Hobbes, and Kant), but of the value of *individuality*, individual personality in and for itself. This essay is a study of two of the great artisans and advocates of individuality, situated squarely in the century that brought this concept to moral and political prominence: Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. It is also an essay about the plurality of individuality, its many aspects

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially essays II and III; Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

² Michael Oakshott, “The Masses in Representative Democracy,” in *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 363-83; see also Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [1860], trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945); *A History of Private Life, Volume II: Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1988), 509-630; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); Steven Lukes, *Individualism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972).

and modes of realization. Looking to Thoreau and Whitman I shall sketch two different visions of individuality and its achievement, as well as offer some tentative assessments of their felicity for life in contemporary democratic societies.

The Era of the Individual

Ralph Waldo Emerson's characterization of the nineteenth century (in America, at least) as the "age of the first person singular" is a doubly appropriate starting point for this study.³ On the one hand, it captures a dominant element of the spirit of the times in which Thoreau and Whitman lived and wrote. Nineteenth century American society was characterized by a "heightened sense of the importance of the individual" as well as by increasing individuation of ordinary life.⁴ The rise of a market economy dissolved households and communities into independently circulating market participants. Popular theological doctrines further loosened the hold of traditions and institutions, emphasizing the inner light and redemptive potential of each person, placing individual choice and improvement at the center of religious and spiritual life. Beyond religion as well, there burgeoned a culture of self-culture, individual self-improvement for its own sake, before if not apart from its utility for family, community, or nation. Voluntarism increasingly became the root principle of social organization, with voluntary association challenging if not eclipsing inherited community in authority and prestige. The evolution of American democracy—the expansion of suffrage, the advent of mass electoral politics under the second party system, and the election of a 'man of the people' in the person of Andrew Jackson—gave individual independence and initiative new political images and outlets.⁵ In nearly every corner of life, America was becoming a nation of individuals.

On the other hand, Thoreau and Whitman actively shaped this culture, fed its imagination, exemplified its potential, championed its value, and defended it from both old and new threats. Yet neither blithely accepted American society as it was. Like Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman advocated ideals of individuality that were as normative and aspirational as they were empirical and descriptive.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume III: 1826-1832*, eds. William H. Gillman and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 70.

⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 109.

⁵ For extensive discussions of these developments, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Lawrence F. Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1988), Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991), and Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, [1835/1840] trans. George Lawrence, ed. J.P. Mayer (New York: HarperPerennial, 1969).

Their treatments of individuality are exhortations to a life of self-making, and are thus critiques of those elements of society that obstruct or compromise such a life. However, though Thoreau and Whitman were favorably acquainted with one another, and though they inhabited the same general milieu, equipped with similar intellectual and practical resources, the two nonetheless furnish substantially different visions of how individuality is properly understood, valued, and lived.⁶ Both valorize the inexhaustible, protean character of the individual. Of his experiment in living at Walden Pond, meant as proof to his audience that all were capable of such experiments, Thoreau remarks that he (like every individual) has “several more lives to lead.”⁷ In “Song of Myself,” speaking as the representative poet of an individualistic, egalitarian, democratic culture, Whitman declares “[e]ncompass worlds, but never try to encompass me [...] I am large, I contain multitudes.”⁸ At the macro-level, both thus characterize the individual and her individuality as the momentary, singular realization of one of countless possibilities. At the micro-level, however, their characterizations pull in distinct and even opposed directions. As I shall argue, Thoreau characterizes individuality in centripetal terms of deliberate, principled, focused cultivation, of fashioning an integral self, whereas Whitman characterizes individuality in centrifugal terms of ecstatic, aesthetic, spontaneous becoming, of embodying multiple, serial selves. Each vision expresses a lofty valuation of the individual, but differently styles the pursuits and satisfactions of individuality, as well as the conditions that encourage and imperil it in modern democratic societies. Accordingly, I shall suggest that their works testify to the plurality and value of individuality as it manifests within and against distinctly modern economic, social, and political institutions, and thus furnish us with lessons of enduring relevance.

Images of Self-Making: the Deliberate Cultivator and the Promiscuous Poet

⁶ David Bowers, “Democratic Vistas,” in *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. Brian M. Barbour (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 9-21; Richard Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 121; Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: the Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 223-6; David S. Reynolds, “Politics and Poetry: *Leaves of Grass* and the Social Crisis of the 1850s,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 66-91, especially 67, 81-2.

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, [1854] in *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 2nd Ed., ed. William Rossi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 215. Subsequent references to Thoreau’s work will be cited in the text with the following abbreviations:

CE: *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: The Library of America, 2001).

“RG”: “Resistance to Civil Government,” [1849] in *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 226-45.

W: *Walden*, [1854] in *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 1-223.

⁸ Walt Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 213, 246. Subsequent references to Whitman’s work will be cited in the text with the following abbreviations:

DV: *Democratic Vistas*, [1871] in *Poetry and Prose*, 953-1018.

LG: *Leaves of Grass* (multiple editions), in *Poetry and Prose*, 5-145 [1855]; 165-672 [1891-1892].

P: *Poetry and Prose* (other works).

