

I celebrate myself, that is to say, Democracy

an essay on radical democratic literature

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RMA Thesis Literary Studies: Literature in the Modern Age

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Utrecht University, August 2010

“Wie Amerika begrijpen wil moet beginnen, zijn begrip Democratie om te zetten van het politieke en sociale in het culturele en algemeen menselijke. Het beste middel daartoe is nog altijd het lezen van Walt Whitman.”

Johan Huizinga

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Introduction

I. THE PROBLEM

In destitute times one has to ask what poets are for. Where the gods have left the world there is no time left for mourning and melancholy. The world, more than ever, is in need of the new poet: “The priest departs, the divine literature comes. Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the poet of the modern is wanted, or the great literatus of the modern.”¹ The task of the modern poet is to overthrow the representational model of the old world. Divine literature is not the literature of gods, priests or kings. Divine literature is there for the people. A new world, a new sensorium. That is what the poet of the modern seems to demand. In times in which gods have fled – times that have left a void to be filled by culture after the castles and churches have been torn down – a new regime of writing comes into being. A new regime in which the power of the written word becomes available to each and everyone: “Everybody reads, and truly nearly everybody writes, either books, or for the magazines or journals.”² Despite the fact that the power of the word has become a universal instrument for the people in the new age, so far according to the poet of the modern – Walt Whitman – America has not produced any single thing worth the name, neither morally nor artistically, that could fill the void that is left.

A new world, a new sensorium. One that is democratic. As modern poetry needed to escape from the courts in order to find its democratic vocation, it is “the democratic formula [that] is the only safe and preservative one for coming times.”³ At the heart of the modern poet’s poetry we find the struggle against the European feudal world. True democracy could only come into being with the poetry to come. For the poet of the modern, democracy exists not with elections, parties and politics, but “in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs.”⁴ Democracy seems first and foremost a performative principle that constantly needs to be put into practice. That is in religion, *literature*, colleges and schools: literature as a blueprint or guiding thread of how to structure the social canvas. In other words “democracy is the basic structure of our future literature and authorship.”⁵ It is precisely the problem this essay is dealing with: what is a (radical) democratic literature and what are the characteristics of such a literature?

II. THE 'METHOD'

To answer this question this essay is profoundly comparative in its approach. The problems posed by Whitman's *oeuvre* are the problems of the modern 'democratic' age of which our time is still part. Precisely for this reason I propose to read Whitman's work in conjunction with an other work, namely that of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. In rereading Whitman, Rancière's work on aesthetics and political theory – on (radical) democracy and literature in particular – seemed to me of extreme advantage, because Rancière's anarcho-democratic method gives a central place to nineteenth century French literature, forming an interesting challenge for a literary scholar who is not interested in merely French literature. Precisely because a substantive part of Rancière's *oeuvre* has been devoted to the work of literature since 1800 – that is Literature as a new regime of writing – is crucial in answering the question of a radical democratic literature posed by Whitman's *oeuvre*.

As Jason Frank argues, Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in period of intense social and political crisis and is to be understood as Whitman's literary response to this turbulence: "on the one hand, and following other political romantics, he invoked a broadened understanding of literature and poetry for political ends; on the other, he turned away from institutions to an unmediated understanding of the people was the only reliable source of democratic regeneration. Whitman's vision of 'aesthetic democracy' emerged from the interconnectedness of this twofold response."⁶ Perhaps, this statement needs to be turned around: Whitman's response emerged from his vision of aesthetic democracy (or: democracy in literature). This opens up the possibility for interpreting Whitman's call for a new aesthetics, separately from a strictly historico-biographical approach. In this thesis I will opt for precisely such a separation, while taking Whitman's aesthetics as point of departure and comparing it to the work of Rancière.⁷

Whitman's vision of aesthetic democracy is opposed to an institutional form of democracy. Rancière's theorization of democracy, as will become apparent in this essay, is exactly the theorization of a non-institutional form of democracy. Politics for Rancière is not about the exercise of power or the embodiment of collective wills, but something that is always already primary to those practices, namely a certain partition of the sensible, the framing of a collective sphere of experience. This partition allows certain subjects to speak, to become visible and audible. The crucial point is that Rancière distinguishes a political democracy from a democracy of literature.

Political democracy – sometimes understood in a juridico-political form in the tradition of the social contract, sometimes understood as the economico-managerial technique of government (politics as the management of money flows) and yet other times as the consensus seeking model of deliberative democracy – is always based on a fixed distribution of the sensible, in which it is not ‘the people’ exercising power, but a small group of political leaders. This form of exercising power is rather an oligarchic form of politics – in which there is always consensus on who is allowed to speak and who is not – than a democratic form of politics.⁸ Democracy, as Rancière argues, is a very specific way of repartitioning the sensible, one that makes consensus impossible. As will become clear, Rancière deduces out of the notion of *demos* the single principle of what makes democracy: the principle of egalitarian practice. In Ancient Greece, democracy meant “the power of the people, which is not the power of the population or of the majority, but the power of anyone at all, the equality of capabilities to occupy the positions of governors and of the governed.”⁹ The equal capabilities of each and everyone make consensus impossible since there is no stable ground on which the ones in power can legitimate their position. Consensus always closes off the polemical configuration of the sensible, while forming an order that leaves no room for emancipation in whatever form. Instead, democracy is the continuous putting into question of any form of order, of domination. As such, democracy is the continuous bringing into practice of this egalitarian ‘law’.

In this conceptuality democracy is ‘performative’ in that it is not a form of representation but a direct way of acting upon the world. The uttering of sounds in the form of words for example already presupposes a receiver that is a being equal to the sender – both share a world and a certain sensorium.¹⁰ In this sense, the action always precedes any signification. Democracy is not so much about explicitly stating the equality of whatever being, but about acting out in a way that is always already ‘shaped’ by equality as such. As a performative principle democracy is radical in that it reaches beyond any institution into all veins of the social: the egalitarian ‘law’ makes any stable ground impossible. The only possibility for politics lies in the principle of egalitarianism: dissent as the necessary precondition for politics.

Literature cuts straight into the distribution of being, doing and speaking. As we will come to see, it is the written word in the new regime that causes a ‘democratic disorder’ that goes under the name *littérarité*. It is the power of the written word to wander

off, without a master to guide it, to obstruct and confuse all (hierarchical) relationships in a community. As Rancière says “[l]a littérature est ce nouveau régime de l’art d’écrire où l’écrivain n’importe qui et le lecteur n’importe qui.”¹¹ One of the fundamental claims in this essay – in fact a double claim – is that a radical democratic literature at once embodies democracy as it performs democracy. Literature at once embodies a radical equality in subject matter as it creates a radical equality of readers; i.e. the double structure that defines *littérarité*: “elle est *la radicale démocratie* de la lettre dont chacun peut s’emparer. L’égalité des sujets et des formes d’expression qui définit la nouveauté littéraire se trouve liée à la capacité d’appropriation du lecteur quelconque. La littérarité démocratique est la condition de la spécificité littéraire.”¹²

It is thus Rancière who already points to the radical democracy in and of literature. Since Rancière bases his theory of democratic literature on an analysis of literature and aesthetics in the nineteenth century, it is extremely well suited to answer the question posed by Whitman’s *oeuvre*. Whitman’s poetry forms the perfect example of how this concept of radical democratic literature actually works. As such, this essay will not churn the tradition of Whitman studies. The aim of this essay is neither to criticize Whitman’s *oeuvre*, nor Rancière’s work. It is not another historico-biographical study of Walt Whitman the political poet. Rather it is an attempt to try and read poetry through philosophy and philosophy through poetry. Bringing these two together will create the possibility of forming a conception of radical democratic literature.

III. THE STRUCTURE

As this essay engages with the question of radical democratic literature, it is this question that already forms the problem for the structure of this essay. This essay is structured in a non-hierarchical way: like grass, i.e. horizontal, egalitarian and connected. Otherwise we will fall into the trap from which both Whitman and Rancière try to prevent us: the reinforcement of existent hierarchical structures. Consequently, it seems to me there is no ultimate arrangement for the chapters. Rather, the chapters find themselves on a radical egalitarian level or field. They should all be understandable on their own merits, however the reader will only take full advantage when they are read in the broader emplotment of the totality, which is as follows.

First, Whitman’s call for a new literature and a new aesthetics - a new aesthetics that has to be democratic - needs to be situated in the history of aesthetics. I will read his call by

situating it as part of what Rancière calls the aesthetic revolution that was conceptualised in the work of Kant and Schiller, with a strong emphasis on ‘free play’ and the *sensus communis* that follows from that free play.

In the next chapter I will deal with the regime against which the aesthetic revolution could take place. To gain a better understanding of what makes a new literature ‘new’, Whitman’s idiosyncratic use of the term ‘feudalism’ as a representational structure will be expounded. Essential for this inquiry, as we will see, is Whitman’s oversimplifying critique of Shakespeare’s poetical world, as hypercultivated.

The third chapter deals with the exact opposite of Whitman’s conception of Shakespearean representation: the wild nature of the American prairie on which Whitman was confronted with the new sensorium – the prairie not as a paradise, but as the absolute realm of this confrontation.

In the fourth chapter, shifting the décor from the prairie to the supermarket, I will be dealing with early criticism of *Leaves of Grass* in which an important topos for reading Whitman can be found. Based on the explosion of words (and the radical equality of subject matter that comes with this explosion) is an important consequence of the power of the written word, i.e. *littérarité*.

Next, to fully grasp the implications of the power of the written word, Rancière’s theory of the errant letter will be read as a new theory of the death of the author. This will result in a reinterpretation of the lyrical I in ‘Song of Myself’, not as Walt Whitman or any other lyrical subject. Instead, I will argue it is the taking place of language that is enclosed in that single word: I.

To complete the full conceptualization of *littérarité* I will once again discuss the consequences of reading the work of literature as an errant letter. However, focussing less on the early reception of *Leaves of Grass* (as the fourth chapter does), I will argue that the sending off of a poem into the world and its consequences for the reader are actually thematized in the poem.

The next chapter deals with the physical experience caused by the confrontation with the errant letter. It will become clear that electricity forms an important imagery for understanding nineteenth century aesthetic experience. As I will argue, Whitman’s poetry can be understood in terms of a telegraphic message sent into the world that in shocking the reader at once makes him/her aware of his/her own subjectivity as well as triggering a *sensus communis*.

After this return to the communal appeal in the aesthetic experience I will deal with the problem of a People. What is this People Whitman claimed the new literature should take into consideration? Through a reading of Rancière's intervention in political philosophy, the connection between democracy and literature as errant letter will be expounded.

Neither Whitman, nor Rancière offers us something that might be called a programme for politics. Instead, their texts seem to embody and to perform some kind of politics. A kind of politics which they like to see as a form of radical democracy. This is what we, after a long detour, hope to elucidate: what are the characteristics of a radical democratic literature?

§ The aesthetic revolution

At the same time that Walt Whitman, nearing the end of his life, is publishing a collection of notes, essays and impressions from his own life, under the title *Good-bye my Fancy*, the nineteenth century is almost coming to an end. In one of the impressions Whitman writes: “No great poem or other literary or artistic work of any scope, old or new, can be essentially consider’d without weighing first the age, politics (or want of politics) and aim, visible forms, unseen soul, and current times, out of the midst of which it rises and is formulated.”¹ Taking Whitman’s own times into consideration, it is necessary to first dwell on a specific moment, namely the beginning of the nineteenth century. Here we find the origins of our contemporary ideas on aesthetics in the thought of those philosophers who in their theoretical frameworks, tried to grasp the new sensorium.

Though the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten is often regarded as the founder of the discourse of aesthetics, it is not until after the work of Kant and Schiller that we can trace what Jacques Rancière calls the aesthetic revolution. Rancière’s idea of the aesthetic revolution is based upon Schiller’s interpretation of Kantian aesthetics. In 1790, Kant completed his critical project by publishing *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, the book that has outlined (and is still of significant importance for) the contours of the discourse on aesthetics. In his analysis of the aesthetic judgment, that is necessarily a subjective judgment, the subject comes to stand before the object. Any object, thus not only a work of art, can bring the faculty of understanding (*Verstand*), that through its categories determines sensible objects, and the imagination, that requires an object of desire, into a free play.

Kant makes a distinction between ‘determining judgments and ‘reflective’ judgements. In the first kind of judgment the particular is subsumed under a universal law or concept, enabling us to apply the categories in a just way. In the latter type of judgment, however, there is only the particular for which the universal has to be found, for which neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori* rules have been given. In the aesthetic judgment of an object by a subject there is no search for specific knowledge of this object. We can perceive and enjoy a sunrise without knowing how this sun came to rise. However, this sunrise can give us a pleasant or unpleasant feeling and it is through this confrontation with an object that the subject becomes aware of subjective feeling.

The aesthetic judgment for Kant is thus necessarily a subjective judgment,² an experience that from the object folds back upon the subject. Out of this analysis Kant is able to distil the four fundamental principles of the aesthetic judgment. First, the aesthetic judgment is disinterested, that is to say, the subject has no desire, no need for the object that is under contemplation. The second principle, logically deduced by the first, is the universal validity of the judgment: “Denn das, wovon jemand sich bewußt ist, daß das Wohlgefallen an demselben bei ihm selbst ohne alles Interesse sei, das kann derselbe nicht anders als so beurteilen, daß es einen Grund des Wohlgefallens für jedermann enthalten müsse.”³ Since in the aesthetic experience – and this is going to be important for Schiller’s theory of the aesthetic – there is no need for any subsumption under a concept, there is thus a promise of the common.

The third principle is seemingly strangely formulated: “*Schönheit* ist Form der *Zweckmäßigkeit* eines Gegenstandes, sofern sie, *ohne Vorstellung eines Zwecks*, an ihm wahrgenommen wird.”⁴ Perhaps this purposiveness without a purpose becomes clearer when we distinguish between the objective purpose, the purpose of the pure object itself, and the subjective purpose, i.e. when the subject experiences the object as purposed. It is not important whether to know what the aim or purpose of the object is, but rather it is the presentation of the form of the object that the subject is concerned with.

This is where we come to see the importance of the free play. Since it is the presentation of the form of the object that is without any desire or purpose, it not only brings the imagination but also the understanding into play: “Die Erkenntniskräfte, die durch diese Vorstellung ins Spiel gesetzt werden, sind hiebei in einem freien Spiele, weil kein bestimmter Begriff sie auf eine besondere Erkenntnisregel einschränkt. Also muß der Gemütszustand in dieser Vorstellung der eines Gefühls des freien Spiels der Vorstellungskräfte an einer gegebenen Vorstellung zu einem überhaupt sein.”⁵ This is precisely the promise of the common in any aesthetic experience: “Dieser Zustand eines *freien Spiels* der Erkenntnisvermögen, bei einer Vorstellung, wodurch ein Gegenstand gegeben wird, muß sich allgemein mitteilen lassen: weil Erkenntnis, als Bestimmung des Objekts, womit gegebene Vorstellungen (in welchem Subjekte es auch sei) zusammen stimmen sollen, die einzige Vorstellungsart ist, die für jedermann gilt.”⁶ The purpose of the judgement is thus to bring the faculty of imagination into harmony with the faculty of understanding. This is the key to the critique of taste, since from the free play we can deduce the fourth principle: *sensus communis*. The aesthetic judgment is neither a theoretical

judgment nor a moral judgment; it is based neither on moral nor on empirical laws. But how then to explain the fact that so many subjective judgments are in agreement? The answer lies in the *a priori* sense for community that is a result of the free play. So perhaps this already points to the somewhat paradoxical nature of the new aesthetic, which is one that is necessarily subjective while at the same time seems to transcend the individual in its communal appeal.

Kant's entire *exposé* on the nature of the aesthetic judgment was soon taken up by Friedrich von Schiller. According to Schiller in his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, which he wrote in the time of the French Revolution, this Kantian philosophical edifice has to be transposed into political propositions. Essential for his account is the analysis that can be found in the 6th letter of the collection of letters, written to Duke Friedrich Christian von Augustenburg, where Schiller tries to diagnose the culture of his time. Culture itself is to blame for the degeneration and weakening – the two extremes of human decay – he sees going hand in hand in his era:

Die Kultur selbst war es, welche der neuern Menschheit diese Wunde schlug. Sobald auf der einen Seite die erweiterte Erfahrung und das bestimmtere Denken eine schärfere Scheidung der Wissenschaften, auf der andern das verwickeltere Uhrwerk der Staaten eine strengere Absonderung der Stände und Geschäfte notwendig machte, so zerriß auch der innere Bund der menschlichen Natur, und ein verderblicher Streit entzweite ihre harmonischen Kräfte.⁷

Because of the cultural development of humanity since the Greek nation state, the state had to divide itself, analogous to the work of reason, in specific areas and locations to which subjects were ordained. Although Schiller, with his regard for Greek culture failed to notice, his description was not unlike Plato's ideal state in which subjects, from the moment of their birth, were distributed according to their capabilities. In Schiller's diagnosis of the splitting up of specific skills, the subject was able to develop and emphasize only one skill, thereby neglecting all other talents: creating the modern man with his fragmentary nature devoid of his harmonious being. Simultaneous with the development in sciences went the classification and ordering of society. And the installation of any hierarchy – the cold rule of law - was highly problematic for Schiller, since humanity could not grow to its full stature.

