

Walt Whitman

By KENNETH REXROTH

OUR CIVILIZATION is the only one in history whose major artists have rejected its dominant values. Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Melville, Mark Twain—all are self-alienated outcasts. One nineteenth-century writer of world importance successfully refused alienation, yet still speaks significantly to us—Walt Whitman, the polar opposite of Baudelaire.

Most intellectuals of our generation think of America as the apotheosis of commercial, competitive, middle-class society. Because Whitman found within it an abundance of just those qualities that it seems today most to lack, the sophisticated read him little and are inclined to dismiss him as fraudulent or foolish. The realization of the American Dream as an apocalypse, an eschatological event which would give the life of man its ultimate significance, was an invention of Whitman's.

Other religions have been founded on the promise of the Community of Love, the Abode of Peace, the Kingdom of God. Whitman identified with his own nation-state. We excuse such ideas only when they began 3,000 years ago in the Levantine desert. In our own time we suspect them of dangerous malevolence. Yet Whitman's vision exposes and explodes all the frauds that pass for the American Way of Life. It is the last and greatest vision of the American potential.

Today, when many intellectuals and politicians hold each other in supreme contempt, few remember that America was founded by, and for three generations ruled by, intellectuals. As they were driven from power in the years before the Civil War their vision of a practicable utopia diffused out into society, went underground, surfaced again in cooperative colonies, free-love societies, labor banks, vegetarianism, feminism, Owenites, Fourierists, Saint-Simonians, anarchists, and dozens of religious communal sects. Whitman was formed in this environment. Whenever he found it convenient he spoke of himself as a Quaker and used Quaker language. Much of his strange lingo is not the stilted rhetoric of the self-taught, but simply Quaker talk. Most of his ideas were commonplace in the radical and pietistic circles and the Abolition Movement. This was the first American Left, for whom the Civil War was a revolutionary war and

who, after it was over, refused to believe that it was not a won revolution.

Unfortunately for us, as is usually the case in won revolutions, the language of the revolutionists turned into a kind of newspeak. The vocabulary of Whitman's moral epic has been debauched by a hundred years of editorials and political speeches. Still, there are two faces to the coin of newspeak—the counterfeit symbol of power and the golden face of liberty. The American Dream that is the subject of *Leaves of Grass* is again becoming believable as the predatory society that intervenes between us and Whitman passes away.

Walt Whitman's democracy is utterly different from the society of free rational contractual relationships inaugurated by the French Revolution. It is a community of men related by organic satisfactions, in work, love, play, the family, comradeship; a social order whose essence is the liberation and universalization of selfhood. *Leaves of Grass* is not a great work of art just because it has a great program, but it does offer point-by-point alternatives to the predatory society, as well as to the systematic doctrine of alienation from it that has developed from Baudelaire and Kierkegaard to the present.

In all of Whitman's many celebrations of labor, abstract relations are never mentioned. Money appears to be scorned. Sailors, carpenters, longshoremen, bookkeepers, seamstresses, engineers, artists—all seem to be working for "nothing," participants in a universal creative effort where each discovers his ultimate individuation. The day's work over, they loaf and admire the world on summer hillsides, blowing on leaves of grass, or strolling the quiet First-Day streets of Manhattan, arms about one another's broad shoulders, or making love in religious ecstasy. Unlike almost all other ideal societies, Whitman's utopia, which he calls "These States," is not a projection of the virtues of an idealized

past into the future, but an attempt to extrapolate the future into the American present. His is a realized eschatology.

The Middle Ages called hope a theological virtue. They meant that, with faith and love, hope was essential to the characteristic being of mankind. Now hope is joy in the presence of the future in the present. On this joy creative effort depends, because creation relates past, present, and future in concrete acts that result in enduring objects and experiences. Beyond the consideration of time, Whitman asserts the same principle of being, the focusing of the macrocosm in the microcosm, or its reverse, which is the same thing, as the source of individuation. Again and again he identifies himself with a transfigured America, the community of work in love and love in work, this community with the meaning of the universe, the vesture of God, a great chain of being which begins, or ends, in Walt Whitman, or his reader—Adam-Kadmon who contains all things—ruled in order by love.