The lives and works of both Thoreau and Whitman are experiments in individuality, in which living and writing are complementary and often inseparable. Thoreau's essays and journals, as well as his longer works such as *Walden* and his travel writings, are not passive records of experiments in self-making; the works, both their composition and dissemination, are parts of the process. Likewise, Whitman's poetry and prose—especially the evolving opus *Leaves of Grass*—are simultaneously practices and exhibitions of their author's lifelong self-artistry. Here the trace of Romanticism, however mediated or imprecise, is readily apparent. Both, at times, speak the language of the *Bildung* tradition.⁹ Yet in distinction from some of the European veins of Romanticism (one might think of Thomas Carlyle, or even Friedrich Nietzsche), Thoreau and Whitman champion the individuality (or potential for individuality) of the ordinary person. Individuality is something achievable by anyone, rather than the exclusive preserve of a few great souls. Both were amply skilled at “reflecting upon relatively modest experiences,” such as any individual could have, and drawing from them great lessons and edification.¹⁰ As remarkable as Thoreau's time at Walden Pond may have been, its chief lesson speaks equally to every person. “However mean your life is, meet it and live it [...] Things do not change; we change.” (*W*, 219) All of the “times and places and occasions” for individuality “are now and here,” waiting for us to avail ourselves. (*W*, 65) Even more emphatically, Whitman asserts that “the genius of the United States” and its culture of the individual resides “always most in the common people,” “the democratic averages.”¹¹ (*LG*, 5-6; 668) His frequent recourse to lists of characters, occupations, events, and places all serve to reinforce the dignity of the commonplace. (Accordingly, he regarded “Thoreau's great fault” his “disdain for men [for Tom, Dick and Harry],” his “inability to appreciate the average life.”¹²) Whitman's America is great not because it produced a Lincoln or an Emerson, but because any person can attain, and every person already somewhat embodies, “self-hood.” (*LG*, 328)

Thoreau and Whitman also epitomize the culture of the first person singular through their literary styles of self-portraiture and self-display. Thoreau, for his part, “made a great show of living

⁹ E.g., Lukes, *Individualism*, 67-72.

¹⁰ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 623. Yet few could deny that Whitman, because of his longer life and greater taste for the company of others, nonetheless exceeded Thoreau in terms of diversity of experience.

¹¹ Peter Augustine Lawler, “Whitman as a Political Thinker,” in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. John E. Seery (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 245-71.

¹² Quoted in Bob Pepperman Taylor, *America's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1996), 4.

a private life.”¹³ *Walden*, like all of his major prose works, is a personal account, despite its representative aspirations. At the outset its author explains his embrace of the perspective of “the I, or the first person,” assuring his audience that “it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.” (*W*, 1) Thoreau is thus explicit about what he believes is ineluctable but often elided or dissimulated: the individuality of every experience, every claim, every story. Whitman arguably goes one further. In multiple editions of *Leaves of Grass*, the lead poem begins with first-person invocation of the individual as the subject matter: “I celebrate myself” (in the 1855 version of what came to be called “Song of Myself”) or “One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person” (in “One’s-Self I Sing,” first appearing in the 1867 edition). (*LG*, 27; 165) The general theme of the individual and her individuality remains conspicuous and palpable throughout *Leaves*, as well as in much of Whitman’s prose. Yet the poet’s most provocative and perhaps most compelling trope is that of self-display, offering himself, body and soul, as a representative of the individual whom he celebrates.¹⁴ Apart from inserting the literary figure of Walt Whitman into the poetry, Whitman commissioned an engraving of himself, derived from an 1854 daguerreotype, as the frontispiece of the 1855 edition. Throughout subsequent editions, as the component poems proliferated and developed, and new photographic and printing technologies came into use, the visual depictions of the poet also changed, reflecting the course of an individual life. Whitman identified this move of authorial self-illustration in an anonymously published self-review, remarking that “[t]he contents of the book form a daguerreotype of [the author’s] inner being.”¹⁵ The evolution of *Leaves* and their author remained forever publicly intertwined.

In their testimonials to individuality writ large, as well as in their self-representations, Thoreau and Whitman advance conceptions of individuality, subtle or implicit as these may be. Though differing in substantial ways, which I will examine shortly, their conceptions share an underlying sensibility that was well-expressed by their British contemporary John Stuart Mill, who claimed that a human being “is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.”¹⁶ Individual personality must be understood as the result

¹³ Robert D. Richardson, “Thoreau and Concord,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Joel Myerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12-24, 14.

¹⁴ Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-6.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ed Folsom, “Appearing in Print: Illustrations of the Self in *Leaves of Grass*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 135-65; 137. On early photographic technologies as outlets for individuality in visual culture, see Louis P. Masur, “‘Age of the First Person Singular’: The Vocabulary of the Self in New England, 1780-1850,” *Journal of American Studies* 25 (August 1991): 189-211; 208-211.