According to Schiller every human being – and every culture – consists of an antagonism of drives, on the one hand there is the sensible drive that “geht aus von dem physischen Dasein des Menschen oder von seiner sinnlichen Natur und ist beschäftigt, ihn

in die Schranken der Zeit zu setzen und zur Materie zu machen.”⁸ On the other hand there is the formal drive that “geht aus von dem absoluten Dasein des Menschen oder von seiner vernünftigen Natur und ist bestrebt, ihn in Freyheit zu setzen, Harmonie in die Verschiedenheit seines Erscheinens zu bringen und bey allem Wechsel des Zustands seine Person zu behaupten.”⁹ Thus humanity is determined by two drives: imagination and reason, lawlessness and law. They correspond to two humanities: there is the primitive, the man of sensation lead by the primacy of the senses, and there is the barbarian, the man of culture, lead by his strict principles and laws. Whereas the one strives for continuous changes, the other strives for a state of perpetual stability.

Those two drives, the sensible drive and the formal drive, mutually determine each other because a human being with only sensation would be only ‘world’ – the formless content of time – whereas a human being with only formal drive would be pure form. In the interaction of both drives, that is to say, their union they are neither separated nor mingled but in a state of free play. Free play as a state of in between in which there is no coercion, no dominance of the one over the other. The human being as living form – *homo ludens* in Johan Huizinga’s words – has taken over care of itself, with art as the ultimate expression and example of this freedom.

The ‘free play’ of the intellectual and sensible faculties is reinterpreted by Rancière in a radical way: in his view the subject and object are caught in a “circle of an inactive activity.”¹⁰ Standing before the object neither the subject nor the object does anything. In other words, there is a suspension of both the faculties. Since both of the faculties prolong this suspension there is an even more important suspension, namely that of the domination of one of the faculties. In this analysis of the free play there is no faculty that dominates the other, since the power of form over matter, or the power of intelligence over sensibility, has also been suspended. There is no longer any either/or. As Rancière puts it: “If aesthetic ‘play’ and ‘appearance’ found a new community, then this is because they stand for the refutation, within the sensible, of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities.”¹¹ The example of this experience for Schiller (and for Rancière) is the *Juno Ludovisi*, in front of which the free play of the aesthetic leads to the autonomy not of reason, nor of sensation but of the deferral of that kind of autonomy. It is the autonomy of the experience, that is, the free play and free appearance, combined together in a sensorium in which activity and passivity, will and resistance, are called for. Through this new sensory experience, a new world for

art, a new life for the community and for individuals – free of dominance: “Kein Vorzug, keine Alleinherrschaft wird geduldet, soweit der Geschmack regiert und das Reich des schönen Scheins sich verbreitet.”¹² – is promised, namely ‘the aesthetic.’ And it is this new ‘aesthetic’ experience that Paul Gilmore, in his analysis of material aesthetics, has delineated as the fundamental experience of the poetry of American Romanticism. Gilmore comes close to the kind of experience set out above: “Aesthetic experience is the sensual and conscious suspension and ecstatic transcendence of the interested self through an encounter with a stimulus, whether a designated art object or not. As the product of material sensations registered on the individual body that give rise to a sense of the limitations and fluid boundaries of the self, the aesthetic moment is inherently paradoxical, blurring distinctions between self and community, sensual and ideal.”¹³ Thus, if we follow Gilmore there is always a promise of the new common, a promise for a new world in the new aesthetic experience, one that transcends the individual body.¹⁴

Precisely in this promise of a new world for the individuals and for the community, the promise of a new humanity, we should understand Walt Whitman’s call for a literature as a medicine against the old humanity. As he puts it near the beginning of his *Democratic Vistas*: “View’d to-day, from a point of view sufficiently over-arching, the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature.”¹⁵ Here we stumble upon what could be seen as one of the key phrases around which Whitman’s project revolves. He is looking both for a new world of Art, which restructures the community in a democratic way, and a new life for both individuals and the community. Both for Whitman are intertwined: the literary work should create the *sensus communis* and the community should take the literary example as the guiding thread for the people to come – “Un people fait un poème, un poème fait un people.”¹⁶ In other words: Whitman’s poetical project could only be grasped from this new aesthetics. An aesthetics not understood in the classical sense since Baumgarten – that is, the judgment over taste or beauty as the final proof of the successful fulfilment of resemblance – but in the Rancièrian sense of *aisthesis* as “a repartition of the sensible that brings together manners of making or doing, forms of visibility, and manners of speaking.”¹⁷ As such, art cuts into a certain partition of the sensible with its distribution of roles and places, while upsetting and redistributing this partition. It is around the beginning of the 19th century – that “strange, *unloosen’d*, wondrous time”¹⁸ in Whitman’s words – that a certain

order, the feudal order as Whitman never tires of repeating, was disrupted by a radical redistribution of the perceptible.

However, the outcome of this aesthetic revolution is not singular. If we follow Rancière, there are two important emplotments of art after the aesthetic revolution, each with its own partition of what makes art art. On the one hand, there is life becoming art, or the life of art. With the founding of numerous museums around 1800 it is possible to trace a historicization of art. The museum does not only render visible art as art, but also the life of art as such. The object of art could, together with other objects, be placed in a historical context, forming a specific art historical period. Furthermore, broad developments could be traced as if art had a beginning and a future endpoint. This historicization was probably – at least according to Rancière – the first task of the discipline of aesthetics which came to a conclusion with the end of art in Hegel’s philosophy. The result is a denial of the aesthetic revolution: “the properties of the aesthetic experience are transferred to the work of art itself, cancelling their projection into a new life and invalidating the aesthetic revolution.”¹⁹

On the other hand, there is the emplotment of life becoming art. Art in this emplotment is not only the expression of life but a form of its self-education: matters of art become matters of education – the education of mankind (the Schillerian *ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*), or how to form a new collective being-together-in-the-world. “As self education,” Rancière argues, “art is the formation of a new sensorium – one which signifies, in actuality, a new ethos. Taken to an extreme, this means that the ‘aesthetic self-education of humanity’ will frame a new collective ethos.”²⁰ And this is precisely where we can locate Whitman’s poetical project: poetry as the medicine curing the sick, or as a lever lifting up the new humanity: “I think Literature – a new superb, democratic literature – is to be the medicine and lever, and (with Art) the chief influence in modern civilization.”²¹ For Whitman it is Literature with a capital L that frames the new collective *ethos*, that is the new dwelling place that forms the community, or the new sphere of experience in the Rancièrean sense “as the sphere of the exercise of a property or a faculty possessed in common by all those who belong to a location.”²² Rancière’s emphasis on the shared faculty by all who belong to a location stems from the fact that *ethos* always implies, through its very meaning, location. And it is through this description that it becomes possible to recognize the Kantian and Schillerian position of the spectator who is dwelling before the free appearance of the work of art, that position that was characterized by the

radical equality of the faculties neutralizing any hierarchy through the free play. It is the new sensorium of the people without domination. But what if this location is not the place before and shared with the work of art, but the nation – the nation as a poem as Whitman often repeated – instead? Then, the nation finds its structure in the body of the poem as the poem finds its structure in the body of the nation. Poetry is thus not a mere form of representation but ‘does’ something, as Jason Frank puts it: “Poetry for Whitman should not aim merely to represent accurately an independent reality, but to enact a new reality.”²³ And whether one is speaking of the poem or the nation, both should be freed from any form of domination. Only then the “[t]he Muse of the Prairies, of California, Canada, Texas, and of the peaks of Colorado, dismissing the literary, as well as social etiquette of over-sea feudalism and caste, joyfully enlarging, adapting itself to comprehend the size of the whole people, with the *free play*, emotions, pride, passions, experiences, that belong to them, body and soul”²⁴ could be saved from the old feudal order of the Old World. Against this background of Old Europe, with its feudal structures of representation – what we could coin in Rancière’s terms the representational regime of art – Whitman is celebrating a new ‘unloosen’d’ poetics, a poetics without the domination of the formal drive over the sensible drive, without the domination of the sensible drive over the formal drive.

§ Nothing will come of nothing

“Nothing will come of nothing.” This phrase so famously uttered by King Lear in act 1.1 of Shakespeare’s play helps the understanding of Whitman’s poetical project as at once a response to and a radical break away from the existing poetical ordering of the world. As revolutions always take place against the background of an existing order, in Whitman’s case this order is perfectly represented in Shakespeare’s *oeuvre*. Whitman clearly understood Lear’s “Nothing can be made out of nothing” in the sense that his stance towards Shakespeare is ambivalent: he at once admired Shakespeare’s writing as he despised the plays for being feudal – brilliantly feudal. Or put differently: Shakespeare is of “astral genius [...] entirely fit for feudalism.”¹ This feudal society with its social hierarchies – the Old World, Europe – formed the groundwork for a society to come. As we will see, Whitman’s critique on Shakespeare presents us with an idiosyncratic use of the notion of feudalism. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman makes it abundantly clear that the New Literature, the poetry to come, needs to break away from the former models:

The great poems, Shakspeare included, are poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the life-blood of democracy. The models of our literature, as we get it from other lands, ultramarine, have had their birth in courts, and bask’d and grown in castle sunshine; all smells of princes’ favors.²

Only against the background of feudal Europe could a democratic Revolution that was at once Democratic and Aesthetic.

As a young man fond of theatre, Whitman – according to his own notes in his “lurid and blood-smutch’d”³ autobiographical sketch entitled *Specimen Days* – saw all of Shakespeare’s drama’s on Broadway, after having carefully read the *oeuvre*. There is no doubt that Whitman was very much influenced by Shakespeare’s plays.⁴ However, reading his notes, one cannot be but struck by his ambivalent stance leading to a warm and lovely embrace as well as a radical dismissal of Shakespeare’s writings.

How, then, does Whitman characterize Shakespeare’s writings? In ‘A thought on Shakspeare’, Whitman contrasts Shakespeare’s work with the imagery of American Nature, that is essentially the background against which, or the environment in which, Whitman experienced this radically new sensorium:

Think, not of growths as forest primeval, or Yellowstone geysers, or Colorado ravines, but of costly marble palaces, and palace rooms, and the noblest fixings and furniture, and noble owners and occupants to correspond – think of carefully built gardens from the beautiful but sophisticated gardening art at its best, with walks and bowers and artificial lakes, and appropriate statue-groups and the finest cultivated roses and lilies and japonicas in plenty – and you have the tally of Shakespere.⁵

The world Shakespeare created, according to Whitman, is a world of a carefully constructed, artificially cultivated order and faultlessness in which every single body – whether it be the gardener or the stable hand – occupies a specific location and performs a specific role. Needless to say this is a world fundamentally opposed to the widespread fields of the lonesome prairies and the mighty rivers that characterize America’s landscape. And as Whitman continues: “[t]he low characters, mechanics, even the loyal henchmen – all in themselves nothing – serve as capital foils to the aristocracy.”⁶ All those bodies serve one purpose: to keep the feudal order in place. This distribution of bodies, of locations and roles – which is totally opposed to the new sensorium Whitman found reflected on the Yellowstone geysers and Colorado ravines – forms an aesthetics that Whitman traces back to the Ancient Greeks: “My own opinion has long been, that for New World service our ideas of beauty (inherited from the Greeks, and so on to Shakespeare – *query* – perverted from them?) need to be radically changed, and made anew for today’s purposes and finer standards.”⁷ Inadvertently the Aristotelian poetics of mimesis come to mind: Shakespeare as the summit of the Aristotelian poetics.

Rancière’s reinterpretation of the Aristotelian poetics, with its specific form of representation may help us to gain a better understanding of what precisely it is that Whitman is fulminating against. In Aristotelian *mimesis* we find the groundwork for a distribution of bodies that could still be traced in feudal societies, in which every single person is designated a place according to kinship and wealth. It is the world of kings and queens, noblemen and peasants. In other words, it is a world of clear-cut distinctions and social hierarchies which assign bodies their places on the social canvas. Aligned with the distribution of the bodies comes a distribution of the roles and speaking positions in society: who is allowed to speak and who is not allowed to speak, and, what can be said and what cannot be said

Here we find the homology between Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the structure of society, namely the distribution of its bodies. Tragedy according to Aristotle is “an imitation of an

action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable, each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the purification of such emotions.”⁸ What tragedy is able to show, or rather, supposed to show us are the general structures of life. Aristotle’s idea of *mimesis*: poetry as a form of fiction that forms an imitation of acting man, more capable than history of showing us universal structures. The character represented has to comply with the rules of goodness, appropriateness, likeness and consistency; i.e. the character will always perform in the only way possible, namely that as predestined by his/her class-origin. Aristotelian *mimesis*, wherein the primacy of plot is more important than the spectacle, distributes bodies, roles and speaking positions in the form of a hierarchy of actions and characters forming a prototypical social structure. As Rancière has argued time and again in his recent reinterpretations of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “Le pouvoir de faire de l’art avec les mots était lié à celui d’une hiérarchie de la parole, d’une relation réglée d’adresse entre des actes de parole et des audiences définies sur lesquelles ces actes de parole devaient produire des effets de mobilisation des pensées, des émotions et des énergies.”⁹ This representational power is a distribution of the sensible which follows a certain hierarchy. Speech acts, tied to and constitutive of specific social hierarchies, function as forms of inclusion and exclusion; e.g. the words of a noble man exclude the peasant from his discourse.

Representation should not be conceived as a certain mode of correspondence theory, i.e. not primarily as a copy-model relationship. Rather, as Rancière notes, “it is the relation of address from a *poiesis* to an *aesthesis*.”¹⁰ It is this specific relationship between a productive nature and a receptive nature, between word and image, between visible and invisible that characterizes that historico-transcendental regime that Rancière calls the *representational regime of art*. In this regime there is a determined relation between words and the visible: speech governs the forms of the visible and words cause the non-visible of thought to be seen.¹¹ This is why we find in Aristotle’s *Poetics* the denunciation of the spectacle: visible elements obey the power of making-seen inherent in words. The action of the poetic expression is governed by an intellectual operation, the operation, famously enunciated by Aristotle, of *muthos*, *ethos* and *dianoia*; i.e. plot, character and discourse. The implication of this operation is, as Rancière emphasizes, that “[t]he words of the theatrical poem referred to a *highly coded invisible* which was that of the ideas and feelings experienced by the characters of the poem.”¹²

The highly coded invisible, the Aristotelian coherence of action tied to the allocation of bodies and locations, the distribution of roles and words, is thus always tied to a social hierarchy. Moreover, the connection of *poiesis* and *aesthesis* lead to a hierarchy of imitations, that is, genres: the noble man had to deal with noble actions, whereas the common man could not but deal with common matters. Tied to the coherence of action is a specific hierarchy of subject matter. In other words “Il liait la rationalité de la fiction poétique à une certaine forme d’intelligibilité des actions humaines, à un certain type d’adéquation entre des manières d’être, des manières de faire et des manières de parler.”¹³ We can summarize this in four principles. First there is the principle of fiction as an imitation of action, with its primacy of the arrangement of this action. Depending on who and what is represented a hierarchy of genres is constructed, the second principle as the principle of genericity. The third principle is that of ‘convenance’ which constitutes an economy of ‘propriety’ between the author, the character represented and the spectator. Finally, the fourth principle is the principle of actuality, that is the performance of language: “ce qui norme l’édifice de la représentation, c’est le primat de la parole comme acte, de la performance de parole.”¹⁴

Up to this point Rancière’s interpretation is certainly plausible, however one always has to keep in mind that a transgression of the four principles of the representational regime was possible in that the Rancièrian regime is more like a Foucaultian historico-transcendental scheme, or, *episteme*. In fact it was because of this regime, more precisely against the background of this regime, that transgressions became possible. As Angus Fletcher observes in his *A new theory for American poetry*, the Aristotelian coherence of action could be traced from the Ancient Greeks up till the 19th century:

there is as much uncertain in literary modes of coherence as there is in modern physics at its most speculative. Especially in the romance forms of literature, the probability principle bends to allow digression, excursion, ornamental and *oriental* amplification, allegorical magic, and a host of persuasive improbabilities, but coherence of action remained foundational for Western poets right on through into the nineteenth century, when certain poets, following examples usually drawn from prose fiction, found they might question probable causation.¹⁵

Fletcher does not explain why nineteenth century poets had the capacity to escape the well-trodden paths of the form of representation that has dominated our history for so long. But, as Rancière has shown, it was with the works of Kant and Schiller that the power of free play obstructs any form of domination. The aesthetic judgment was at once highly

subjective and at the same time made an appeal to a sense for community, a result of the free play. As a consequence it was no longer possible to maintain that highly coded invisible of Aristotelian poetics; rather we have a new way of framing a common world by using the power of linking words to the visible: “La nouveauté historique signifiée par le terme de ‘littérature’ est là: non pas dans un langage particulier mais dans une nouvelle manière de lier le dicible et le visible, les mots et les choses.”¹⁶ With the man of intelligence no longer dominating over the man of sensation, the whole knot of subject matter, bodies, roles, places and genres is untied – all subjects become radically equal subjects of literature. As Fletcher points out in the passage cited above, poetry could become prose as prose could become poetry, with Whitman’s poetry as a primary example: “In my opinion the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry.”¹⁷ And Whitman goes on by pointing to the fact that all of poetry’s stylistic utilities – e.g. rhyme and the measurement-rules of iambic, spondee, dactyl – could be used by orators, writers or any eloquent person. This is precisely one of the reasons why Whitman had to denounce all the literature coming from Europe, and the literature of the epigones following that old model. In one of his more furious moments in *Specimen Days* we read:

One’s mind needs but a moment’s deliberation anywhere in the United States to see clearly enough that all the prevalent book and library poets, either as imported from Great Britain, or follow’d and *doppelgang’d* here, are foreign to our States, copiously as they are read by us all. But to fully understand not only how absolutely in opposition to our times and lands, and how little and cramp’d, and what anachronisms and absurdities many of their pages are, for American purposes, one must dwell or travel awhile in Missouri, Kansas and Colorado, and get rapport with their people and country.¹⁸

The literature of the old world, in which even the dirtiest crime has something heroic, does not correspond with the nature of the aesthetic experience one gets while wandering through the American prairies, which are the source of Whitman’s aesthetico-political thought on democracy. And the question is whether the poets of the New World will ever get rid of the old representational models or not. “Will the day ever come – no matter how long deferr’d – when those models and lay-figures from the British islands – and even the precious traditions of the classics – will be reminiscences, studies only?”¹⁹ The Shakespearean form of representation as the study, that is, as the groundwork, on which to build a New World literature, fit for the people and democracy to come. In such a New

World literature, that blows up all hierarchies, there is no longer a strict separation between prose and poetry.