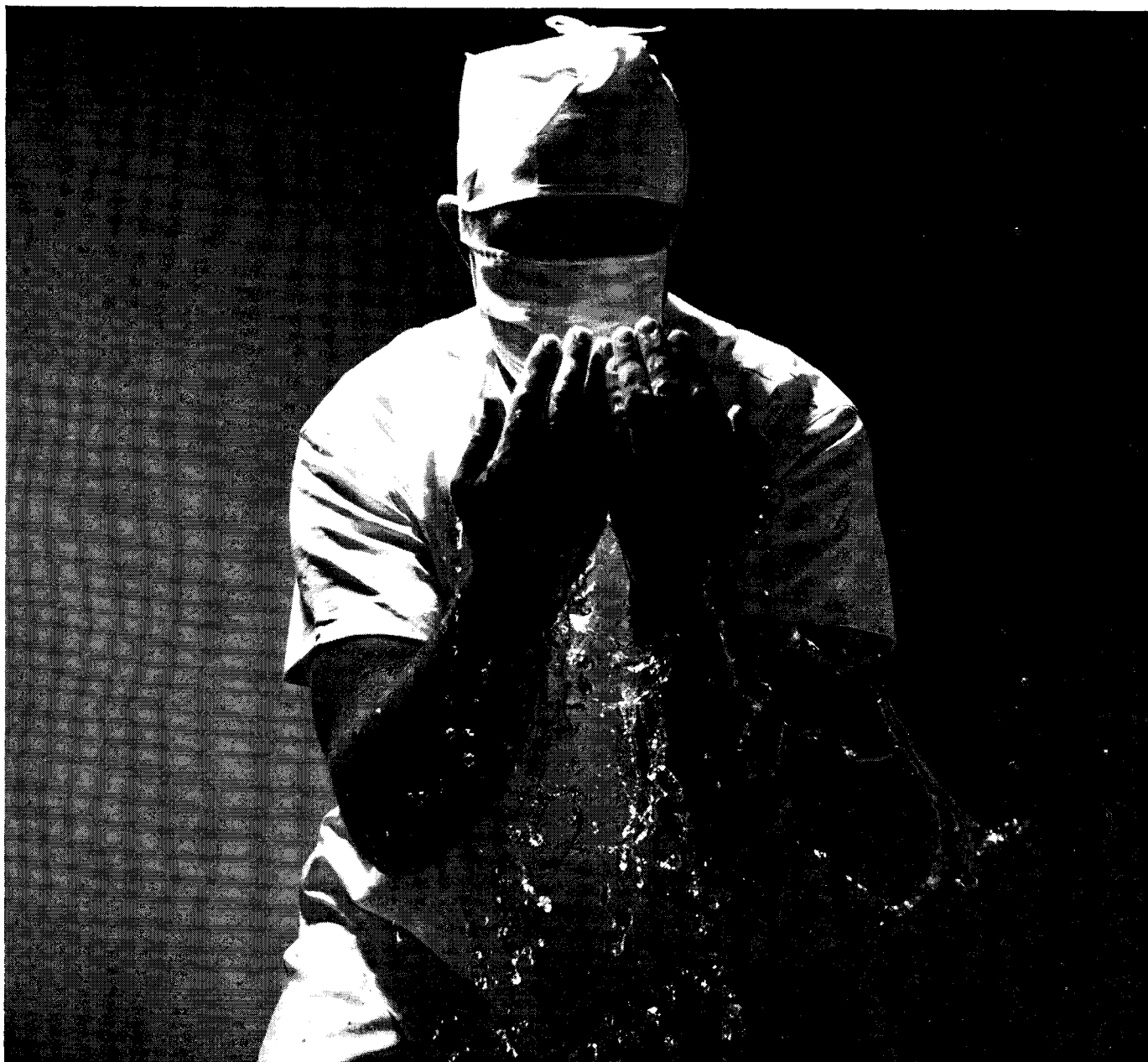
Whitman's philosophy may resemble that of the *Upanishads* as rewritten by Thomas Jefferson. What differentiates it is the immediacy of substantial vision, the intensity of the wedding of image and moral meaning. Although Whitman is a philosophical poet, almost always concerned with his message, he is at the same time a master of Blake's "minute particulars," one of the clearest and most dramatic imagists in literature.

Not the least element of his greatness is his extraordinary verse. He was influenced, it is true, by Isaiah, Ossian, and all the other sources discovered by scholarship. His poetry has influenced all the cadenced verse that has come after it. Yet, in fact, there has never been anything like Whitman's verse before or since. It was original and remained inimitable. It is the perfect medium for poetic homilies on the divinization of man.

Only recently it was fashionable to dismiss Whitman as foolish and dated, a believer in the myth of progress and the preacher of an absurd patriotism. Today we know that it is Whitman's vision or nothing.