¹⁶ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *On Liberty and other writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 60.

of organic self-development, expressive of the unique character and perspective of the individual herself. Individuality is thus neither mere unconventionality, nor a fixed identity, however unique. Rather, it is the authentic expression of oneself, of a personality that is always becoming. Thoreau and Whitman each depict individual personality as mobile and inexhaustible—not because there is no limit to what one presently is or could soon become, but because the self is “always in formation, always changing.”¹⁷ Their common ground is thus fundamental: Thoreau admonishes his readers to awaken to their own potential for continual self-making; Whitman’s poetry exemplifies and celebrates the malleability of the self. The two diverge, however, regarding the pursuit and enjoyment of individuality, shedding light on different aspects of a shared ideal.

The prevailing tropes in Thoreau’s treatment of individuality are deliberate living and self-cultivation. Thoreau says of his experiment at Walden Pond:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life[.] (*W*, 61)

Earlier in *Walden*, he asserts that the “mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” caught in a waking slumber, leading half-lives, squandering their best hours and energies, toiling to satisfy superficial needs and serve designs not their own, and distracting themselves with petty, mocking amusements. (*ibid*, 5) It is to this desperate, conventional life that a deliberate life of individuality is opposed. To live deliberately is to live a true and self-directed life, which for Thoreau is a life according to principle, as dictated by individual conscience. (“RG,” 227) As he writes in “Life without Principle,” [t]he community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man. You may raise money enough to tunnel a mountain, but you cannot raise money enough to hire a man who is minding *his own* business.” (*CE*, 351; see also *W*, 12) Living deliberately means knowing and tending to what is properly one’s own business, “explor[ing one’s] own higher latitudes” and pursuing one’s own peculiar potentials and purposes. (*W*, 214) Apart from the commercial image of minding one’s own business, Thoreau commonly characterizes deliberate living in terms of the agricultural imagery of self-cultivation. Indeed, *Walden* trades extensively upon the parallel images of economic self-sufficiency through cultivating the means to satisfy one’s true needs and the achievement of individuality through practices

¹⁷ Folsom, “Appearing in Print,” 155. See also George Kateb, “The Idea of Individual Infinity,” *The Hedgehog Review* 7 (Summer 2005): 42-54.

of self-cultivation, tending to one's personal growth and development as the farmer tends to the growth and development of her crops. As Mill would later do in *On Liberty*, Thoreau juxtaposes the vital, dynamic, authentic image of "cultivat[ing] a few cubic feet of flesh" to the static, desperate, conformist image of existing as a mere machine. (*W*, 3; also 148) Individuality, which is the end of the deliberate life, consists in "carrying out the purpose of a life" (*CE*, 399) by "consciously engaging in practices that mold a particular kind of self."¹⁸

Thoreau's ideal entails dispensation to heed the authority of one's conscience "even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely they will." (*W*, 49) Yet a deliberate life is necessarily directed towards a determinate and uncompromising end; it is principled and disciplined; though its principles are internal, it is not spontaneous in the sense of whimsical or unpredictable. While it is exaggerated (though not uncommon) to label Thoreau a would-be Stoic, advocating an ascetic life of self-denial, deliberate living is very much a practice of husbanding one's will, in Montaigne's neo-Stoic phrase.¹⁹ Minding one's own business means knowing what are properly one's own concerns and devoting oneself to just those matters, bringing them to fruition through restrained, narrowly-focused efforts. This is what I alluded to in describing Thoreau's ideal of individuality as centripetal. Directed towards an internally articulated end, its pursuit requires a kind of myopia and foreclosure of alternatives. Thoreau, of course, recognizes that one's business might change—he did, after all, leave Walden Pond to move on to the next life he had yet to lead. However, the essence of the deliberate life is purity of purpose and pursuit. Thus, the protean, sovereign self he valorizes is, at any given moment, a *bounded* self. Minding one's business means minding these boundaries, not being tempted to concern oneself with what is beyond one's proper, principled horizons. Thoreau explicitly recognized the detachment or even impersonality this requires. As he says in *Walden*, in the chapter titled "Solitude," "I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator[.]" (*W*, 91) Beyond the palpable echoes of, say, Marcus Aurelius, there is an instructive affinity between Thoreau's account of distance from oneself, internal to the self that is

¹⁸ Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild*, 2nd Ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 37.

¹⁹ The common reception of Thoreau as a Stoic owes much to Emerson's widely publicized eulogy. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," in *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 320-33. Michel de Montaigne, "Of Husbanding Your Will," in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, ed. and trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 766-83.

both subject and object of cultivation, and Harry Frankfurt's conception of a person possessed of free will. "Besides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are."²⁰ The self-critical perspective that Frankfurt describes as essential to freedom of the will can be understood as a more refined account of Thoreau's doubleness. For Thoreau, individuality is the product of deliberate self-cultivation, which entails the practice of standing aloof from oneself, if only metaphorically, and choosing not just what one does but subtly working upon the desires and dispositions that occasion and inform one's choices and actions. Foreclosure is thus an ineluctable element of Thoreau's conception of individuality. Even though one may always have other lives yet to lead, these do not constitute a limitless set, for they must be properly one's own; and knowing and pursuing what is properly one's own means saying no to countless other possibilities, some of which may remain viable options for the future and some of which may not, such as one's principles dictate. (Whether the principles themselves may legitimately change is another matter, which I cannot attempt to address here.) Individuality follows the inspiration and guidance of "inflexibly severe" categorical judgment according to principles, and accordingly the sentiment that properly animates the deliberate life is "not joy but zeal."²¹ The essay "Resistance to Civil Government" and the act of principled opposition to slavery that occasioned it are ready evidence of both the mode of judgment and the state of mind behind it. There may indeed be a lighter side to individuality, a sense of happiness in self-direction and self-making, but this is ultimately a secondary consideration. Such satisfaction must be earned, and even once enjoyed it must not tempt one away from the course of deliberate self-cultivation that brought it about.