Indeed, Whitman's poetry itself forms a particularly important source of free verse. A source of free verse in which the barriers between prose and poetry have more or less become indiscernible, thereby dismissing the literary and social etiquette of the old European order. He departs from the restrictions and conventions of lyric poetry and their institutional support.²⁰ Instead we find an explosion of the free play of passions, emotions and senses – and experience he saw reflected on the endless fields of the American prairies and the peaks of the mountains. That is where thought becomes sensible and the sensible becomes thought, resulting in a new poetry and a new poetics. We find ourselves confronted with a literature composed within the aesthetic revolution, leaving the old works in a void. To quote Whitman: “For our existing world, the bases on which all the grand old poems were built have become vacuums – and even those of many comparatively moderns ones are broken and half gone.”²¹ Nonetheless Shakespeare with his “mighty aesthetic sceptres of the past”²² kept on exercising influence over Whitman's poetry. And it is Whitman's poetry, with its explosions of free verse and chaotic enumerations, that forms the ultimate expression, and most of all *celebration*, of the new sensorium, the new distribution of bodies, of voices, of colours, of sounds, which, without its feudal predecessor could not have come about – indeed nothing comes from nothing. This is the lesson to be learned from Whitman's polemic against Old World literature. Where Rancière argues that literature as a mode of writing in the new regime can only be defined on itself, i.e. on a singular basis, since there is no institutional support and no invisible economy presupposed, Whitman points to something more pertinent. To be truly revolutionary is almost like a catch, in the sense that the New World literature could always only be defined as set off against this Aristotelian/feudal form of representation. Thus the new literature is always highly dependant on the former regime. Without the canonical oeuvre of Shakespeare – and Whitman would have been the first to acknowledge this – Whitman's work would not have been as revolutionary as he would have it to be.

§ Prairies, Plains, Poetry

In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman is in search of what constitutes the basic democratic structure of the new literature, the literature to come. As he makes clear that in his view only a new Poetry can be the worthy support and expression of American Democracy, he pleads for a return to Nature. The question, then, becomes whether Whitman is pleading for a turn to a typical Romantic master signifier (as the capital N seems to imply), or if Nature to him means something much more radical. Or perhaps it is both, his own version of that signifier turned into the radical basis on which the new sensorium comes to its full expression.

Whitman's turn to nature is not one in the sense of the English poets with their "smooth walks, trimm'd hedges, poseys and nightingales" but Nature: "In the prophetic literature of these States [...] Nature, true Nature, and the true idea of Nature, long absent, must, above all, become fully restored, enlarged, and must furnish the pervading atmosphere to poems, and the test of all high literary and esthetic compositions."¹ The great bard of American democracy opposes to the old regime of feudal representations a regime of writing embedded in the open air: "Democracy most of all affiliates with the open air, is sunny and hardy and sane only in Nature – just as much as Art is."² It is out on a stroll in Nature that the good old poet could grasp the new senses and new joys – to paraphrase a piece in specimen days – the new senses and joys that come with the new sensorium. And as Whitman argues in a piece called 'Mississippi Valley Literature' a new theory of democratic literature is not to be extracted from the "models and lay-figures of the British islands"³ but from "[t]he pure breath, primitiveness, boundless prodigality and amplitude, strange mixture of delicacy and power, of continence, or real and ideal, and of all original and first-class elements, of these prairies, the Rocky mountains, and of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers."⁴ Written on the prairies, plains and mountains, Whitman finds the laws of the American democracy to come. A form of writing that Rancière contrasted with the Aristotelian form of representation, a form of writing:

qui veut la gager sur la puissance d'esprit qui s'écrit déjà dans les choses et doit finir par s'identifier au rythme même de la communauté. Cette puissance d'esprit est à l'oeuvre déjà dans la nature qui écrit sa propre histoire dans les plissements de la Pierre ou les lignes du bois. Elle l'est dans cette vie qui ne cesse de s'écrire, de se symboliser elle-même, dès ses plus humbles degrés, et qui s'élève sans cesse vers

des puissance plus hautes d'écriture et de symbolization de soi. Elle l'est dans cette humanité dont le langage est déjà un poème vivant mais qui parle, dans les pierres qu'elle taille, les objets qu'elle forge et les lignes qu'elle découpe sur le territoire, un langage plus vrai que celui des mots. Plus vrai parce que plus proche de la puissance par laquelle la va s'écrire elle-même.⁵

This is precisely what we find in Whitman's poetics, the poet that travelled all over the United States in search of this new American poetics. The great plains of the American Midwest, and the mighty Mississippi river, often characterized as a female source of life in Whitman's poetry, no longer function as the silent tableau against which poetry could form its representation. Rather, the poet on his journey through North America's landscape is confronted with a direct presentation of the true American poetics: "Indeed through the whole of this journey, with all its shows and varieties, what most impress'd me, and will longest remain with me, are these same prairies. Day after day, and night after night, to my eyes, to all my senses – the esthetic one most of all – they silently and broadly unfolded."⁶ It are the folds in the rocks, the stream of the mighty river or the endless open space of the prairies that talk to him, not in the overabundance of embellishments, but in the pure voice of the rough nature talking silently. Apparently it is the silent eloquence of the mute rocks and fields that speaks to the poet. Towards the end in *Specimen Days*, just after his horrid impressions of the Secession War, we find Whitman's most brilliant reflections on "America's characteristic landscape." Whitman is not the poet of the great metaphors but the bard of the simple, the usual and the direct. He is the poet that wants to free himself and his readers from the fetters of the European feudal systems, of which the political system in a mutual presuppositional connection founds its structure in the poetic representation.

Instead, Whitman wanders over the prairie and loafes on the grass: one man in an almost empty space, free from any form of oppression, letting the things speak for themselves. "My days and nights, as I travel here – what an exhilaration! – not the air alone, and the sense of vastness, but every local sight and feature. Everywhere something characteristic."⁷ After which he continues with a characteristic enumeration of all those local sights and features: "the cactuses, pinks, buffalo grass, wild sage – the receding perspective, and the far circle horizon all times of day, especially forenoon – the clear, pure, cool, rarefied nutriment for the lungs, previously unknown."⁸ And he keeps on adding things that breathe in air for a new life. Walking over the prairie he fills his lungs with the fresh American air. But there is something in this air, perhaps he breathes in the seeds for a

new aesthetics of all those American areas as one big poem – “fused in the alembic of a perfect poem, or other esthetic work, entirely western, fresh and limitless – altogether our own, without a trace or taste of Europe’s soil, reminiscence, technical letter or spirit.”⁹ Nature unfolds itself as a poem without any limits (immediately Whitman’s own project springs to mind), the nature of the American Midwest that is truly different from the European soil. No wonder it is there that the poet finds the seeds for a new poetry to come.

Strolling over the prairies all the poet’s senses are thrilled by a complete new sensorium: “The prairies – as I cross’d them in my journey hither – and these mountains and parks, seem to me to afford new lights and shades. Everywhere the aerial gradations and sky-effect inimitable; nowhere else such perspectives, such transparent lilacs and greys.”¹⁰ The prairies stimulate him to rethink the work of artists: “I can conceive of some superior landscape painter, some fine colorist, after sketching awhile out here, discarding all his previous work, delightful to stock exhibition amateurs, as muddy, raw and artificial.”¹¹ What those prairies ask for is someone who is willing and able to let go of all he knows and all he made in order to radically open up to the new senses and let the things speak for themselves.

Because the things may be speaking for themselves the poet needs to understand the story they are telling. What is it that the grass of the prairies is saying? This is a question that can be found in “Song of Myself”:

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full
hands;
How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what
it is any more than he.¹²

It takes not much imagination to see Whitman wandering over one of the great prairies while envisioning a new utopia. Grass as an immeasurable canvas or sheet dropped by god.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropped,
Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say Whose?¹³

Indeed things tell their own story, stories that await interpretation by the poet:

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow

zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the
same, I receive them the same.¹⁴

What the prairies first and foremost seem to offer is a horizontal spread-out surface on which a new ‘we’ can be produced. A new ‘we’ that is uniformed by a new sensory experience. As Rancière puts it: “Principe de politique du sensible: contre les hiérarchies de la représentation, la poétique s’identifie à une esthétique générale qui exprime les lois du sentir, le communicable de la sensation en general.”¹⁵ What ‘Song of Myself’ expresses is the general aesthetic – conceptualized in the Kantian and Schillerian suspension of any domination of the faculties – that is experience by black and white, Canadian (Kanuck) and slave-owning plantation owner (Tuckahoe), and by congressmen and slaves (Cuff). It is precisely this general aesthetic experience, as Paul Gilmore argues, that constructs an “ideal realm of beauty where geography, history, and identity disappear in an ineffable, yet sensual experience.”¹⁶ The aesthetic experience that is central to late eighteenth and nineteenth century poetry. Indeed this personal experience that transcends the individual realm is what is at stake in Whitman’s interpretation of the poetry of the prairies: “No one, I discover, begins to know the real geographic, democratic, indissoluble American Union in the present, or suspect it in the future, until he explores these Central States, and dwells awhile observantly on their prairies.”¹⁷

No doubt this cosmic experience of the prairies with their hint to a political unity stands in a radical opposition to the Aristotelian-Shakesperian form of representation with its castles, queens and rose gardens. As already theorized by Kant, the new aesthetic experience is an experience no longer restricted to the realm of art. Instead any object can be the cause or impulse of any such an experience. Moreover, for Whitman, it is precisely in those non-art objects that the most overwhelming or most impressing moments of the transcendental aesthetic experience can be found: “New senses, new joys, seem develop’d. Talk as you like, a typical Rocky Mountain cañon, or a limitless sea-like stretch of the great Kansas or Colorado plains, under favoring circumstances, tallies, perhaps expresses, certainly awakes, those grandest and subtlest element emotions in the human soul, that all the marble temples and sculptures from Phidias to Thorwaldsen – all paintings, poems, reminiscences, or even music, probably never can.”¹⁸ Again, Whitman draws a straight line from the Ancient Greeks to the late eighteenth century – a line that runs from the Greek sculptor Phidias up to the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorwaldsen – to overturn it with the

experience of a new sensorium. That is the truth written in the rocks and trees of Missouri, Kansas, Wisconsin and all the other states.

All truths wait in all things,
They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,
The insignificant is as big to me as any,
What is less or more than a touch?¹⁹

The poet allows himself to be touched by the splendour of all kinds of seemingly insignificant things. In each and every thing a whole history is enveloped, which through carefully paying attention and affection can be heard. In Rancière's words: "La nature a détrôné le roi en supprimant sa place, son point de visée – la nature dans le double sens qui va commander, pour l'âge nouveau, le noeud de la politique à l'expérience sensible: en une seule notion, la puissance qui fait être et tient ensemble les êtres et le lieu où l'on va, sans privilège, se promener et regarder."²⁰

What can be taken from the new sensorium is that all hierarchies of subject matter are overthrown, and consequently the insignificant reigns. Poetry, not about kings, knights and queens but about stroll and confrontation with a simple thing as a leaf of grass:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of
the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and
the egg of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of
heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all
machinery,
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any
statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of
infidels,
And I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the
farmer's girl boiling her iron tea-kettle and baking
Shortcake.²¹

It is precisely in those base subjects that the possibility for a new communal experience can be found. Even in those infinitesimally small objects a whole universe is encapsulated; and all objects belong to the same new aesthetic realm. That is to say, Whitman could as easily go to something as low to the ground as grass, as from there to the stars connected in the

magnetic night. And everything is in his poetry – words simple as grass. As one of the most important Whitman scholars rightfully noticed: “America’s history, for Whitman, was a kind of accelerating flattening, a turning of high discrimination and hierarchy into a ‘vast-spread’ equality, not erasing distinction and variety, but putting variety on a level plain.”²² That is why, according to Ed Folsom, the prairie is the perfect analogue for American Democracy for Whitman, precisely because the prairie offers an analogue for the aesthetic experience that is at once subjective and reaching beyond the subject into a collective: “Earthbound and joined by an intricate root and seeding system, the prairie grasses, in endless close proximity, at once dug down and reached skyward.”²³ With its rhizomatic structure, grass grows endlessly in all directions, but is precisely because of this structure always linked to itself.²⁴ Thus, this is what Whitman reads in the silent speech of the prairie grass: the whole history of the United States in its democratic becoming is contained in those tiny leaves that so peacefully wave with the wind. Now, we can even better understand a leave of grass is no less than the journey work of stars. Folsom argues that the prairie for Whitman constitutes some kind of paradise, a word Whitman is not keen in using. Therefore Folsom proposes a rather dull neologism, namely prairiedise. However, the prairies for Whitman were not a paradise, but formed the realm in which he was confronted with a very real new aesthetic experience: the aesthetics of sensory writing in which silent things speak.

But, when silent things speak, why then write poetry? The answer might be simple: nature will never stop writing – “urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world”²⁵ – and thus the only way for the poet to respond to this sensory writing is the production of more words. Silence is not the way for a poet, otherwise his existence as a poet would be in danger. The poet cannot simply let him/herself disappear in the sensory writing of nature. Therefore a new writing is needed and Whitman was perfectly aware of this problem, thus he becomes himself part of that procreant urge of the world. He responds to it with a wild poetry of immense enumerations of words, simple words, that speak for themselves. That is why his poetry is not the poetry of the great metaphors but one of the base subjects. As if his own poetry *is* nature, as if it wants to get so close to life as to become life itself. In their greatest simplicity the words find their uttermost complexity. That is why Rancière is correct when he says “Il n’y a pas de simple sentiment et de simple mot.”²⁶ They already say enough themselves. For the old American bard the democratic project of the United States to come might be concealed in a single word, in the

air that fills the lungs or in a single spear of summer grass. This is 'Song of Myself': the celebration of the plenitude of words. It is the law of his poems the poet found in "the unspoken but more-and-more decided feeling that came to me as I pass'd, hour after hour, amid all this grim yet joyous elemental abandon – this plenitude of material, entire absence of art, untrammel'd play of primitive Nature."²⁷ It is striking how often Whitman in his prose pieces evokes sceneries in which he is in total absence of art alone on the grass, or in almost empty spaces of nature. These spaces tell him more than the most brilliantly written poetry. In those moments he discovers as he says the law of his own poems, the infinite multitude that can be said and speak for themselves. "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the / origin of all poems, / You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . there / are millions of sun left."²⁸ Perhaps we now can understand what it means to observe a spear of summer grass, the very moment with which 'Song of Myself' begins. It is to open up a world written on the things, an endless world that unfolds itself in the hands of the reader in the form of the poem.

I pass the death with the dying, a birth with the new-washed
babe . . . and am not contained between my hat and
boots
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike, and every one
good,
The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all
good.²⁹

It is enough for the poet to mention all those different manifold objects, because they will do their work themselves - a true gift of the poem.

§ In a supermarket – *littérarité* (1)

In 1955, precisely hundred years after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*, arguably the most Whitmanian poet of the twentieth century wrote ‘A supermarket in California’. In this short poem, Allen Ginsberg presents the reader with a dreamlike encounter between the lyrical I and Walt Whitman. The place of this encounter: a supermarket. “In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!”¹ While never passing the cashier, together they stroll around, tasting everything this supermarket has got to offer, enjoying the splendour of the insignificant. This décor of the supermarket, with wives in avocados and babies in tomatoes, is not the experience of an acid tripping poet reading Whitman. Rather, the supermarket/warehouse is an often evoked topos for reading Whitman’s poetry.² In fact, critics as early as the first edition in 1855, found in the topos of the supermarket common ground. And it is not only the lesser known critics that use the image of the supermarket or similar images in their critical judgments of Whitman’s poetry.