"Mankind, the spirit of the Earth, the paradoxical conciliation of the element with the whole and of unity with multitude—all these are called utopian, and yet they are biologically necessary. For them to be incarnated in the world all we may need is to imagine our power of loving developing until it embraces the total of man and of the earth." So said Teilhard de Chardin. Or, as Whitman says in the great mystical poems which are the climax of his book, contemplation is the highest form and the ultimate source of all moral activity because it views all things in their timeless aspect, through the eyes of love.





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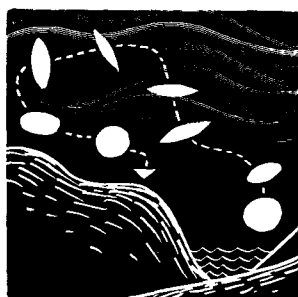
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RESEARCH IN AMERICA

THE DISPUTED CIA DOCUMENT ON UFOs

IN this space last month, there appeared a report on the twenty-year-old argument over whether planet earth is being clandestinely explored by intelligently guided vehicles from planets of stars other than earth's sun. The report began by pointing out that the Darwinian theory of evolution has encouraged modern astronomers to accept the idea that the skies must hold hundreds if not thousands of planets on which living creatures have evolved to a level of intelligence equal or superior to the intelligence of earthmen. Next, the report recited scientific speculations concerning possible visits to earth by interstellar excursionists in years gone by. Finally, the report made clear that if such visits in fact occurred, the visitors left behind them no unequivocal relics or other signs of their presence.

To believe in the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere than on earth is one thing. To believe that some of the harder specimens of that life have survived passage through many light-years of space (a light-year is 5,880 billion miles long, and the star nearest to the sun is 4.25 light-years away) and landed on earth without wrecking any of their ships or leaving instruments or tools or articles of clothing or even footprints behind is quite another. Consider, for comparative purposes, the amount of debris earthmen already have scattered over the moon preparatory to landing themselves on the moon, which orbits only 221,593 to 252,948 miles out from earth.

The United States Air Force since 1948 (the year after Idaho businessman Kenneth Arnold said he saw, while piloting his own plane over the Pacific coast of this country, "a chainlike formation of disc-shaped objects" performing spectacular maneuvers around Mount

Rainier in the Cascades [see LETTERS, page 50]) has been hunting some fragment of hardware of a "flying saucer." SR's science editor believes that the search has netted absolutely nothing. He so believes because he has read through all but one of the once-secret dossiers the Air Force has kept on UFOs (unidentified flying objects). He cannot be certain, however, because the one exception—the minutes of a meeting of a panel of eminent scientists headed by H. P. Robertson of the California Institute of Technology—is still classified in the secret category thirteen years after issuance of the panel's report in 1953.



At SR's request, during the period when last month's UFO report was being prepared, Major Hector Quintanilla, Jr., of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base at Dayton, Ohio, director of the Blue Book Project under which UFO sightings are shepherded, formally asked declassification of the Robertson panel minutes. Power to remove the secret label from this particular text rested with the Central Intelligence Agency because CIA had summoned the panel. Since publication of SR's report last month, CIA has given Major Quintanilla a "sanitized" [officialese word meaning "edited"] version of those minutes, and the Major has given a copy of the version to SR through the Air Force Office of Information in Washington.

The edited copy fills twenty-three standard-sized typescript pages. Nowhere in the script is there an indication of how many lines or pages of the original minutes were deleted, or what was the nature of the deletions, or why any deletion was necessary to protect the nation from its enemies.

CIA's insistence on editing in the face of an Air Force request for unequivocal declassification of a thirteen-year-old document is unfortunate. The very exercise of censorship suggests that vital information of long-range significance may be withheld for strategic reasons. That CIA, not the Air Force, is the censor is susceptible to interpretation as a sign that whatever data is missing has clandestine implications—precisely the claim that UFO fans have been making for years.

The questions raised by the CIA editing of the Robertson panel minutes are further complicated by a comparative reading of the censored version alongside the one-page report that bears the signatures of the Robertson panelists. The report's full text, with the names of its signers, was published in SR last month under the mistaken designation of a summary. The primary conclusion stated in the document was "that the evidence presented on Unidentified Flying Objects shows no indication that these phenomena constitute a direct physical threat to national security . . . and that there is no residuum of cases which indicates phenomena which are attributable to foreign artifacts capable of hostile acts. . . ." "In the light of this conclusion," the panel recommended "that the national security agencies take immediate steps to strip the Unidentified Flying Objects of the special status they have been given and the