Despite the common ground that the two share—from roots in Transcendentalism and Romanticism to vitalistic and organic images—Whitman's notion of individuality is in many ways the converse of Thoreau's, and illustrates a very different vision of the practices and sensibilities of self-making. Whereas Thoreau insists upon principled, consistent, narrowly-focused self-cultivation, valorizing protean, yet willfully bounded individuality, Whitman celebrates the affective, transient, and even whimsical dimensions of self-making, valorizing effusive, spontaneous individuality that

²⁰ Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11-25; 12. See also the account of "self-watching" in Stuart Hampshire, "Sincerity and Single-Mindedness," in *Freedom of Mind and Other Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 232-56.

²¹ Robert Sattelmeyer, "Thoreau and Emerson," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, 25-39; 26; Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 83.

transcends boundaries (both between the momentary realizations of oneself, and between separate individuals). At the heart of Whitman's vision is the pluripotency and endless, inexhaustible potentiality of the individual. "Each of us is limitless," he says in myriad ways throughout his poetry and prose as he praises and explores the "all-varied, all-permitting, all-free theorem of individuality." (*LG*, 296; *DV*, 970) As George Kateb has suggested, Whitman's individual is characterized by "infinite potentialities," not only in Thoreau's sense of there always being several more lives for one to lead (i.e., a ponderable yet finite set of possibilities), but in the farther reaching sense that the individual is not (merely) a singular, self-sovereign entity living a singular, self-contained life.²² There are at least two complementary dimensions of this Whitmanian ideal.

First, the self that Whitman celebrates is porous rather than rigidly defined and contained. That is, the boundlessness of the individual is not only a function of her capacity to deliberately fashion herself into something other than what she presently is (what Kateb calls "*indefinite plasticity*," and which Thoreau embraces as fully as Whitman);²³ it is every bit as much a function of her incomplete sovereignty over herself, her inability to keep the world (and with it, other individuals) out. In "Song of Myself" the poet identifies such porosity and the precariousness it brings:

Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
[...]
Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity (*LG*, 215)

The self is boundless, her individuality open-ended, in the sense that the line between oneself and others is never completely fixed or impenetrable. This is indeed one of the most pervasive and persistent themes in Whitman's poetry—being affected, deeply and consequentially, through one's encounter with others. Yet this is merely descriptive, an ontological claim about the self. The second, partly affective and partly normative dimension of individuality in Whitman's poetic depiction is what one could call seriality or serial becoming.²⁴ Consider the 'I am/I become' trope that knits together the diverse characters of "Song of Myself." Large tracts of the poem consist in the narrative 'I

²² George Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 245.

²³ Kateb, "The Idea of Individual Infinitude," 53.

²⁴ While my use of these terms is informed by Michael Moon's use of similar concepts, my use differs materially from his. Michael Moon, "Solitude, Singularity, Seriality: Whitman vis-à-vis Fourier," *ELH* 73 (Summer 2006): 303-23.

adopting not just the perspective of others (what Kateb terms “sympathetic identification”), but an identity informed or even provoked by that of another individual.²⁵

All these I feel or am.

[...]

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself
become the wounded person (*LG*, 225)

Admittedly, such claims can easily be dismissed as metaphorical language. Yet it appears that Whitman intends something more. His praise of individuality clearly goes beyond a sense of wonder at or contentment with the existence of a plurality of different individuals with different personalities and identities. The extensive use of lists in his poetry could be read in this narrower sense, but his interest is apparently more than simply taxonomic. When he proclaims “I reject none, accept all” or describes himself as a “kosmos,” he is, I suggest, offering a commentary upon the nature of the self, specifically the receptivity of individuals to one another. (*LG*, 469; 210) Whereas Thoreau suggests that one might stand aloof from oneself and look at the world or at oneself as another might, impersonally, as it were, Whitman suggests that one might genuinely inhabit new identity after new identity, that the self (and thus the individuality it manifests) may be changed and enlarged by actual or even imagined encounters with others. The former supposes a kernel of identity that, while in a process of self-development, is self-determining, firm, and stable at any given moment; the latter supposes a supple, malleable, fluid self. One might even say that Whitman’s depiction of the self is, in a sense, radically egalitarian and democratic—no identity is entrenched or privileged; each has its distinctive worth and has its turn to speak.²⁶ Individuality is “all-varied, all-permitting, all-free” not only in the external sense, celebrating plurality of identity amongst individuals, but also in an internal sense, celebrating plurality of identity within each individual.