On 6 May 1856, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes to his friend Thomas Carlyle a not so well-known letter in which he says:

One book, last summer, came out in New York, a nondescript monster which yet had terrible eyes and buffalo strength, and was indisputably American,--which I thought to send you; but the book throve so badly with the few to whom I showed it, and wanted good morals so much, that I never did. Yet I believe now again, I shall. It is called *Leaves of Grass*,--was written and printed by a journeyman printer in Brooklyn, New York, named Walter Whitman; and after you have looked into it, if you think, as you may, *that it is only an auctioneer's inventory of a warehouse*, you can light your pipe with it.³

In 1856 - almost one year after the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. One year after the letter - which has become known, and not in the least instance because of Whitman himself, as probably the most famous letter in the history of American literature – in which Emerson wrote to Whitman: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career.” The book that in 1855 was a wonderful gift and the “extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed” has quickly turned into a “nondescript monster” that could only be compared to a dreary description of a warehouse. No matter what reason there was for Emerson changing his thought on *Leaves of Grass*, the letter to Carlyle contains a critique that could often be heard in the literary criticism of the 19th century.⁴

It was only three days before Emerson's letter to Carlyle that the *Boston Intelligencer* published a review of *Leaves of Grass* which branded Whitman's work as a "heterogeneous mass of bombast." The book should "find no place where humanity urges any claim to respect." Moreover, the author "should be kicked from all decent society as below the level of a brute."⁵ Both the poet Emerson – who was the first to praise Whitman's *Leaves* – and the anonymous critic of the *Boston Intelligencer* denounce Whitman's poetry because they feel something in it is overdone. Whether it be the work of a lunatic or the inventory of an auctioneer, *Leaves of Grass* is characterized as a work of overabundance; poetry as an explosion of words.

Another of those early critics – Charles A. Dana, at the time working for the *New York Daily Tribune* – shows a remarkable ambivalent stance towards Whitman's poetry: "His words might have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise, before the want of fig-leaves brought no shame; but they are quite *out of place* amid the decorum of modern society, and will justly prevent his volume from free circulation in scrupulous circles."⁶ Whitman's poetry is the poetry that consists of words that could have been uttered in the Garden of Eden, yet seem to be strangely out of place in modern society. As Charles Eliot Norton put it in the *Putnam's Monthly* those words, "words usually banished from polite society are here employed without reserve and with perfect indifference to their effect on the reader's mind" forming "a curious and lawless collection of poems."⁷

The images of lawlessness, of madness, or of a certain animality are often evoked in those early reviews, to indicate a certain excess – the excess of words – that characterizes Whitman's poetry. Once more from an early, vulgar review of *Leaves of Grass*:

As to the volume itself, we have only to remark, that it strongly fortifies the doctrines of the Metempsychosists, for it is impossible to imagine how any man's fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love. This *poet* (?) without wit, but with a certain vagrant wildness, just serves to show the energy which natural imbecility is occasionally capable of under strong excitement.⁸

The image of Walt Whitman as a wild donkey-poet bursting with energy as evoked above, is a crude polemic that shows – like all of the reviews mentioned above – a clear inability of dealing with the overabundance sprouting from Whitman's *Leaves*.

Nonetheless, there is something cosmic about Whitman's poetry. Therefore we do not only have to go to the reviews of the first edition of the *Leaves* since at the very core of

‘Song of Myself’ we find precisely what provoked the scandal of which those reviews are the evidence. Let us listen to the voice of the poetic I in ‘Song of Myself’ which says:

And I Know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.⁹

As the poetic I – the substance of the poem that consists of nothing but all the objects of the universe – tells the reader: “I am not to be denied I compel I have stores plenty and to spare,/And any thing I have I bestow.”¹⁰ Clearly the poetic I acknowledges its own overabundance, which it forces upon the reader. But it is not enough. The I is an omnivore, eager to eat all it can, to absorb the universe in order to express it.

I know perfectly well my own egotism,
And know my omnivorous words, *and cannot say any less*,
And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.¹¹

No wonder the early critics found themselves confronted or even threatened with the work of a madman or a beast.

As we have seen, Whitman’s poetry is poetry written after – or within – the aesthetic revolution. That is to say: poetry written in a new regime of writing which is opposed to the old economy of Aristotelian representation, in which every word had a well-determined point of origin as well as a destination. Through this economy of speech-act tied to a double location, determination of who was accountable for the words uttered and who not, was self-evident. However, once this trajectory is interrupted and confused, words circulate freely. As the poetic I chants:

Endless unfolding of words of ages!
And mine a word of the modern a word en masse.¹²

The word of the modern for Whitman, that is to say, a word in the new regime of writing.¹³ Whitman often used the French expression *en-masse* to refer to modern society – e.g. People *en-masse*, Democracy *en-masse* – as well as to his own mode of writing. For example, the 1891-92 final version of *Leaves of Grass* opens with the poem ‘One’s-Self I Sing’ of which the first stanza: “One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person,/Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.”¹⁴

To create the new democratic structure of the literature to-come it was not enough for Whitman to break with the formal rules of the old Aristotelian-Shakespearean mode of

writing, it was not enough to break with measurement-rules of iambic, spondee or dactyl. What was needed in order for poetry to become truly democratic was the word En-Masse: the radical equality of all words, all objects are able to become subject of a poem. In this sense *Leaves of Grass* is an *experimentum linguae*. As Whitman once explained to his friend, Horace Traubel (who used this quote for the introduction of the posthumous publication of Whitman's notes for a treatise on words *An American primer*): "This subject of language interests me – interests me: I never quite get it out of my mind. I sometimes think the *Leaves* is only a language experiment – that it is an attempt to give the spirit, the body, the man, new words, new potentialities of speech."¹⁵ In his notes published in this *Primer* Whitman noticed that each class and each segment of the social fabric created its own set of words, the carpenter as well as the painter, the politician as well as the blacksmith: "Factories, mills, and all the processes of hundreds of different manufactures, grow thousands of words."¹⁶ Where the social distribution of roles partitions language, language carves up the social fabric. It is easy to recognize in these words what Rancière says about the Platonic choreographic community, where each individual performs the task – that is to say, nothing but this task – for which he or she was born. The living soul of the community, forming a harmony, consists of three characteristics: "les occupations des citoyens, leurs manières de faire; leur manière d'être ou *ethos*; et enfin le *nomos* communautaire qui n'est pas seulement la 'loi' de la communauté, mais tout autant son 'air' our son ton."¹⁷ For Whitman, it is precisely this allocation of words and bodies that the tongue for the new world, for the new times and the new people need to overcome:

In America an immense number of new words are needed, to embody the new political facts, the compact of the Declaration of Independence, and of the Constitution – the union of the States – the new-States – the Congress – the modes of election – the stump speech – the ways of electioneering – addressing the people – stating all that is to be said in modes that fit the life and experience of the Indianian, the Michiganian, the Vermonter, the men of Maine, the – also words to answer the modern, rapidly spreading, faith, of the vital equality of women with men, and that they are to be placed on, an exact plane, politically, socially, and in business, with men.¹⁸

If the new politics is really going to be a politics of radical equality, a politics in which not only all states are equal but women as well as men, then first of all a new tongue, a new distribution is needed. A new tongue to be used by the men of reason as well as the men of sensation. However, this availability of the word to each and every one in the choreographic community is not without consequences. Where Whitman's aim is to

liberate each individual from its social segment by granting him access to the word, this excess of words creates in fact a new opposition between two groups: the ones that keep on circulating more words; words that are ‘useless’ and unnecessary words, at least, in the eyes of the second group, the ones that claim to speak correctly. Isn’t this precisely the situation in which Whitman and his critics found themselves?

In Whitman’s notebooks we find a massive amount of notes and observations that should form the foundation for such a new tongue. Not only his ‘The Primer of Words’ – which Traubel published as *An American Primer* – but whole stock-takings of American slang or French vocabulary can be found in ‘Words’ and ‘Other Notebooks, &c. on Words’. Reading his notebooks on words, one is definitely struck by the abundant use of the word *En-Masse*. And like the notebooks, the *Primer* could be read as an explosion of words. This is the fundamental rule, the key for reading Whitman: what he says, what he delineates in his theoretical thinking is actually happening while reading the text. His theory is at the same time his praxis as his praxis is his theory.

The same goes for *Leaves of Grass*, which is both a practical as well as a theoretical performance of the word *En-Masse*, which could best be understood through the example of section 15 of ‘Song of Myself’. The beginning of the section reads:

The pure contralto sings in the organloft,
The carpenter dresses his plank . . . the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild
ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready¹⁹

And this enumeration – that starts with a juxtaposition, or rather a parallelism of the man of reason, the contralto, with the man of sensation, the carpenter – goes on for another 64 verses. Every time the subject is coupled with a specific object which belongs to a specific segment of the social fabric:

The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with halfshut eyes bent
sideways,
The deckhands make fast the steamboat, the plank is thrown for the shoregoing
Passengers²⁰

Taken as a whole, all those segments stand next to and meet each other in the body of the poem. This is the new world, the new America in which all objects are equally subjects for a poem.

How to describe the new world in which all objects are subject of a poem? Although the poem's diversity is hard to deal with – “I resist anything better than my own diversity”²¹ – *E pluribus unum* seems the answer, and Whitman could have gone on, endlessly adding more words to the description of this One. It is the technique of the supermarket, or warehouse. It is the technique that Leo Spitzer once called *chaotic enumeration*, “which bespeaks the same inspiration, on another plane, as the *modern department-store* with its agglomeration of wares brought from the four corners of the globe.” And he continues “the post-Whitmanian writer can enumerate things and thoughts detached from their frames, in order to evoke the plenitude of the world.”²² In his interpretation of Whitman's ‘Out of the cradle endlessly rocking’ Spitzer makes clear that this technique of “endless catalogues” is essentially a technique for the representation of the anarchic complexity of the modern world which resembles “an oriental bazaar.”²³ As a formal method, the chaotic enumeration overturning plot as most important characteristic of good poetry is probably the most essential and most anti-Aristotelian innovation we can find in Whitman. No matter how chaotic this bazaar might be, every object carries its own meaning, its own history. As Whitman put it in his notebooks: “What do you think words are? Do you think words are positive and original things in themselves? – No: Words are not original and arbitrary in themselves. – Words are result – they are the progeny of what has been or is in vogue.”²⁴

Almost 150 years later Jacques Rancière is able to recognize in similar words a new regime of writing that emerged at the beginning of the 19th century: “Il est de déployer un nouveau régime d'adéquation entre la signification des mots et la visibilité des choses, de faire apparaître l'univers de la réalité prosaïque comme un immense tissu de signes qui porte écrite l'histoire d'un temps, d'une civilisation ou d'une société.”²⁵ It is the complexity of the new world which consists of an infinite amount of objects and thus of an infinite amount of individual stories. Thus *Leaves of Grass* is a silent explosion of words. Perhaps what Paul de Man once said of Rilke's poetry – “the categories of the beautiful and the ugly are subsumed, [...] under the common rubric of the interesting” – can, with a slight twist, be applied to Whitman's poetry: the categories of the beautiful and the ugly are subsumed under one rubric – the democratic. And therefore “[h]is poetic universe has something

dazzling, as if it consisted of rare items in a collection or a museum, well set off against the background of a world that emphasizes their singularity.”²⁶ It is precisely in this singularity that the universal is signified: the democratic.

The poet finds himself stuck in a paradox: he is so full of one word – Democracy – that he cannot find enough words to express what he actually wants to say, and therefore he keeps adding words and inventories. But his shortage of words, resulting from an excess of words, signals something else, namely what is implied in the very meaning of the word Democracy. That the poet is not able to stop including more individuals and more objects in the body of the poem is precisely the effect of democracy without an end. The writing of poetry in this way is the practice of democracy as a never finished project; it is never possible to close of the democratic common. As a consequence the poem is nothing but a fragment. But in being a fragment, as the Schlegel brothers have shown in their *Athenaeum*, it is nothing else but a finite body signalling the infinite.²⁷ In Rancière’s words: “Le fragment est symbole: morceau quelconque et microcosme d’un monde. [...] Il est bien plutôt la résolution des contradictions de la nouvelle totalité.”²⁸ Poetry as a world in itself, a microcosmos – tripping or not – of a (Californian) supermarket.

§ This I is not One

For over 150 years, ‘Song of Myself’ has kept audiences in an enigmatic grip, not in the least because of what seem to be simple questions. As the poem is an extraordinary work of reader-oriented poetry, the lyrical I is often taken as the flesh-and-blood Walt Whitman. Numerous scholars have tried to locate biographical facts, as if Whitman has created his own ghost that needs to be pinned down in the body of the poem, a ghost that always already has disappeared the moment you think you have caught him. No doubt this is a substantial part of the reason why this poem still fascinates us today. As often happens in interpreting *Leaves of Grass*, scholars try to look through the eyes of the dead, or go hunting for the haunting spectre of Whitman himself. However, it is the text of ‘Song of Myself’ that already seems to warn the reader not to go hunting for any psychological, biographical or historical facts.

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand
 . . . nor look through the eyes of the dead . . . nor
feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
 from me¹

Rather, the poem’s imperative seems to be: open up yourself for a polyphony of voices and decide for yourself. Could it perhaps be that what we read in this passage is the death of the author *avant la lettre*? Without a doubt many of the historico-biographical interpretations, whether they considered Whitman’s alleged homosexuality, the great Secession War or his body aesthetics, have been very fruitful. But to focus on Whitman’s personal life as the explication of his poetry implies a continued blindness for what is most distinctive about his poetry of the word *En-Masse*. As the lyrical I chants after the long enumeration of section 15 of ‘Song of Myself’:

And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend
 outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.²

Ending with a period, this I is not One. “I am large . . . I contain multitudes.”³ In this section, I will steer away from any psychologizing or historicist interpreting attempt. Rather, I will offer a new account of the lyrical I that is very much connected with the free

play - that is to say, the lyrical I that is at once the whole embodiment of Whitman's politico-poetics while being nothing more and nothing less than the poem's Self.

The problem of 'Song of Myself' is the problem of the pronoun. Who is the I? Roman Jakobson, following the linguist Otto Jespersen, argues that the I belongs to the category he named the shifter. That category that according to Bertrand Russell consists of 'egocentric particulars'. And indeed Whitman's poetry is often characterized as overtly egocentric. "Masturbation, Song of Myself"⁴ we read in one of D.H. Lawrence's critiques of Whitman. The meaning of the shifter cannot be defined without reference to the message and thus the I becomes the link – which distinguishes shifters from all other constituents of a linguistic code – between the sender and the message that is being sent, as Jakobson puts it: "the sign I cannot represent its object without 'being in existential relation' with this object: the word I designating the utterer is existentially related to his utterance and hence functions as an index."⁵ The shifter, constituting a deictic relation, thus first indicates the move from signification to indication: a reference to an instance of discourse. Only in relation to this instance shifters can replenish their significance. The lyrical I and the poem are thus in an existential relationship, although we do not yet know what this relationship entails.

In Giorgio Agamben's reading of the shifter we might find the first key to the understanding of this existential relation: "The sphere of the utterance thus includes that which, in every speech act, refers exclusively to its taking place, to its instance, independently and prior to what is said and meant in it. Pronouns and other indicators of the utterance, before they designate real objects, indicate precisely that language takes place."⁶ The taking place of language, before any designation of whatever object, is extremely important since "[i]n this way, still prior to the world of meanings, they permit the reference to the very event of language, the only context in which something can only be signified."⁷ Before we could even start to think of the lyrical I as the flesh-and-blood Walt Whitman, we are confronted with something more primary: the taking place of language. As the lyrical I indicates:

And I know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.⁸

Sound should here not only be taken as firm, harsh or reliable in the sense of e.g. a sound thrashing, but really as an object (the book) that is composed out of sounds: the event of language.

Perhaps this theorizing of the shifter also helps us to understand that other highly problematic word: you. To whom is the poem referring when it is addressing a certain you? Although it is very likely the reader that is being addressed, something more primary can be taken from this apostrophe. Paul de Man once wrote about Rilke's poetry that "[t]he dominating center, the 'du' of the poem, is present in the poem only to delegate, so to speak, its potential activity to the speaking voice [...]. The purpose of the text is not to reunite the two separate entities but to evoke a specific activity that circulates between them."⁹ In Whitman there is indeed the play of the two separate entities, however, there is no center. The whole point of his poetry is the decentering of the center, through the word *En-Masse*, where the activity specific to the circulation is the taking place of language. The poem thus conceived as a field or body of sounds has no overarching principle that governs the composition. As we know the final title of the poem is 'Song of Myself', that is, the title already indicates that what the reader holds in front of him/her is an event of language.

With the primacy of the event of language over any central speaking institution the poem becomes a field of sounds. As theorized by Roland Barthes among others, this resulted in the death of the author. Since it is never possible to fully grasp who this author is, Barthes was able to put forward that "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin."¹⁰ The author is there first and foremost to limit, to close, the text. To "furnish it with a final signified" in Barthes words. It is exactly this theological authority – Barthes speaks of an Author-God – that Barthes wants to get rid of. Secondly, the author is there to put the text in a the context of a temporality: "the Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book."¹¹ This temporal characteristic is related to the theological characteristic in that one always has to believe in the Author as point of origin. It is the Author that is the creator, the one who gave birth, to the work. Therefore, the author is conceived as the authority underneath the text. However, 'Song of Myself' eliminates the author, commanding the reader not to read "through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on the spectres in books."

Now the One, the master signifier so to speak, has been subtracted from the multiple, the language of literature has been turned on itself as being an event: "I celebrate

myself.” The poem becomes an errant letter, looking for whomever is willing to read it. As Barthes’ famous dictum suggests: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”¹² It is the author that vanishes behind the power of his own words as Rancière argues “La littérature ne vit que de la séparation des mots par rapport à tout corps qui en incarnerait la puissance. Elle ne vit que de déjouer l’incarnation qu’elle remet incessamment en jeu.”¹³ A new existential relationship between the lyrical I and the poem has come into being.