There is, however, another sense in which Whitman’s view is impersonal where Thoreau’s is personal. The deliberate life Thoreau advocates is oriented by individual judgment according to personal principle, of the form ‘I deem *this* way of life to be properly *mine*.’ Anything else is resignation and conformity of one species or another. As Jane Bennett has suggested, Whitman also advocates a

²⁵ Kateb, “The Idea of Individual Infinitude,” 52-3.

²⁶ As George Santayana said, critically though not without grounds, “Whitman[...]knows nothing but moods and particular images,” and portrays a world of simple and chaotic elements. See “The Poetry of Barbarism,” [1911] in *A Century of Whitman Criticism*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 125-135; 126.

different model of judgment proper to individuality as he understands and praises it: judging “not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing.” (*LG*, 475) This “strangely open-armed, projective, impersonal” judging marks a turn away from the modern Western model of responsible moral agency (according to which the individual is the sovereign author of her actions, and thus is directly and completely responsible for them), a model that undergirds the sort of moralism that Thoreau clearly espouses (e.g., in his anti-slavery writings).²⁷ The form of Whitman’s ‘solar judgment’ is well-expressed by his admirer D.H. Lawrence, “I am everything and everything is me. I accept everything in my consciousness; nothing is rejected.”²⁸ This affirming, non-moralizing judgment also models the sensibility with which one individual ought to encounter another: openness, not only to understand another, but to become other than what one presently is. Like Nietzsche, Whitman aspires to be “only a Yes-sayer,” not merely to others but to the new identifies and modes of being that he may find through encounter with them.²⁹ (These different models of judgment inform starkly different views of individuality vis-à-vis democracy, a theme I explore below.)

How embodiment informs Thoreau’s and Whitman’s respective visions of individuality reinforces the distinctions just noted. Whitman’s poetry is deeply sensual, celebrating and exploring embodiment, affect, and sexuality.³⁰ It trades upon the recurring notions that “[i]f anything is sacred the human body is sacred” and that “[t]he spirit receives as much from the body as it gives to the body.” (*LG*, 256; 21) One finds much the same in his prose; in *Democratic Vistas* he describes the “towering self-hood” which each individual is capable of achieving as “well-begotten selfhood.” (*DV*, 970; 963) His elevation of the body (perhaps even above the soul) and his corporeal imagery of self-hood expresses an underlying sense that individuality is developed and expressed through the body. Like his model of judgment, his model of embodiment is permissive and welcoming. The body is not, as he says, a callous shell that keeps others and their affective states at a distance, but a permeable, conductive medium that invites them in to be experienced and appreciated. As the individual is embodied, the achievement and enjoyment of individuality necessarily involves embrace of the body and what it can do or become or experience, which subsequently shapes who one is.

²⁷ Jane Bennett, “The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman,” in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, 131-46; 133.

²⁸ D.H. Lawrence, “Whitman,” [1921] in *A Century of Whitman Criticism*, 152-61; 155.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, [1887] trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §276.

³⁰ Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Embodiment is deeply important to Thoreau as well, who views the individual “as part and parcel of Nature” (as he puts it in “Walking”) and who advocates a life spent, in no small measure, deliberately tending to the needs and well-being of the body.³¹ (*CE*, 225) *Walden*, for instance, is arguably as much about bodily matters as spiritual. Yet deliberate cultivation of individuality, like deliberate cultivation of a bean field, requires careful exercise of control. In order to cultivate a crop, one must practice selectivity and discipline, imposing plans and limits upon wildness. Similarly, the deliberate, principled cultivation of individuality consists in practices of self-discipline along every dimension of one’s existence—including, or perhaps especially, one’s embodiment. In *Walden* Thoreau describes a double bodily practice, tending to its needs (“Food, and Clothing, and Shelter”) while also subduing its desires so as to manage its energies and development. (*W*, 8) Where Whitman welcomes all and rejects nothing, Thoreau counsels “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity,” offering for ridicule the story of a “good woman who thinks her son lost his life because he took to drinking water only.” (*W*, 62; 42) The moral, for my present purpose, is that individuality is achieved through self-discipline. His ideal is at least reminiscent of Stoicism; he describes happiness found in measured self-adequacy rather than in ecstasy.³² Individuality, like a thriving bean field, is cultivated through practices that say no as well as yes, that resolutely foreclose some possibilities in order to pursue others. (e.g., *W*, 108-9) At any given moment, the self is deliberately finite, despite its indefinite ability to change. One might say, then, that Thoreau’s vision of individuality is primarily principled and practical, whereas Whitman’s is primarily aesthetic and affective. The former depicts individuality and its cultivation in agent or agency-centered terms of integrity and self-mastery, whereas the latter depicts individuality in de-centered, dis-integrated terms of receptivity and spontaneity.

These deeply divided conceptions of a common ideal not only reflect different views of the individual as such, but also of her relation to others. Thoreau is rightly famous for his suspicion of others and generally low estimate of what intersubjective relations do for and to the individual. As Bennett succinctly puts it, his work is animated by “a fear of suffocation: social life seems excessively regulated, privacy too easily invaded, individuality too readily normalized, the world overpopulated.”³³ Individuality is, in the end, a solitary achievement, a repudiation of conformity characterized by

³¹ See, for instance, Russel B. Goodman, “Thoreau and the Body,” in *Thoreau’s Importance for Philosophy*, eds. Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 31-42 and Joel Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1965), 131-190.

³² Though not in a dispassionate or dissipating sense. E.g., Rick Anthony Furtak, “Thoreau’s Emotional Stoicism,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 17 (2003): 122-132.

³³ Bennett, *Thoreau’s Nature*, xxviii.

deliberately turning away from the ways of others to build and inhabit one's own "temple," (*W*, 148) one's own "inner citadel."³⁴ Even the modest sized community of Concord furnished examples of the superficiality, desperation, and self-loss that too much closeness brings.³⁵ (e.g., *W*, 2-27) In nature, one may find peace and renewal, not merely because of what nature uniquely offers, but because in nature one finds time and space that is not colonized by the customs, actions, and expectations of others. Genuine connection to another is rare, and the presence of others is risky.³⁶

Whitman was, in his own way, averse to conformity. He disdained the "fossil-etiquettes" of even the most useful social norms and traditions when these hindered receptivity and the organic development of the individual. (*P*, 1055-6) However, on the whole he can scarcely get enough of the intersubjectivity that Thoreau found suffocating. Among the chief preoccupations of his writing is to mend the rifts between persons, and thus between individual identity and social union. *Leaves of Grass* grew from Whitman's own struggles with personal identity during the social and political crises of the 1850s, which threatened American democracy and Union (not just between North and South, but between American citizens).³⁷ *Democratic Vistas* similarly grew from the aftermath of the Civil War and trumpeted an aspirational vision of a new Union and a new democratic culture. For Whitman, individuality doesn't only separate individuals. "There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all." (*DV*, 949) As Jason Frank puts it, Whitman's writing "aims not only to ascribe aesthetic value to the commonest and the low, or to affirm the sublime multiplicity of the self, but to explore the workings of everyday attachments to others," which he found to be fully consistent with individuality.³⁸ One need only consider his enthusiasm for cities (above all, his native New York). What Thoreau regarded as scenes of overpopulation, "infinite bustle," and desperation, Whitman regarded as banquets of human plurality and personality (however average). (*CE*, 348) Given the latter's notion of a porous self that is prompted to new identities by encounters with others, nothing could be more fertile ground for individuality than the bustling metropolis. Each thus simultaneously furnishes a vision of individuality and a concomitant vision of community, for good or for ill.

³⁴ Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), especially Chapters 5-7.

³⁵ See also Jason Frank, "Promiscuous Citizenship," in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, 155-84; 167-9; Taylor Stoehr, *Nay-Saying in Concord: Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1979).

³⁶ Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature*, 20-5.

³⁷ Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 140-1; Frank, "Promiscuous Citizenship," 157-9.

³⁸ Frank, "Promiscuous Citizenship," 161.

Individuality and Democracy

Each of my subjects understood their visions of individuality to say something important about modern democracy, above all American democracy. Ironically, it was Thoreau who expressed the now orthodox view that Whitman is “apparently the greatest democrat the world has ever seen,”³⁹ and in the past few decades there has been a push to find an equally, if eccentrically, democratic Thoreau.⁴⁰ To be sure, both offer criticisms of democracy. Whitman, for instance, worried about the “leveling tendencies of Democracy” generally, penned scathing criticisms of particular political administrations, and suggested that “individuality [supplied a needful] counterpoise” for the shortcomings of actual democracy.⁴¹ (*LG*, 667; *P*, 1307-1325) However, notwithstanding recent democratic rehabilitations, Thoreau’s critique is more profound and intractable, and shows a very different assessment of the relationship of democracy to individuality, and thus of individuality to politics in most modern societies.

The 1849 essay “Resistance to Civil Government,” is perhaps as much a critique of democracy as it is an indictment of slavery or a defense of individual conscience. Thoreau’s brief imprisonment for conscientious non-payment of the Massachusetts poll tax is the occasion for a prolonged reflection upon the proper relationship between the individual and the state which, in the American case, necessarily means the relationship between individuality and democracy. (He is acutely aware that the tax he refused to pay was democratically enacted, and was a brick in a larger edifice of democratic politics and institutions.) As individuality is enacted through deliberate *self*-making, democracy (and politics more generally) is necessarily a second-rate affair. On the one hand, democratic practices, however solemn, trifle with what is serious and deep in life.

All voting is a sort of gaming, like chequers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, playing with right and wrong, with moral questions [...] Even voting *for the right* is *doing* nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. (“RG,” 230-1)

³⁹ Quoted in Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 240.

⁴⁰ For instance, Shannon L. Mariotti, *Thoreau’s Democratic Withdrawal: Alienation, Participation, and Modernity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010); Bob Pepperman Taylor, *America’s Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); and Brian Walker, “Thoreau on Democratic Cultivation,” *Political Theory* 29 (April 2001): 155–89.

⁴¹ See also Jason Frank, “Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People,” *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 402-430; 406-7.