Poetry in the new regime of writing thus first and foremost concerns an emancipation of lyricism; it is the lyrical I who is freed from the fetters of the old poetico-political framework. Where in the representational regime the quality of the poem depended on the mode of enunciation in relation to the speaker position, in the new regime this whole relation has been blown up by the errant letter. That is to say, Rancière’s theory – in which there is no longer any master to plant seeds in the soul of his disciples – can be seen as a new way of burrying the author. However, Rancière never draws this conclusion from his own work. In fact, he proposes a doubling of the I, as the brother of the poet: “quand la poésie prend conscience d’elle-même comme l’acte de s’accompagner, comme la coextensivité du Je à son dit [...], c’est-à-dire une certaine manière pour le poète de se constituer et de constituer son semblable, son frère.”¹⁴ But this brother is still too close to the author and still invites the reader to interpret the poem in a biographical way.

Whitman’s poetry is radically different from this model. The only way to understand the lines “To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow / All are written to me, and I must get what this writing means”¹⁵ is to read this I as the shifter, linking the voice of the poem to the body of the poem in the event of language that *is* the poem. Only when the I is conceived as a specific world, namely the poem, we can understand how objects are written to it and flow through it. “One world is aware, and by far the largest to me, and that is / myself.” The self is a world and the objects flowing through it are enlisted in long chaotic enumerations. A true invention of Whitman, or as Leo Spitzer puts it “the post-Whitmanian writer can enumerate things and thoughts detached from their frames, in order to evoke the plenitude of the world.”¹⁶ It is only through the lyrical I that everything is held together. As the I himself says: I contain multitudes.

The I should not be read as the poet himself. Nor as the double of the poet. Let’s not confuse those things. It is not the I of the Romantic poet, as Jason Frank argues: “If

Romantic writers tended to see the poet as the text's sole originator and author/authority, Whitman works again and again to decenter this relationship. Even the poetic 'Me' or 'I' is not one for Whitman, but many; it is democratic in its very plurality and in its 'nomadism.'¹⁷ The I is nothing but the I of the poem, the shifter through which the whole network of things in the poem finds its full expression. It is the I who sets the frame of the poem, the new frame in which the things detached from their original position find a new proper place; what the poem offers us is nothing but the world, from all four corners of the globe.

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they
are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or
next to nothing,
If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,

And he goes on:

This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the
water is,
This is the common air that bathes the globe.¹⁸

So it is nothing less than his words constituting the poem that bathe the world. They envelope the world and express the world; consequently what is offered in this poem is nothing but the world. This is what gave rise to the reading (by Richard Bucke among others) of Whitman as the poet of cosmic consciousness: the appropriation of space by the lyrical subject, which is not a mere analogy or metaphor but the true disappearance of the lyrical I. As De Man puts it: "The assimilation of the subject to space [...] does not really occur as the result of an analogical exchange, but by a radical appropriation which in fact implies the loss, the disappearance of the subject as subject. It loses the individuality of a particular voice by becoming neither more nor less than the voice of things, as if the central point of view had been displaced into outer things from the self."¹⁹ So it is not the poet that makes things speak, but the poem. In a very literal sense, voice is attributed to human subjects as well as to things themselves:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and

Dwarfs,
 Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
 And of the threads that connect the stars – and of the wombs,
 And of the fatherstuff,
 And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
 Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
 Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.²⁰

The silent speech of things becomes audible. The poem gives the things a voice: it is sound. However, the things of the world carry their own meaning, their own silent voice, i.e. the trace of history. The world is not left untouched by history, but is a huge canvas, a huge fabric of signs awaiting interpretation. That is what grass is according to the lyrical I: a hieroglyph. And everything on the canvas can be looked at in a poetic way, that is the world as a poem. This is a new ‘regime of expressiveness’²¹ in which poeticity is a certain state of being in language: “On appellera poétique tout objet susceptible d’être perçu selon cette différence à soi qui définit le langage poétique, c’est-à-dire le langage en son état originaire. La poéticité est cette propriété par laquelle un objet quelconque peut se dédoubler, être pris non seulement comme un ensemble de propriétés mais comme la manifestation de son essence.”²² Not only slaves, prostitutes or thieves have a voice, but also the fog in the air or the threads connecting the stars.

Perhaps we can say this is a specific form of the great nineteenth century project of the Absolute book, after which nothing has to be written any more. The Absolute book breathing humanity – Whitman liked to think of his *Leaves* as the new bible, for a democracy to come – a book that should be available to each and everyone:

This is the breath of laws and songs and behaviour,
 This is the tasteless water of souls this is the true
 sustenance
 It is for the illiterate it is for the judges of the supreme
 court it is for the federal capitol and the state
 capitols,
 It is for the admirable communes of literary men and
 composers and singers and lecturers and engineers and
 savans.
 It is for the endless races of working people and farmers and
 seamen.²³

In this passage the juxtaposition of the Schillerian opposition between the men of sensation (the illiterate) and the men of reason (the judges of the supreme court) can be

found. The poem is for the endless races of working people, farmers and seamen, as well as for the communes of literary men. Through the very act of reading this new Bible, the opposition between those two categories is resolved: *sensus communis*. That is the true character of the errant circulation of the paper and letters.

Now, the lyrical I as the self of a poetical world is not without its own contradictions and paradoxes. As Rancière rightfully observes, literature in the new regime consists of two opposing logics, resulting in a tension which he terms a positive contradiction:

Literature as such displays a two-fold politics, a two-fold manner of reconfiguring sensitive data. On the one hand, it displays the power of literariness, the power of the 'mute' letter that upsets not only the hierarchies of the representational system but also any principle of adequation between a way of being and a way of speaking. On the other hand, it sets in motion another politics of the mute letter: the side-politics or metapolitics that substitutes the deciphering of the mute letter written on the body of the things for the democratic chattering of the letter.²⁴

On the one hand, writing has undone the hierarchical ties and is without any legitimate source. Words are erring on their way into the world without any destiny; the only materiality supporting language is language itself. This is what he calls the logic of disincorporation. On the other hand, there is always the search for a legitimizing force, a body that guarantees the meaning of the word, which results in a further production of more words. In the logic of incorporation, language has a body or a material state as its guarantee. Again, as Rancière puts it:

There was, on the one hand, a vast egalitarian surface of free words that could ultimately amount to the limitless indifferent chatter of the world. On the other hand, however, there was the desire to replace the old expressive conventions with a direct relationship between the potential of words and the potential of bodies, where language would be the direct expression of a potential for being that was immanent in beings.²⁵

Whitman's poetry is the perfect example of this tension at work. Written in an age in which American society was constantly threatened by a further dissolution, 'Song of Myself' tries to reintegrate the social bond. What we read in this poem is thus another contradiction, or problem: how to deal with the problem of the individual self and that of the community? What Whitman proposes is a self that consists of that community, a self that at once

celebrates itself and the common: i.e. a pure event of language. Perhaps the potential for being that is immanent in beings is the limitless chatter of the world. Or, at least it is the fundamental tension Whitman's truly revolutionary lyrical I has to deal with:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then . . . I contradict myself;
I am large . . . I contain multitudes.²⁶

§ Errant letters – *littérarité* (2)

Reading in the new regime of writing is not a practice restricted to people belonging to certain privileged parts of the social canvas. As we read in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (the preface which is omitted from later editions): “The owner of the library is not he who holds a legal title to it having bought and paid for it. Any one and every one is the owner of the library who can read the same through all the varieties of tongues and subjects and styles.”²⁷ With the move away from ownership as a legal category, Literature, or writing in general, becomes available to each and every individual. No longer the discursive practice of the librarian decides what could be read and what could not be read. It is the free circulation of writing without any legitimate institution that makes everyone the owner of a library. As a consequence the power of words becomes available to an enormous mass of individuals. Against or within the background of this new regime of writing, *Leaves of Grass* was written.

The publication of the first edition of the *Leaves* was a disturbing event for more than one reason. *Leaves of Grass* offered critics an explosion of words, making them believe they were dealing with the work of a beast or madman, or more politely: the inventory of a warehouse. But there is something more curious about *Leaves of Grass* as an object sent into the world, something that is often remarked but not interpreted by critics, namely the fact that *Leaves of Grass* was a collection of poetry published anonymously. In contrast to the previous chapter that focussed on the consequences of the errant letter for the relationship between author and lyrical I, I will now discuss into the consequences of the errant letter for the reader. As we will come to see the very gesture of sending the poem into the world is thematized in the poem. As I propose to read the I as the shifter that links the voice of the poem to the body of the poem, forming a letter being sent off into the world, a recurrent theme in ‘Song of Myself’ is the poem on a line of flight:

My ties and ballasts leave me I travel I sail
 my elbows rest in the sea-gaps,
I skirt the sierras my palms over continents,
I am afoot with my vision.²⁸

What follows is a long catalogue of impressions of what the lyrical I sees during this flight. And the I continues that nothing could prevent it from doing so:

I fly the flight of the fluid and look at the spheric product,
My course runs below the soundings of plumbers.

I help myself to material and immaterial,
No guard can shut me off, no law can prevent me.²⁹

Leaves of Grass as an object sent into the world disturbs this world. Or rather we can say it brings a certain disorder to this world, which no law could prevent. It is this disordering of the world that forms an important part of Rancière's account of democracy. So let us pause here for a moment to elaborate on what exactly makes the sending of the poem into the world a potential – or perhaps inherent – democratic gesture.

In the new regime of writing, the whole invisible economy that governed the former regime has been upset, hereby exploding at least four interrelated types of hierarchy. Summarizing, we could say the representational regime consist of four principles. First, there is the principle of fiction with the primacy of the arrangement of actions, presupposing a specific space-time configuration. Second, there is the principle of 'genericity', the organizing hierarchy of genres analogous with subject matter. Third, the principle of appropriateness and fourth, the principle or primacy of speech as act.³⁰ Against the primacy of fiction the primacy of language is opposed. Against the distribution of genres, the principle of 'antigenicity' - following the radical equality of subject matter - is opposed. To the principle of appropriateness we find opposed the indifference of style with regards to the subject chosen. And the model of writing replaces the model of the speech act.³¹

With the collapse of all those hierarchies an aesthetic revolution took place through which the whole ground on which to build any ontological theory of art seems to be endlessly falling away. All objects have become equal and thus all objects have become poetic. It means the end of art as systematical practices with clear rules: "[I]t means the ruin of any art where art's dignity is defined by the dignity of its subjects [...], the aesthetic revolution is the idea that everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subjects, by what it speaks of: art can show and speak of everything in the same manner."³² And where art could speak of everything in the same manner, everything could be turned into a work of art. There is no longer any inherent principle that makes art Art.

Although none of the aforementioned principles of the aesthetic regime is more important than another, the overturning of the primacy of speech into the primacy of

writing seems of particular relevance for Rancière's interpretation of the sending off of the poem into the world. In fact it opens up the space for Rancière's idiosyncratic interpretation of the myth of the written word at the end of Plato's *Phaedrus*. As the inventor Toth goes to king Thamos to show his invention, writing, the king is hardly convinced of the advantages writing might bring to the people. Quite the contrary, the negative aspects of writing are far more apparent: since people could rely on the written word, their memorizing capabilities will decrease. Consequently, education will no longer produce educated men, but only semblances of educated men. Without the primacy of speech the master can no longer plant the seeds of knowledge in the soul of the student. Hence the people are turned into wearisome people. Socrates develops this myth further with the example of painting:

I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.³³

Writing without any master to guide travels in search for whomever is willing to pick up and read. In this erring, the word is unprotected, unable to defend itself; it remains silent. Now, in Rancière's reading there are two seemingly contradicting aspects of writing deduced from this myth. Writing is at the same time too silent as it is too talkative:

L'écriture possède en effet un double défaut. Premièrement, elle est muette comme une peinture qui signifie toujours stupidement la même chose. Elle est incapable d'accompagner le logos qu'elle dessine, de répondre à ceux qui l'interrogent, incapable donc de faire de ce logos un principe de vie, une puissance qui croisse dans une âme. Deuxièmement, elle est, à l'inverse, trop bavarde. N'étant pas un logos conduit, accompagné par son père, elle s'en va rouler n'importe où, sans savoir à qui il faut et à qui il ne faut pas parler.³⁴

With the silent word of writing – that is the word that is not directly linked to an addresser/orator, there is no one who could be held accountable for the word – hierarchies, or let's say specific speech-act relations, are disrupted; there is no legitimate speaker as there is no legitimate interlocutor. And this is precisely why the written word is too talkative: since there is no presupposed legitimate interlocutor it talks to each and every

one who is willing to listen to it, that is to say, both the ones who should read and the ones who shouldn't read (e.g. the slaves in Whitman's poetry). In Rancière's words the letter becomes an orphan letter and, consequently, we can say the poem becomes an errant letter in the world.

Although the contours of what causes the disorder are already becoming visible, we need to go one step further. Rancière's reading of *Phaedrus* is embedded in a larger reading of Plato's political philosophy, which could be summarized as the logic of the proper. Plato's community is a choreographic community in which each body is determined from birth to perform a specific role and nothing but this role, as a specific part of the social canvas. The harmony of the community consists of three things: "les occupations des citoyens, leurs manières de faire; leur manière d'être ou *ethos*; et enfin le *nomos* communautaire qui n'est pas seulement la 'loi' de la communauté, mais tout autant son 'air' ou son ton."³⁵ Thus, writing confuses and upsets the relations of those three characteristics that form the living soul of the community. Rancière has a specific name for this confusing, this deregulation, namely *littérarité*. The written word not only causes trouble in the soul but re-carves the space that is between bodies, the space that regulates the community.

Whitman seemed to have been pretty sensitive to this aspect of the written word in the sense that the very act of reading is a constant theme throughout 'Song of Myself'. If we take a closer look at what has become section 2 of the poem, we come across the first indication of what might be errant letters: "The sound of the belched words of my voice words / loosed to the eddies of the wind."³⁶ Following the eddies of the wind the words err through the world waiting for someone to fetch them. And this someone, as becomes clear at the end of this section, is the reader: "Have you practiced so long to learn to read? / Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?"³⁷ And a little further – in what has become section 5 – we come across another invitation by the lyrical I to read the poem. The you is invited to loafe on the grass with the I, an act that could perfectly be read as an act of reading outdoors:

Loafe with me on the grass loose the stop from your
Throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want not custom
or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.³⁸

What the you is invited to, is the act of reading aloud in the open air, loafing, that is, spending time in such a way as to avoid working, to avoid any action at all, that is obstructing, upsetting or escaping the regular distribution of roles on the social canvas. Loafing is the suspension of any domination of the faculties. The act of reading is thus first and foremost an act of confusing the regular distribution, an act of resistance. In the very act of reading all readers are equal, as the lyrical I makes clear: “And are aware how I am with you no more than I am with / everybody.”³⁹ Or put differently in an earlier section of the poem: “I play not a march for victors only . . . I play great marches / for conquered and slain persons.”⁴⁰ Whitman was writing for both the ones who should read and the ones who shouldn’t read:

This is the meal pleasantly set . . . this is the meat and
 drink for natural hunger,
 It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous . . . I
 make appointments with all,
 I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
 The keptwoman and sponger and thief are hereby invited
 . . . the heavy-lipped slave is invited . . . the
 venerealee is invited,
 There shall be no difference between them and the rest.⁴¹

Since Whitman’s poetry offered the people who should not read food and pleasure, Harold Aspiz in his *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* is only partially right when he reads Whitman as the poet who was to heal the nation in the most bodily sense of the word healing. In fact, Whitman’s poetry is a ‘healing’ poetry in so far that it disorders the harmony of the community in which slaves were slaves, whores were whores and thieves were thieves. As Rancière puts it in his reading of *Phaedrus*: “Tout parole a un point d’origine et un point de destination bien determines et s’inscrit ainsi dans une disposition ordonnée des corps à leur place et dans leur fonction. Le trouble survient lorsque cet espace traversé, troué par des espaces à destination indéterminé.”⁴² And Whitman’s poem is a perfect example of a space that wanders off to each and every one, interrupts this distribution, without any determinate distribution. And it is precisely in this indeterminateness that the possibility to form a new community is given shape, a community of readers, that is, a community which is cured from the ‘disease’ of slavery, cured from any hierarchy and thus creating a radical equality. “I do not ask who you are . . . that is not important to me.”⁴³ A radical democratic poetry. But how to understand democracy, then?