Although he does not recommend another *political* regime in place of democracy, his suspicion towards democracy is palpable and unyielding. What matters to him above all is individuality, living a deliberate, self-cultivated life, according to one's principles. Whatever social good an individual might do comes from such a life.⁴² As he writes in "Slavery in Massachusetts:" "The fate of the country does not depend upon how you vote at the polls—the worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning." (*CE*, 343) There is here a comment about democracy, though certainly not a theory of democracy. Individual character and a life well-lived are what matter in this world, and democratic politics tend to dilute and trivialize the gravity of ordinary actions and their subtle, unspectacular effects.⁴³ On the other hand, Thoreau believes that democratic politics transfer individual responsibility (both for oneself and for one's society) to an aggregate, a notional 'people' who collectively take decisions and actions, and into which the individual and her character is dissolved. In *Walden* Thoreau offers a guiding principle suitable to all pursuits of individuality in all domains of life: "In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high." (*W*, 18) Rather than gaming with the right, leaving its enactment to the tabulation of votes and thus recognizing oneself as a mere drop in the ocean, Thoreau proclaims the *potency* as well as the worth of individuality. "Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence," which is to say that one should cultivate oneself as an exemplar, giving others the example of a principled, deliberate life. ("RG," 235) Democratic politics under the second party system were already becoming spectacular, engrossing affairs, akin to a national sport for the ordinary citizen.⁴⁴ Thoreau was keenly worried that the spectacle of democracy and the identification of oneself with a group that it encouraged and rewarded was cheapening individuality, making its pursuits seem trivial before the power of institutions.

Where "Thoreau said Nay to the claims of democracy," "Whitman sent back the thunderous [though not uncritical] affirmation" of the aggregation and mass spectacle that attend modern

⁴² Plotica, "Thoreau and the Politics of Ordinary Actions," *Political Theory* (2016)(forthcoming); Leo Stoller, *After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views on Economic Man* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 19.

⁴³ Plotica, "Thoreau and the Politics of Ordinary Actions."

⁴⁴ E.g., Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 231-253.

democracy.⁴⁵ His favorable estimate of democracy, and its relation to individuality, stems, first and last from the peculiar perspective from which he regards both democracy and individuality—a perspective that combines aesthetic and metaphysical sensibilities and commitments. Regarding the aesthetic dimension, Jason Frank has claimed,

Whitman is one of America's greatest theorists of the relationship between aesthetics and democratic politics[, uniting] these spheres in a conception of "aesthetic democracy." For Whitman, the popular commitment to democracy requires an aesthetic evaluation, and he aimed to enact the required reconfiguration of popular sensibility through poetic depiction of the people as themselves a sublimely poetic, world-making power[,]autopoetic rather than autonomic[.]Whitman claimed to sing the multitudinous diversity of the vox populi back to the people themselves, thereby enhancing their latent poetic capacity and aesthetically enabling a radical democratic politics of collective revision.⁴⁶

As I have suggested, Whitman's vision of individuality is highly aestheticized, privileging embodiment, sense, affect, and boundless, spontaneous self-artistry that is prompted at least as much by encounters with others as by willful choices. His treatment of the minutiae of life in America's democratic culture, which he considers to be "unrhymed poetry," rests upon this foundation. (*LG*, 6) Aesthetic democracy is impossible, in Whitman's view, without aesthetic individuality. Indeed, his poetry and prose can be understood as "his effort to create a new kind of consciousness," a new kind of average individuality ideally suited to and derived from democratic culture.⁴⁷

Yet, as Stephen John Mack has suggested, the aesthetic dimension of Whitman's thought is intertwined with a metaphysical dimension that is the stage upon which aesthetic individuality and democracy play out.

For Whitman, the universe, with all its conflicts and contradictions, is an organic whole—and democracy its defining quality and animating principle. This is to say that democracy names a variety of interdependent conditions and processes, none of which can be properly understood in isolation from the others. For example, the political process [...] is for Whitman only one

⁴⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 388. Indeed, at their first meeting in 1856, Thoreau and Whitman quickly came to disagreement over their estimates of American democracy. (*ibid.*, 389-90) Prior to publishing the first edition of *Leaves*, Whitman was active in Democratic Party politics in a number of capacities, (Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 25-53, Reynolds, "Politics and Poetry," 66-8), whereas Thoreau's life was marked by principled withdrawal from ordinary politics.

⁴⁶ Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy," 403.

⁴⁷ Quentin Anderson, *The Imperial Self: An Essay in American Literary and Cultural History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 88.

feature of *total democracy*; elections, he argues, are the political manifestation of a logic that operates throughout the universe.⁴⁸

As one finds throughout *Democratic Vistas*, as well as *Leaves of Grass*, ‘democracy’ names a principle at work throughout all scales of existence. (E.g., “I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign democracy.” [LG, 211]) Within the individual it manifests in the processual, multitudinous nature of the self. At the intersubjective level it manifests in egalitarian social and political practices and institutions, from the idea of equal dignity for men and women, to the American electoral and party systems. This cosmic inflection explains Whitman’s optimism regarding democracy “yet to be enacted” despite his criticisms of much of what political democracy in fact amounted to in his own life. (DV, 960) In terms that reflect his selective reception of Hegel, he understands democracy not as a fleeting historical moment, or a contingent human accomplishment, but as the world itself viewed from a particular angle. Hence, the results of one election, the failures of one party, or even the collapse of one regime, neither prove nor disprove the truth or worth of democracy.