Let us keep in mind what democracy according to Whitman first and foremost is not: any institutional form of a political system. Democracy is not a political system. Rather, democracy is a performance of equality that continuously redistributes the allocation of bodies, voices and sites, in other words, the perceptible. What governs this redistribution is the very fact of literariness described above. Once more in Rancière's words:

le regime de l'écriture 'orpheline', en disponibilité, le système de ces espaces d'écriture qui trouent de leur vide trop peuple et de leur mutisme trop bavard le tissu vivant de l'ethos communautaire: le portique royal d'Athènes où les lois sont écritures sur des tablettes mobiles, plantées là comme des peintures stupides, semblables, nous dit le Politique, à des ordonnances qu'un médecin parti au loin aurait laissées pour toute maladie à venir.⁴⁴

This is what constitutes the crime of democracy: the disruption of the regular distribution denaturalizes the working-class. And not only the working class, but any proper relation between word, thing and speaker (and we might add the reader here as well). In its flight as errant letter, the poem confuses and obstructs the distribution of roles:

I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride
myself,
And tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.⁴⁵

This could perfectly well be a consequence of the very act of reading: the bride is reading poetry where she was supposed to share the bed with the bridegroom who, frustrated, gets out of bed. It is the misfortune brought by the very act of reading, hence the act of reading does not necessarily bring a positive emancipation. However, striving to control this exuberance of the written word will only lead to the distribution of more words. And since with the collapse of the four rules of the representational regime there is no proper relation between word, thing and speaker there is no specific way of speaking, no specific way of controlling the words attributed to an object, anymore. In other words, there is an endless amount of words available for any object: "Au trouble de l'écriture aucune parole vive ne suffit à remédier. Le remède au malheur de l'écriture, c'est une autre écriture, une écriture en deçà ou au-delà des mots, qui oppose à leur bavardage comme à leur mutisme un autre mode d'inscription ou de circulation."⁴⁶

The excess creates an opposition between groups: the group that keeps on circulating more words, words that are 'useless' and unnecessary words, at least, in the eyes

of the second group, the ones that claim to speak correctly. Rancière concludes that “[t]he modern political animal is first a literary animal, caught in a circuit of a literariness that undoes the relationships between the order of words and the order of bodies that determine the place of each.”⁴⁷ We are political animals first in the banal sense we are taught by Aristotle: we use language. But as Plato’s critique of writing shows: “we are confounded by the excess of words in relation to things.”⁴⁸ There are at once too many and not enough words vis-à-vis “the modes of communication that function to legitimate ‘the proper’ itself.”⁴⁹ This obviously explains why politics is an endless activity that could never be closed off: there are always more words available to delineate the proper. And it also explains why Whitman kept on expanding his poem and his catalogues: not because the distribution of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was more or less a failure, but because of the excess of words that is inherent to any form of democratic poetry on “a perpetual journey.”⁵⁰ That is, the poem as an errant letter:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop some where waiting for you⁵¹

§ The electricity of poetry

“De poëzie, die meer is dan welluidendheid, vormelijkheid of populariteit, openbaart zich bij een lezer, die van poëzie houdt, bij wijze van elektrische *schok*; ik kan de sensatie niet anders omschrijven, wanneer ik het verschil wil aangeven tussen de lectuur van gemiddelde poëzie en ‘ware’ poëzie.”¹ As one of the most important Dutch literary critics of the twentieth century, Menno ter Braak, tries to set out the rules for distinguishing true poetry from average poetry, he points to the fact that poetry is something more than belles-lettres, more than a mere form or popularity. Poetry is the form of writing which reveals itself to the reader in the form of an electrical shock. It is at the same time the only reason for publishing poetry: “de enige sensatie, die in mijn ogen het drukken van poëzie rechtvaardigt.”² But how then, does this shock appear and manifest itself?

Reading true poetry will result in a most physical experience: “De sensatie van de poëzie-schok is niet uitsluitend een beeld, een symbool. Er gaan met die schok *lichamelijke* sensaties gepaard; het klierstelsel reageert, b.v. de zweetklieren maken de huid prikkelig of klam; een enkele maal treden rillingen op.”³ It is different from *poesie pure* in the sense that it has a direct effect on the body whereas *poesie pure* often appeals to something beyond the body, something mere spiritual. Rather, this shock only appears in the most intimate sphere of the written word: “De poëzie-schok, die ik bedoel, ondergaat men in de intimiteitssfeer van het gedrukte woord; de poëzie-schok is een cultuur-schok, die afhankelijk is van een technische vinding, het handschrift, en nog veel sterker afhankelijk van een moderne technische vinding, de boekdrukkunst.”⁴

Although this shock was made possible through the invention of handwriting, it was not until the Modern period, with the invention of the printing press, that it could have become the sole measure for truly great poetry (at least for Ter Braak). Ter Braak continues his essay arguing that the shock’s only cause can be found in “de sensatie der *concreetheid*” – a sensation of concreteness. The poem can only give us a sensation of concreteness in the sphere of a language full of commonplaces, but what it exactly is that this concreteness consists of does not become clear in Ter Braak’s short essay. The only characteristic he points to is the encounter of the reader with something threatening, though it should certainly not be read as the (Kantian) sublime. Rather, Ter Braak talks about the encounter with a certain persona; but what if this persona is something like the lyrical I as the event of

language, like the I in 'Song of Myself'? Is it perhaps the encounter with this happening of language that is the most concrete of all encounters? Could it perhaps be that this electric shock is a peculiar trait of a new mode of writing that comes with the new aesthetic regime? Or, maybe electricity is at the heart of the new aesthetic experience that is at once highly subjective and appealing to a new form of community? As we will come to see the notion of electricity forms an important topos for thinking of Whitman's poetry as a democratic poetry for a people to come.

Paul Gilmore, argues that electricity forms a huge topos in nineteenth century American literature and art: "These sources [i.e. nineteenth century American literary, popular and scientific understandings of electricity] point to frequent attempts to imagine aesthetics as a sensual experience of the individual body, embedded in specific social situations, that somehow leads to the individual's momentary suspension in a sense of a larger whole."⁵ The nineteenth century saw the emergence of scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses on electricity, of which some saw electricity as the life-force in all beings, or as the connecting thread between heaven and earth. The invention of powerful batteries led to the development of new technologies by which instantaneous communication has increasingly become an established fact. The multiple developments in the science of electricity posed a direct problem for Newtonian science: "By challenging a Newtonian notion of solid particles in motion, a clockmaker God, and, concomitantly, *a poetics of static form, imitation, and mimesis*, the electric sciences provided a potential font of images and ideas for romantic thought, for reimagining the relationships among society, art, the individual consciousness, and some larger social whole."⁶ As Gilmore argues, the electric sciences challenged a certain poetics while implying that the development in the field of electric sciences directly led to a new form of poetics, one that dissolves all the boundaries and lines that had been drawn by the former regime.

Electricity became a gigantic topic in nineteenth century American literature, perhaps most pronounced and most recognized in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. However, it plays an important role in the work of Emerson, Melville and Margaret Fuller as well. What can be seen at this moment in the history of American literature is at once the emergence of representation of electric instruments and sciences within literature, and the use of electricity to describe some kind of transcendent or aesthetic experience derived from literature. The topos of electricity, as Gilmore argues, serves to imagine some sort of collective that is no longer confined to lines of race, class, gender or the nation state. But it

is not only a topos for imagination; rather it is much closer to the fundamental structure of the new aesthetic sensorium: “Electricity embodies the inability to distinguish between matter and immateriality, as thought becomes as material as electricity and the material world becomes as ‘active and subtle’ as thought.” And Gilmore continues “[p]oetry, thus, is electric in its ability to blur the line between body and mind, to affect us on both a sensual and a conscious level.”⁷ In a similar way, Jacques Rancière reads the topos of electricity as the very way nineteenth century romantic aesthetics worked: “But electricity is not only a scientific discovery and an invention of the nineteenth century. It is the utopia of this century: immaterial matter, matter equalling spirit. Electricity is not technology in the service of the new aesthetics. It is the technology of aesthetics, aesthetics realized as technology.”⁸ Perhaps this is where Ter Braak’s shock comes from: words becoming as material as electricity, or more precise, words becoming electric. The encounter with the electrico-aesthetic self of the poem.

In a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson written in August 1856 – the letter that together with Emerson’s famous letter to Whitman, served, much to the dissatisfaction of Emerson, as the appendix to the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* – Whitman demands that the new American literature that builds on the ruins and archives of the English tradition is, electric. In order to be American, the literature to come has to be “*electric*, fresh, lusty, to express the fullsized body, male and female – to give the modern meanings of things, to grow up beautiful, lasting, commensurate with America.”⁹ Eighty years before Ter Braak wrote his piece on the electricity of the poetic experience, Whitman had argued for exactly the same kind of potentiality of poetry to become electric.

As a direct consequence of its electric being, the self becomes more fluid. This is precisely what we find in the ‘formless poetry’ of ‘Song of Myself’:

To be in any form, what is that?
If nothing lay more developed the quahaug and its callous
shell were enough.

Mine is no callous shell,
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.¹⁰

The body of this I is juxtaposed with the body of a mussel with its hard shell and very specific shape that functions as a shield, whereas the body of the I is depicted as a highly sensitive electric body that is trying to connect with all the objects in the world, i.e. the

opposite of the lonely, hermit life of the quahaug. It is the ultimate metaphor for describing how poetry and body, body and poetry connect or even merge, probably to the point where reading poetry becomes a real physical act (which in Whitman's case might much more be an erotic act).

Perhaps the silent current of electricity is a perfect way of describing how the errant letter finds itself on a journey through the world, looking for connections with whomever come who may. Leaving behind the Platonic terminology it certainly gives us a more contemporary and thrilling terminology for understanding the working of this letter, which is much more in line with the aesthetic experience of nineteenth century American poetry. We should not forget that the poem is always first a material body – think of a battery that is highly charged, sending off sparks: “My flesh and blood playing out lightning, to strike what is / hardly different from myself”¹¹. The material body of the poem is looking for other material bodies to connect with, as one of the ways Whitman uses electricity as “the way that poetry, like sex, might become a vehicle, an act, of bodily connection shocking in its intensity and its challenge to normative bodily boundaries. Electricity works to make this connection not only because it was imagined as a material force akin to the nervous impulse, but also because it continued to represent some ideal, immaterial connection uniting all creation.”¹² The passage of ‘Song of Myself’ cited above indicates that the poem is as a nexus of electric stimuli: multiple circuits come together here to merge into one and go out again.

Electricity is not only used by Whitman in a material sense but also to indicate a more spiritual or transcendent experience: “Aesthetic experience is electric, for as electricity had been shown to pass mysteriously, almost immaterially, from one material body to other bodies, so the aesthetic experience (through language, in the case of poetry) seemed also to temporarily dissolve the distinctions between self and other, mind and body.”¹³ As Harold Apiz in his book *Walt Whitman and the body beautiful* perfectly has shown, Whitman was very much influenced by the scientific and pseudo-scientific discourses on electricity and biology of that time: “As electricity was a mysterious power grounded in the earthly, material world and yet a part of the celestial ambience; as it seemed to be the link between the physical, mental, and spiritual worlds; and as it seemed to constitute the very psychic essence, Whitman incorporated it into his poetic imagery and language.”¹⁴ Whitman read and seemed to have been intrigued by, among others, the works of George Moore's *The Use of the Body in Relation to the Mind* and William Channing's *Notes on the Medial Application of*

Electricity, which describe all bodies as inherently electric. Electricity was a vital force for Whitman, so much that some have argued that he saw it as a curing force: “Through his touch and his breath, the healer-persona lavishes similar gifts upon his readers, infusing the very paper and ink of *Leaves of Grass* with a beneficial electric charge.”¹⁵ A vital force that at once was able to cure the individual as well as the people *en-masse*.

One of Whitman’s most pertinent concerns was how to reconcile the separated states and how to keep them united. This is where the other great influence on Whitman’s thinking of poetry as electric poetry came from: the telegraph. Although only appearing a few times in his poetry, the telegraph plays a huge role in the way Whitman himself conceived the function of his own *Leaves*. As Gilmore argues “By the time Whitman was writing *Leaves of Grass*, the telegraph, with its ability to send information across wide distances and to knit together disparate political and social elements, had become the chief reference for reading the body as electric.”¹⁶

The telegraph had the ability to really detach words from their body, by sending them into the world: those are the true electric words, the ‘concreetheid’ Ter Braak talked about. In the preface to the 1872 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, this telegraphic being of Whitman’s poetry becomes quite explicit when he says that his chants constitute “the thread-voice, more or less audible, or an aggregated, inseparable, unprecedented, vast, composite, electric *democratic nationality*.”¹⁷ Why not conceive of the *Leaves* as a telegraphic-message sent out into the world? In the end it is Whitman himself who thinks them this way and perhaps it is more in line with his times to think it as an electric message than as a letter. Furthermore, it makes the reader aware of the shared humanity, not in the form of a direct political framework, but much more in the sense of a collectivity beyond the nation in the form of the bodily experience, the receptivity that is so beautifully described in ‘Song of Myself’, in the form of a sensorial body as shared by all. Once more how Rancière puts it: “La littérature alors s’identifie au poème communautaire – verbe accessible à tous les sens, chant des peuples ou rythme de l’Idée – jusqu’à s’y annuler aux temps du mariage entre le chœur symboliste et la machine futuriste, jusqu’à s’identifier ultimement au trajet silencieux de l’électricité ou au chant des machines – en bref, au poème des ingénieurs des âmes.”¹⁸ With as the ultimate result the poetic shock as felt by Ter Braak in reading good poetry. Indeed the poetic shock was made possible by a technical innovation, however not so much by the printing press as Ter Braak claimed, but much more by the transmitting apparatus called the telegraph.

Thus, it is possible to read Whitman's use of the trope of electricity in relation to his poetry, and, consequently Whitman's aesthetics could be read to that shock experience Ter Braak talked about in his discussion of true poetry. Still, there is more to this use of electricity, something we might read as a temporal aspect. Since Whitman was writing for a people to come, his poetics and poetry had to anticipate a future people. Every time someone would encounter the errant work (and this should still go even for us readers and critics today) one would have to experience that shock, that electricity of this strange magnetic field in which language happens, to which readers are drawn again and again. It is not a coincidence that Whitman was highly appreciated by futurist artists, like Marinetti, who hailed Whitman as one of the great precursors of Futurism. In a piece titled 'We Renounce Our Symbolist Masters, the Last of All Lovers of the Moonlight' Marinetti wrote: "We accept none but the enlightened work of four or five great precursors of Futurism. I am alluding to Émile Zola; Walt Whitman; Rosny-Aîné, the author of *Bilateral* and *The Red Wave*; Paul Adam, the author *Trust*; Gustave Kahn, the creator of Free Verse; and Verhaeren, the glorifier of machines and of tentacular cities."¹⁹ It is striking that among the French names, Whitman is the only foreign one. Perhaps Marinetti felt the poetic shock while reading Whitman. Whatever the reason for mentioning Whitman might be, fact is that Whitman's poetry keeps on 'shocking' people, as true poetry always should.

Now we know how Whitman's poetry is embedded in the nineteenth century discourses on electricity we can return to Whitman's poetic *oeuvre* and conclude that for Whitman to think of poetry in terms of electricity has several advantages. First of all, poetry as a telegraphic, i.e. as an electric message was a way of aligning his work with the state of the art developments of the time. A rhetorical strategy of making his poetry appear all the more revolutionary. So the trope of electricity and its technical innovations is perfectly in line with Whitman's own poetic innovations. But it also points to the way literature as an object in the world works: works of literature are literally sent into the world to address whatever reader. Furthermore it helps him to explicate his poetics of connecting the people to come through the reading of this message. The whole community of readers is connected by lines of electricity. And thinking of a community of readers connected by electricity comes very close to the *sensus communis* as theorized in the more philosophical theories of the aesthetic at the time. As a consequence, the trope of electric poetry is at once a figurative use of language as it is the perfect description of the actual aesthetic experience. It helps us to understand how aesthetics is firmly anchored in the material and

social world. In fact, aesthetics is the very way in which we are dealing with social and material matters. Though for some reading poetry might be an escape from the every day socio-material surrounding, it is this poetic shock – as Ter Braak calls it – that at once makes the reader aware of this highly subjective experience, which at the same time transcends the individual into an appeal to the community. In poetry, this first and foremost happens in what we can call the event of language. And it is this confrontation with the happening of language in the body of the poem that was perfectly sensed by Whitman. And 80 years later by Ter Braak we might add.

§ a People

In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman describes what could be considered as his main quarrel with the whole poetic tradition, namely that “Literature, strictly consider’d has never recognized the People, and, whatever may be said, does not today.”¹ How convincing this may sound within all the polemics against the European poets with their poetry from ultramarine lands – “There is plenty of glamour about the most damnable crimes and hoggish meannesses, special and general, of the feudal and dynastic world over there, with its *personnel* of lords and queens and courts, so well-dress’d and so handsome”² – there is something highly problematic about this phrase. The problem lies not so much in the accusation against the *littérateurs* of the older tradition (though that might be a topic worthwhile investigating in itself), but in one single concept: the People - indeed with a capital P. As Whitman seems to suggest, the People is something out there that can be observed, like a tree or a house, and that it is waiting to be represented within literature. However, this notion of the people is highly problematic – as we will come to see especially for a radical democratic politics – in the sense that a people always has to be constructed, and consequently forms always a highly contingent notion. Nonetheless it is Whitman himself who already noticed the very problem enclosed in this term: “The People! Like our huge earth itself, which to ordinary scansion, is full of vulgar contradictions and offence, man, viewed in lump, displeases, and is a constant puzzle and affront to the merely educated classes.”³ Indeed, the People is a puzzle and not only to the educated. It is a ‘mathematical’ puzzle which, as Rancière argues, always contains a fundamental miscount. So let us once more turn to his work, since in his work on politics and philosophy the very principle of democracy and the work of literature as an errant letter are connected. It can help us to understand the true radicality of Whitman’s radical democratic literature.

When Rancière in his theory, e.g. in *La Mesentente* or *La haine de la démocratie* goes to Plato, he makes this move precisely because Plato was probably the first and the major enemy of democracy. It is there that the principle of democracy should become most visible. In Plato’s choreographic community, everyone is assigned a proper place and role, after which, as a totality, the community moves in some sort of harmony. Consequently, in this distribution, politics is abandoned because it presupposes that what is common can be counted. Where normally the political begins – “when one stops balancing profits and

losses and instead worries about distributing *common* lots and evening out communal shares and entitlements to these shares”⁴ – Plato blocks this from the very start. As Rancière takes it from the classics of political philosophy the problem of politics is not a matter of what ties individuals together, but a more fundamental puzzle: “Politics arises from a count of community ‘parts,’ which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount.”⁵

To exemplify this problem, Rancière uses Aristotle’s *Politics* which delineates three axes for the proper distribution of common shares within the community. Basically, this comes down to the wealth of a small number, the virtue of the excellence of the best and the freedom that belongs to the people: the oligarchy of the rich, the aristocracy of the good and the democracy of the people. Those three axes should be in a perfect mix to form the community proper. However there is one peculiar aspect which rests with the people: freedom. It is with becoming visible in the aesthetic distribution that any artisan whatsoever - and thus counting in the counting of the whole - is no longer in a relation with the oligarchy; a relation in which the artisan was reduced to the level equal with the slave. In other words: the freedom of the artisan or shopkeeper confuses the very logic of the oligarchy.

Freedom, however, is not proper to the people alone. It is something that is shared with the oligarchy and aristocracy, i.e. they are simply free like the rest. Precisely for this reason Rancière claims that this freedom is an empty property: “Not only does freedom as what is ‘proper’ to the demos not allow itself to be determined by any positive property; it is not proper to the demos at all. The people is nothing more than the undifferentiated mass of those who have no positive qualification – no wealth, no virtue – who are nonetheless acknowledged to enjoy the same freedom as those who do.”⁶ The demos thus identifies itself with what belongs to all citizens, i.e. they identify themselves with the whole community through what Rancière sees as a homonymy: the demos (those who have no part in anything) become the demos (the whole community). Perhaps we can also say it is a metonymic claim of a small part that at the same time covers the whole. It is this ‘part of those who have no part’ that is fundamental for the existence of the community as a political community.

Consequence is not that politics happen because of the existence of the people, but as Rancière rightfully observes, it is the other way around; because of politics the people can come to exist: “The outrageous claim of the demos to be the whole of the community only satisfies in its own way – that of a *party* – the requirement of politics. Politics exists

when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part.”⁷ In further Rancièrian terminology this would mean that politics interrupts and upsets the logic of the police order in order to create a redistribution of the parts, a repartition of the sensible. Precisely for this reason the police order is always founded on a fundamental miscount, the people form a kind of magnitude that escapes the original count, since its very being is paradoxical: being at once without a part, and being the whole. Thus, the people is fundamentally indeterminate. This is where a literary critic like Jason Frank brings in the fundamental autopoietic dimension of the people. In his account, the people is characterized by a constitutive futurity, that makes it impossible to close off and form a coherent group under the signifier ‘people’. The people constantly reinvents itself, resulting in a fundamental miscount that Frank calls sublime, i.e. the people’s magnitude that escapes the original count. As Frank argues: “The people invoked by Whitman do not aim at the realization of a common essence or at the construction of such an essence, but are only realized through their continual political reinvention out of a collective reservoir of sublime potentiality.”⁸

But what, then, is the lesson for democracy we can take from this picture as drawn above? What is it that the people claim or exercise against the several forms of oligarchy – the power of wealth, the aristocracy of knowledge and the superiority of birth (i.e. that is the power received from the kinship with a certain bloodline as Rancière in *La haine de la démocratie* added to the list)? Is there any democratic law we can deduce from the part that has no part? As Rancière points out the liberty of the people is an empty property: “politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of societies is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part. It begins when equality of anyone and everyone is inscribed in the liberty of the people. The liberty of the people is an empty property, an improper property through which those who are nothing purport that their group is identical to the whole of the community.”⁹ However, it is precisely through this empty liberty that the people can claim their radical equality with all the other parts in the distribution. What the people metonymically claim is that they stand for equality. What they put into play is a form of egalitarian contingency. The very form in which democracy discloses itself is the sheer equality between anyone and everyone in a society.

Perhaps we can say democracy is a principle that constantly needs to be put into practice, a performative rule: democracy only exists when the radical equality between subjects is being put into practice. A very basic equality nonetheless, one in which each and

everyone that is recognized as speaking, hearing – i.e. first and foremost as visible in a certain distribution – an equality that thus in its very core is aesthetic.¹⁰ Consequently, any form of government is always a contingent form, the true scandal democracy reveals. “The democratic scandal”, Rancière says, “consists in revealing this: there will never be, under the name of politics, a single principle of the community, legitimating the acts of governors based on laws inherent to the coming together of human communities.”¹¹ There is never any universal law – accept perhaps for this egalitarian principle – on which any democratic society worth the name could base its political structure.

The consequences for any institutional form of democracy are enormous, since each and everyone is equally entitled to exercise any governing. That is what government by the people means, not the government by the part of those without a part, but the performativity of equality. “What remains is the extraordinary exception, the power of the people, which is not the power of the population or of the majority, but the power of anyone at all, the equality of capabilities to occupy the positions of governors and of the governed.”¹² Something not always understood correctly. As Whitman wrote in his

Democratic Vistas:

“As to the political section of Democracy, which introduces and breaks ground for further and vaster sections, few probably are the minds [...] that fully comprehend the aptness of that phrase, ‘THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE,’ which we inherit from the lips of Abraham Lincoln; a formula whose verbal shape is homely wit, but whose scope includes both the totality and all minutiae of the lesson.”¹³

I am here not proposing a radical rereading of Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* but rather am trying to understand what Whitman had in mind when he discussed his ideas of an egalitarian people to come. For if there was one poet aware of the non-institutional character of democracy, it was Whitman.

With this axiomatic radical equality of each and everyone as opposed to any form of oligarchy, the institutional consequences are clear: we might as well draw lots. At least that is the conclusion Rancière seems to be drawing in his book. Moreover, Whitman perfectly sensed this decision making by luck, in one of the more idyllic moments in *Democratic Vistas*: “I can conceive a community, to-day and here, in which, on a sufficient scale, the perfect personalities, without noise meet; say in some pleasant western settlement or town, where a couple of hundred best men and women, of ordinary worldly status, *have by luck been drawn together*, with nothing extra of genius or wealth, but virtuous, chaste,

industrious, cheerful, resolute, friendly and devout.”¹⁴ Now, this being drawn together by luck, of those who in this passage of Whitman have no particularities, is precisely what causes a certain hatred of democracy: sheer contingency. For how can one want all those characters in Whitman’s poetry to take over control in society? Think of how all the groups that normally wouldn’t have any part in American society – thieves, prostitutes, malformed, etc. – find their share in the poetry of Whitman: “I feel, with dejection and amazement, few or none have yet really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work for them, or absorb’d the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies which are theirs – and which, thus, in highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated, unexpress’d.”¹⁵ The result of this existence of a people that does not really exist is ignorance, as Whitman argues, that furthermore leads to the hatred of democracy. In this hatred “[t]he denunciation of ‘democratic individualism’ is simply the hatred of equality by which a dominant intelligentsia lets it be known that it is the elite entitled to rule over the blind herd.”¹⁶ Perfectly in line with what one may expect when it comes to a radical democratic poetry, this hatred returns in the criticism on Whitman’s poetry, as we will see. This brings us first to the place of literature in this theoretical drawing of democracy.

If the only principle of democracy is the principle that there is no legitimate order and thus every order can and will always be upset and undone by the egalitarian performance of those who have no part, there will be a particular role for literature in the modern age, that is not seldomly characterized as the democratic age. Let us first listen once more to what Whitman has to say about the power of literature: “Few are aware how the great literatures penetrates all, gives hue to all, *shapes aggregates* and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will.”¹⁷ Literature has a power of its own that is at once able to create a community, to sustain it and to destroy it. As errant letter, electric message, send into the world looking for connections with whomever it may concern, literature constitutes a potential community of readers. Those readers in the act of reading poetry no longer perform the task for which they were assigned a place on the social canvas. In its very erring, literature brings a disorder into the community not dissimilar to the one noticed by Rancière in his analyses of Ancient Greek city-state communities. Those that had no part in any reading community stand up and entitle themselves to read whatever comes their way. In the new aesthetic sensorium in which all hierarchies are overthrown, reading has become the ultimate egalitarian principle.

As already hinted at above, this results in a new hatred which is specifically directed at what goes under the name of democratic literature.

In a collection of short essays, impressions and meditations titled *Good-Bye my Fancy*, published in the same year as the 'deathbed' edition of *Leaves of Grass*, we find 'An Old Man's Rejoinder' in which Whitman takes issue with what some of his critics claimed to be one of the flaws in Whitman's poetry. Namely, that Whitman while celebrating the common people *en masse* he didn't "allow enough heroism and moral merit and good intentions to the choicer classes, the college-bred, the *état-major*."¹⁸ It is precisely this oligarchic objection, this hatred of democracy in the account of those critics that Whitman is opposed to. As he, a little further, continues this polemic with the critic E.C. Stedman (who was a poet himself): "If America is only for the rule and fashion and small typicality of other lands (the rule of the *état-major*) it is not the land I take it for, and should to-day feel that my literary aim and theory had been blanks and misdirections."¹⁹ No, as Whitman says, he is writing not for those happy few, but for the "heroic appetite" of a new audience. Whitman is writing for the people *en masse*, the great aggregate that formerly had no (or only a marginal) part in the production and circulation of literature, of which the great enumeration that has become known as section 15 of 'Song of Myself' is the perfect example. That is where we find singers, carpenters, deacons, spinning-girls, duck-shooters, prostitutes and presidents all together: those who have part and those who have no part. In this way Whitman 'constructs' a people. In Jason Frank's words: "Whitman's invocation of the people is [...] sublimely autopoetic rather than autonomic; the people are at once the inexhaustible inspiration and the effect of poetic mediation."²⁰

Perhaps we may now conclude that Whitman's use of the concept of the People, which is never fully elaborated, becomes much more graspable within the framework of Rancière's anarcho-democratic theory. It is then and only then that we can understand how literature can become a democratic mode of writing for a people to come. As Whitman's poetry travels over distance and over time, erring in the world, while forming a direct challenge to the social equilibrium of 1855 as well as to the one of 1892-93, it still challenges the distribution of the sensible today, since we are still invited to loafe with him on the grass.

Conclusion

Let us close the book that is in front of us. What we see is a dark green quarto sized book of which the title consists out of letters connecting, through their roots and leaves, the earth and the sky. This extraordinary looking book does not wear an author's name and thus seems to be begging for a judgment on its own merits. Therefore, let us now open it once again before we put it down to let it rest, finally. What we see is still not any author's name on the title page. Instead, we are presented with an engraving of a man wearing a wide shirt, a hat and a small beard. Someone who looks like a workman. (We do not yet know that this is Samuel Hollyer's engraving of Whitman based on a daguerreotype taken by Gabriel Harrison. For, how could we know? In fact, since there is nothing referring to it, we do not even know yet that this man is Walt Whitman.) Is this persona, the persona we meet in 'Song of Myself' as the "American, one of the roughs, a kosmos, / Disorderly fleshy and sensual"? Perhaps. But in fact it does not really matter, for what is more important is the interpretation of the omission of any author's name. This omission does not only eliminate the author, but a whole *cultus* of the author as an extraordinary being, a genius. Instead, the picture presents us with an ordinary man, the average of the great aggregate, implying already a radical dismissal of any hierarchical structure. Thus, this engraving sends us straight into the heart of our inquiry into the radical democratic nature of Whitman's poetry. What, we asked ourselves at the very beginning of this essay, are the characteristics of a radical democratic literature? What is a radical democratic poetry?

The question posed above is the one we have distilled out of the demands put forward by Whitman in his *Democratic Vistas*. It reaches straight to the heart of Whitman's poetics; a poetics, nonetheless, that reaches outside and beyond the pure realm of literature. The care of a new literature went hand in hand with the care of a new democratic state, and vice versa, resulting in this strange politico-poetical project. Not a historico-biographical interpretation, but the texts themselves can help us to answer the question imposed on us. Therefore we read Whitman's work in conjunction with Rancière's political philosophy and theory of aesthetics. This reading offered us the first contours of the template of what might be considered as a radical democratic literature for the people to come. Let us thus – by way of conclusion – carefully (re)construct that template, not necessarily following the lines of the chapters as they are arranged in this essay.

1. A new literature does not come out of nothing: a new sensorium. As has become clear in this essay, Whitman's project at once tried to grasp and express a new sensorium, one without any form of domination. This new sensorium he first and foremost saw reflected on the immensely stretched out prairies of North America, where one single spear of summer grass can trigger the creation of a whole poetic world. There, he discovered the silent speech of things in the world. Not only forms this grass the realm where Whitman was confronted by the new aesthetic experience, it also forms the basic imagery of his democratic political idea(l)s. A field of grass where each and every single spear is connected to the other, thus forming a collectivity, while each is preserving its own individual story. It is precisely this experience that was theorized by Kant and Schiller; an experience at once radically subjective as transcending into a communal realm.

2. Indeed a new literature does not come out of nothing: construct an enemy. Opposed to the pure expression of things in the new experience, we find a deliberately constructed antagonism. According to Whitman, Shakespeare resembles everything the new democratic literature should not be. That is to say, the Shakespearean mode of representation is as much a literary mode of distribution as it is a political distribution. Bodies are tied to certain segments of the social canvas, where they are (not) allowed to say, see and hear certain things. It is a hypercultivated poetical world governed by an invisible economy (the feudal form of representation) that forecloses any possibility of emancipation. Instead, this dividing up of the world into rigid segments that does no justice to the anarchico-democratic nature of the new world, constantly reinvigorates the already existing order. Precisely for this reason, the old world literature has never done justice to the people. It has deliberately ignored the ones that were not supposed to read.

3. A new literature is necessarily a revolutionary literature: blow up your enemy's poetical edifice. And is this revolutionary literature supposed to be a democratic literature, equality as a performative principle has to be constantly put into practice. That is to say, any form of domination or hierarchy has to be blown up: hierarchies of address, of subject matter, of genre, and of causal rationality of actions.

a. There is no longer a hierarchy between sender and reader – *Leaves of Grass* is for the slaves as well as for the president. A new literature is based on the primacy of writing: the disappearance of the author. In the new regime of writing, literature circulates without any institutional grounding. The consequence is not only the collapse of the author-reader hierarchy. Literature as an errant letter is no longer tied to its source of origin – the death

of the author. *Leaves of Grass*, published anonymously, forms the perfect example of this new mode of writing that circulates without any institutional body; a necessary precondition for its democratic being. A new literature is stripped of the author with his/her theological function. Instead, we are confronted with a space of words criss-crossing the space of the community: like electrical words sent out by the telegraph.

b. All objects are radically equal subjects for poeticization – that is why Whitman's poetry of enumerations is often seen as a supermarket. A new literature celebrates the insignificant: the explosion of words. Whitman's poetry is the poetry of the word *en masse*. More than anything else, he celebrates the splendour of the insignificant. Subjects for which earlier was no place in literature, found their way into the body of the poem. It is not the style of representation that matters, instead we have long 'indifferent' and chaotic enumerations doing more justice to the anarchic being of the modern world.

c. Consequently there is no longer a strict separation of genres – never accept the foreclosure of any order. Whitman was perfectly aware of his poetry crossing the borders between prose and poetry. To be revolutionary he had to find his own (democratic) poetics. Therefore, literature as the new mode of writing can only be defined on itself, i.e. by going to the work of literature itself. There is no ontological ground for distinguishing prose from poetry.

d. There is no longer the Aristotelian primacy of the plot, instead we celebrate the taking place of language. It was Whitman himself who liked to see his own poetry as a language experiment, with perhaps 'Song of Myself' as the ultimate example of this taking place of language. The question in the new regime is not so much who is addressing who (a question belonging to the previous regime with its primacy of the speech act), but what is happening? This is first and foremost the question we should ask when thinking about the lyrical I. As we have seen, it is precisely the taking place of language that is signified through this lyrical I. Poetry is an explosion of words, not a hierarchical structure of an I (in the form of the author) who orders the whole structure.

4. A new literature has to take into consideration the people: construct your own People. As we have seen – through the political theory of Rancière – the notion of a people is always an aporiatic notion, in the sense that those who have no part always form a group that exceeds any counting. The people is a fundamentally contingent notion and the new literature perfectly points to this contingency. In its erring, the letter (i.e. the work of art or poetry) always constitutes a potential community of readers that through its openness is

always already a contingent formation. A new literature creates a physical experience: the electric shock. As we have seen, Whitman saw his poetry as a source of electricity. The new literature will bring a people together that transcends the gender, political, or national framework. The new aesthetic experience at once makes the subject aware of its own subjectivity while at the same time transcending into a more communal realm: the fundamental principle of the new aesthetics is the *sensus communis* that is a direct result of the free play and its suspension of domination. It should be noted that the new literature distinguishes itself from the old world literature by breaking away from the a priori delineated group of addressees. That Whitman in his poetics evokes the notion of the People is thus not a trivial fact, but serves as probably one of its most distinctive characteristics of his radical democratic poetry. A people constituted in its futurity has to be anticipated by the radical democratic literature, while at the same time it is this literature that creates the possibility for such a future people.