Whitman’s aesthetic and metaphysical sensibilities and commitments establish the connection in his works between individuality on the one hand, and democratic culture and politics on the other. Democratic culture, and its “average personalism,” is the soil in which individuality can finally come to fruition. (DV, 942; 961) Upon this cultural foundation, democratic institutions serve as tools of further cultivation.

Political democracy, as it exists and practically works in America, with all its threatening evils, supplies a training school for making first-class men. It is life’s gymnasium, not of good only, but of all [...] I know of nothing grander, better exercise, better digestion, more positive proof of the past, the triumphant result of faith in human kind, than a well-contested American national election. (DV, 952, 954)

There is something of a feedback loop at work here. Democratic political contestation provokes encounter between citizens, and thus nurtures the development of what Whitman called individuality (itself, a kind of democratic culture within the soul).⁴⁹ Yet the plurality and vitality of ‘well-begotten selfhood’ is what energizes and elevates political democracy, pushing it towards the realization of its destiny. Thus, one could say, only in a democratic culture can individuality truly flourish, and only

⁴⁸ Stephen John Mack, “A Theory of Organic Democracy,” in *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald D. Kummings (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 136-50; 137-8.

⁴⁹ Frank, “Aesthetic Democracy,” 410, 425.

through the triumph of individuality does democracy wash itself clean, “justif[ying] itself through the works it creates.”⁵⁰ Rather than entailing separation and agonism, Whitman believes that individuality and democracy entail receptivity and mutuality.⁵¹ As he remarked, “I consider ‘Leaves of Grass’ and its theory experimental—as, in the deepest sense, I consider our American republic itself to be.” (*LG*, 657) It is an experiment in the symbiotic development of individuality and democracy, of provocation and reconciliation between the ‘I’ and the ‘We.’

Nineteenth Century Ideals, Twenty-First Century Practices

As with any study in the history of ideas, the foregoing discussion is haunted by questions of salience. What do Thoreau and Whitman have to tell us about individuality or democracy *today*, and why should we listen? Why should we continue looking to Thoreau and Whitman when the world we inhabit is undeniably different from theirs in so many ways? Although I can only be suggestive here, these questions demand answers. Most generally, Thoreau and Whitman continue to speak to us today insofar as they prompt us to consider what is shallow and what is profound in ourselves, our political culture, and our political practices. They squarely address to us, who remain their audience, basic questions regarding what a self is, and thus what a citizen is, and thus what democracy is. Thoreau’s bounded notion of the self and his ideal of deliberate self-cultivation entail limited connection with others, leaving little for democracy to be other than aggregative procedure. Whitman’s porous and promiscuous self is made for connection, and is only truly at home, truly realized, in a richly democratic culture. The two accordingly offer competing visions of individual life, and of the social and political life that a collection of individuals can and ought to enjoy.

Yet even though their words continue to appeal to us, they reach our ears in an undeniably changed context. Processes of economic, technological, political, and social change have left us in a paradoxical situation with respect to Thoreau and Whitman. We inhabit a world in which the individual is enmeshed in an immense and complex tangle of institutions, and yet enjoys unprecedented opportunities for self-disclosure and self-making. Contemporary information technologies and networks furnish just one ready example. Thoreau and Whitman explored the potentials of self-making and democratic politics in the age of newspapers, early photography, and

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 424.

⁵¹ Kateb, *The Inner Ocean*, 241-242.

telegraphy; today most individuals in modern societies can access global information networks with their smartphones. The connected individual has become a virtual citizen of a virtual global democratic culture, with each contributing her voice in countless ways to the formation of new economic, social, and even political arrangements, mired (happily or not, wittingly or not) in endlessly innovative cultures of self-branding and self-display. Yet at every turn the individual today is also dwarfed by the arrangements she helps to shape, the culture in which she participates, and by the information platforms and infrastructures she uses. We thus find ourselves in positions surprisingly akin to those critically examined by Thoreau and Whitman. In the nineteenth century the question may have been, for example, how casting strips of paper (in elections, in the marketplace, in the realm of public debate) shaped the individual and the society she lived in, whereas today paper has given way to new and rapidly-evolving technologies, but the same fundamental questions continue to resonate, *mutatis mutandis*. Much as Thoreau and Whitman grappled with the role of political participation in self-fashioning and the relationships between individuality and democracy, today we might ask whether a post or a tweet can quiver one to a new identity, or merely distract oneself from a deliberate life? Do new communication technologies enrich or impoverish the individual and democratic culture? Today Thoreau and Whitman offer us no more, and yet scarcely any less, than they offered their nineteenth century contemporaries: reflections upon individuality in democratic societies that articulate distinct visions of promise and peril. That is, they bequeath to us resources of which we might still avail ourselves as we individually and collectively shape ourselves and our common world.