Though the writing that goes under the name ‘Whitman’, started to bear the author’s name soon after the first edition in 1855, it is the writing of a people for a people. Indeed, the question whether that persona is the author of the twelve poems or not, is not a question at all. Of course, we now know it is Walt Whitman. Although the writing goes under his name, it is the writing that refuses any categorization, any ordering, any hierarchization and any finalization. For Whitman radical democratic literature is a never finished project. In his work he resists “the countervailing tendency to treat democratic life as somehow finished and always already accomplished.”¹

Despite the fact that Whitman’s poetry does not yet bring a political democracy, the democracy in and through literature may be the first step in imagining a new democratic common. This poetry teaches us how to continue to resist hierarchical systems that obstruct a democratic distribution of the sensible. And, as such, this poetry providing a radically new aesthetic experience of the democratic common, may be the poetry needed in the destitute times of today.

Notes

Introduction

¹ Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 956.

² *Ibid.*, 998.

³ *Ibid.*, 972.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 980.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 964.

⁶ Jason Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People." *The Review of Politics* 69, (2007), 406.

Frank himself notes already the importance of going beyond the strict historico-biographical: "Whitman's distinctive contribution to American political thought is obscured when the politics of his writings are reduced to his early political affiliations and party activism." (406)

⁷ In his essay Jason Frank refers to Rancière, but only superficially touches upon the connection between the work of Whitman and the thought of Rancière. It is precisely this connection I will work out. My project arose out of two fields of interest: my interest in the aesthetico-political philosophy of Rancière and my interest in the poetry of Whitman. Only later I discovered Frank's work on Whitman's aesthetic democracy, in which he (marginally) uses some concepts of Rancière's political theory.

⁸ Cf. Rancière, Jacques. *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006), 52-53.

Rancière explains that the distinction between direct and representative democracy cannot help us to find a way out of this oligarchic structure. Instead, both are constructed in a similar way: in direct democracy of the Ancient Greek city state only a very limited number of citizens was allowed to vote, while in a representative democracy it is always the representatives of minorities that rule.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰ As such, does not arise out of shared interests or empathy, but something much more primary.

¹¹ Rancière, Jacques. *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22. Emphasis mine.

§ The aesthetic revolution

¹ Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 1273.

² In the very first section of the Critique we read: "Das Geschmacksurteil ist also kein Erkenntnisurteil, mithin nicht logisch, sondern ästhetisch, worunter man dasjenige versteht, dessen Bestimmungsgrund *nicht anders* als *subjectiv* sein kann."

- Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 115.
- ³ Kant, Immanuel. *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 124.
- ⁴ Ibid., 155.
- ⁵ Ibid., 132.
- ⁶ Ibid., 132.
- ⁷ Schiller, Friedrich. *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag, 2000), 22.
- ⁸ Ibid., 47.
- ⁹ Ibid., 48.
- ¹⁰ Rancière, Jacques. *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 30
- ¹¹ Ibid., 31.
- ¹² Schiller, *Briefen*, 122.
- ¹³ Paul Gilmore, “Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics.” *American Literature* 76.3, (2004), 470-71.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Docherty in his *Aesthetic Democracy* also notes the communal appeal in the aesthetic experience. However, for Docherty, this leads to an ethical demand in an Agambian or post-Levinassian sense. The aesthetic experience as an event confronts us with our selfhood as conditioned by alterity, by our being-with-otherness. This leads to a form of love – taken from Agamben’s conceptualization in *The Coming Community* – as a responsibility towards whatever other, that is without any predicates. However, before one can start to think in ethical terms there is always a prior aesthetic distribution that makes the whatever seen as such. That aesthetic distribution that is central to this essay.
- ¹⁵ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 956.
- ¹⁶ Rancière, Jacques. *La Parole Muette* (Paris: Hacette Littératures, 2005), 51
- ¹⁷ Jacques Rancière. “What Aesthetics Can Mean.” In Peter Osborne (ed.), *From an aesthetic point of view* (London: Serpent’s Tail Books, 2000), 17
- ¹⁸ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 714. Emphasis mine.
- ¹⁹ Jacques Rancière. “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes.” In Steven Corcoran (ed), *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 123.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 119.
- ²¹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1219.
- ²² Rancière, Jacques. *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 3-4.
- ²³ Jason Frank, “Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People.” *The Review of Politics* 69, (2007), 426.
- Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1080-81. Emphasis mine.

§ Nothing will come of nothing

¹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1082.

² *Ibid.*, 979.

³ *Ibid.*, 714.

⁴ Finding intertextual traces of Shakespeare in Whitman's own poetry and prose has almost become a discipline in itself. Cf. Richard Clarence Harrison. "Walt Whitman and Shakespeare." *PMLA* 44.4 (1929). And see also: Floyd Stovall. "Whitman's Knowledge of Shakespeare." *Studies in Philology* 49.4 (1952).

⁵ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1176.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1176.

Though Whitman's critique on Shakespeare is an oversimplifying critique the conclusion he draws from it is right. Stephen Greenblatt in his *Shakespearean Negotiations* argues that Shakespeare's plays are full of subversive powers. Opposed to Whitman's reading of Shakespeare's poetical world as hypercultivated we find a world full of subversions of (monarchical) powers. Shakespeare's noble characters are 'jugglers' or hypocrites. Those subversive characters, Greenblatt argues, originate in and lead to an attempt to intensify the power of the monarch in a Machiavellian manner.

For Greenblatt's brilliant reading please see: Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: the circulation of social energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988). Especially chapter 2 "Invisible Bullets", 21-65.

In fact, Greenblatt's reading forms a problem for Rancière's representational regime in which genres correspond with the correct representation of characters, that in turn corresponds with a specific social distribution. However, this confrontation between Greenblatt's reading of Shakespeare and Rancière's tripartite historico-transcendental division of the history of aesthetics falls outside of the scope of this essay.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1275.

⁸ Aristotle. *Poetics* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 10.

⁹ Rancière, Jacques. *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), 20.

¹⁰ Jacques Rancière. "What Aesthetics Can Mean." In Peter Osborne (ed.), *From an aesthetic point of view* (London: Serpentine Books, 2000), 20.

¹¹ This is not to be confused with the performativity of democracy as used throughout this essay. The performance of democracy is a continuous putting into practice of radical equality, which is thus fundamentally opposed to Aristotelian invisible economy that governs the speech acts in the representational regime.

¹² Ibid., 23. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Rancière, Jacques. *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), 18.

¹⁴ Rancière, Jacques. *La Parole Muette* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2005), 25.

¹⁵ Fletcher, Angus. *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 229.

¹⁶ Rancière, Jacques. *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), 17.

¹⁷ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1080,

¹⁸ Ibid., 890.

¹⁹ Ibid., 890.

²⁰ Cf. Jason Frank, “Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People.” *The Review of Politics* 69, (2007), 412.

Frank argues that Whitman attempted to form an unmediated confrontation with the reader and that therefore Whitman had to depart from “the ‘technism’ of poetic form [...] and the formalism of political institutions.” However, as Frank himself seems to note in his essay, it is impossible to locate Whitman’s self in the poem. Instead, we have a disappearance of the self, the death of the author as we will come to see. Furthermore, we should be aware of the limits, posed in Frank’s reading, for understanding Whitman’s radical poetry. To understand the true revolutionary character of Whitman’s poetry we have to read his work in the broader history of aesthetics.

²¹ Ibid., 1175.

²² Ibid., 1175.

§ Prairies, Plains, Poetry

¹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1008.

² Ibid., 949.

³ Ibid., 890.

⁴ Ibid., 890-1.

⁵ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l’écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 133-134.

⁶ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 888-889.

⁷ Ibid., 887.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 883.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 31.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l'écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 28-29.

¹⁶ Paul Gilmore, "Aesthetic Power: Electric Words and the Example of Frederick Douglass." *The American Transcendental Quarterly* 16 (2002), 292.

¹⁷ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 895.

¹⁸ Ibid., 880.

¹⁹ Ibid., 56.

²⁰ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l'écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 27

²¹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 57.

²² Ed Folsom "Walt Whitman's Prairie Paradise." In Robert F. Sayre (ed.) *Recovering the Prairie* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), .49.

²³ Ibid., 49.

As Whitman once wrote in *Specimen Days*: "This is the hour for strange effects in light and shade – enough to make a colorist go delirious – long spokes of molten silver sent horizontally through the trees (now in their brightest tenderest green,) each leaf and branch of endless foliage a lit-up miracle, then lying all prone on the youth-ful-ripe, interminable grass, and giving the blades not only aggregate but individual splendour, in ways unknown to any other." (Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 839) It is on the grass that he came to recognize that it at once gives individual splendour as it creates a true aggregate. Only in the *en masse* the individual comes to full bloom.

²⁴ And it would not be far-fetched to state that this goes for Whitman's own work as well, Whitman as a rhizome. However, this would lead us into a whole other terminology and inquiry. Nonetheless it might be a fruitful project to try and apply a more Deleuzian literary schizoanalysis to Whitman, insofar as this project in front of you doesn't already hint at such an analysis.

²⁵ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 28.

²⁶ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l'écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 31.

²⁷ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 879.

²⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁹ Ibid., 32.

§ In a Supermarket – littérature (1)

¹ Ginsberg, Alan. *Collected Poems 1947-1997* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 144.

² The topos of the supermarket has a double meaning. On the one hand there is the democratic implication outlined in this section. On the other hand the supermarket perfectly describes what

often happens with Whitman's poetry: *Leaves of Grass* has become a place for people who without carefully treating the text can easily shop for ideas. As a consequence Whitman could be read in any way with any purpose. Tell me your Whitman and I will tell you who you are.

³ Carlyle, Thomas. *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-1872, Volume II Emerson, Ralph Waldo* (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2006), 238.

⁴ For Emerson's ambiguous stance towards Whitman's poetry please see: George Monteiro "Fire and Smoke: Emerson's Letter to Whitman." *Modern Language Studies* 15.2 (1985); and, Kenneth M. Price "Whitman on Emerson: New Light on the 1856 Open Letter." *American Literature* 56.1 (1984).

⁵ Boston Intelligencer. "An American Echo 1856." In Milton Hindus (ed.) *Walt Whitman: the critical heritage* (London: Routledge, 1997), 61.

⁶ Dana, Charles A. "The first notice 1855." In Milton Hindus (ed.) *Walt Whitman: the critical heritage* (London: Routledge, 1997), 23.

⁷ Norton, Charles Eliot. "Charles Eliot Norton's Review." In Milton Hindus (ed.) *Walt Whitman: the critical heritage* (London: Routledge, 1997), 24.

⁸ New York Criterion. "Rufus W. Griswold on Whitman." In Milton Hindus (ed.) *Walt Whitman: the critical heritage* (London: Routledge, 1997), 32.

⁹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 45-46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ It should be clear that the word of the modern is not to be confused with the word of the Modern. It is not Modernism or Modernity Whitman is talking about.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁵ Whitman, Walt. *Daybooks and Notebooks* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 729.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 747.

¹⁷ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l'écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 126.

¹⁸ Whitman, Walt. *Daybooks and Notebooks* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 736-37.

¹⁹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²² Spitzer, Leo. *Linguistics and Literary History: essays in stylistics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 206.

²³ Leo Spitzer. "Explication de Texte Applied to Walt Whitman's Poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking'" *ELH* 16.3 (1949), 237-38.

²⁴ Whitman, Walt. *Daybooks and Notebooks* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 736.

²⁵ Rancière, Jacques. *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), 24.

²⁶ De Man, Paul. *Allegories of reading: figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 22.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben in a more psychoanalytical reading comes to a similar conclusion, as one of the essential stylistic instruments of modern art, namely the unfinished, always signifies something absolute: “almost all modern poems after Mallarmé are fragments, in that they allude to something (the absolute poem) that can never be evoked in its integrity, but only rendered present through its negation.” Agamben, Giorgio. *Stanzas: word and phantasm in Western culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 32

Every poem hints at a nonexistent whole, that is the infinite. Whitman’s poetry might be an example in that it tries to encapsulate the world in its infinite facets.

²⁸ Rancière, Jacques. *La Parole Muette* (Paris: Hacette Littératures, 2005), 61

§ This I is not One

¹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 28.

² Ibid., 42.

³ Ibid., 87.

⁴ D.H. Lawrence. *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 425.

⁵ Jakobson, Roman. *On Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 388

⁶ Agamben, Giorgio. *Language and Death. The Place of Negativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 25

⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 45.

⁹ De Man, Paul. *Allegories of reading*, 30.

¹⁰ Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142.

¹¹ Ibid., 145.

¹² Ibid., 148.

Instead Barthes introduces the notion of the scriptor, that is born simultaneously with the text. This scriptor comes close to what Jakobson calls the shifter, in the sense that “For him [= the scriptor], on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.” Ibid., 146.

The scriptor seems so have exactly the deictic function in referring to nothing but the taking place of language. Writing, no longer designates an operation of representation, but becomes “a performative a rare verbal form (exclusively given in the first person and in the present tense) in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered—something like the I declare of kings or the I sing of very ancient poets.” Ibid., 145-146. We may add: or the I sing, which refers to nothing but the taking place of language.

¹³ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l'écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 45.

¹⁶ Spitzer, Leo. *Linguistics and Literary History: essays in stylistics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 206

¹⁷ Jason Frank, “Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People.” *The Review of Politics* 69, (2007), 418.

¹⁸ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 43.

¹⁹ De Man, Paul. *Allegories of reading*, 36.

²⁰ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 50.

²¹ Rancière, Jacques. *La Parole Muette* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2005), 40-41

²² Ibid., 40.

²³ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 43.

²⁴ Rancière, Jacques. “The Politics of Literature.” *SubStance* 33 (2004), 20.

²⁵ Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. (London: Continuum, 2004), 57

²⁶ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 87.

§ Errant letters – littérature (2)

²⁷ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 19.

²⁸ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 59.

²⁹ WW 63

³⁰ Jacques Rancière. *La Parole Muette* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2005), 17-31.

³¹ Ibid., 28.

³² Jacques Rancière. “Politics and Aesthetics: an interview.” *Angelaki* 8 (2003), 205.

³³ <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html>

³⁴ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l'écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 125

³⁵ Ibid., 126.

³⁶ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 27.

- ³⁷ Ibid., 28.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 30.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 71.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 44.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 44.
- ⁴² Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots*, 124.
- ⁴³ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 72.
- ⁴⁴ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots*, 126.
- ⁴⁵ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 64.
- ⁴⁶ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots*, 129.
- ⁴⁷ Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: politics and philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37
- ⁴⁸ Jacques Rancière & Davide Panagia. “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière.” *Diacritics* 30.2 (2000), 15.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 82.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 88.

§ The electricity of poetry

- ¹ Ter Braak, Menno. *Verzameld werk. Deel 6* (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1950), 525.
- We should take note here of the fact that Ter Braak never wrote about Whitman. In his immense oeuvre he only mentions him once, in a comparison with other writers. Nonetheless, the reading I present in this section tries to point to at least one point of convergence between the two: the trope of electricity, which almost certainly, for Whitman played a bigger role than for Ter Braak.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid., 526.
- ⁴ Ibid., 527.
- ⁵ Paul Gilmore, “Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics.” *American Literature* 76.3, (2004), 473.
- ⁶ Ibid., 474. Emphasis mine.
- ⁷ Ibid., 477.
- ⁸ Jacques Rancière. “What Aesthetics Can Mean.” In Peter Osborne (ed.), *From an aesthetic point of view* (London: Serpent’s Tail Books, 2000), 25
- ⁹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1352. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Ibid., 55

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gilmore, Paul. *Aesthetic materialism: electricity and American romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 148.

¹³ Paul Gilmore, "Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics." *American Literature* 76.3, (2004), 478

¹⁴ Aspiz, Harold. *Walt Whitman and the body beautiful* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 150

¹⁵ Ibid., 160.

¹⁶ Paul Gilmore, "Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics." *American Literature* 76.3, (2004), 480

¹⁷ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 1028-29.

¹⁸ Rancière, Jacques. *La chair des mots. Politique de l'écriture* (Paris: Galilée, 1998), 134-35. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ F.T. Marinetti. *Critical Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 45.

§ a People

¹ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 968.

² Ibid., 967-968.

³ Ibid., 967.

⁴ Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: politics and philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸ Jason Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People." *The Review of Politics* 69, (2007), 427.

However, I prefer to stick to Rancière's terminology, since Frank's evocation of the word sublime, might easily lead to philosophical misunderstanding and confusion with in particular the Kantian concept of the sublime. Frank himself never elaborates on the origins of his use of the word, although he quotes Whitman using it. However, Whitman's idea of the sublime is not to be understood in Kantian terms.

⁹ Ibid., 123.

¹⁰ Aesthetic not in the sense of disinterested pleasure, or any other kind of judgment of taste; but aesthetic in the sense of sharing a certain sensorium, i.e. a certain (re)distribution of the sensible.

¹¹ Rancière, Jacques. *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006), 51

¹² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 967.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 992. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 979.

¹⁶ Rancière, Jacques. *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006), 68

¹⁷ Whitman, *Poetry and Prose*, 957. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1274-1275.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1275.

²⁰ Jason Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People." *The Review of Politics* 69, (2007), 403.

Conclusion

¹ Jason Frank, "Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People." *The Review of Politics* 69, (2007), 428.

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