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## The American Renaissance Reconsidered



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*The House of the Seven Gables*," *ELH* 48 [Spring 1981]:172-73. Gilmore's valuable essay seems to me typical of much recent work on the artist in the market in that it calls attention to the importance of the market only to draw ever more firmly the line between the values of that market and the values of art. The point I am urging in this essay is the rather different one that for Hawthorne qualities like independence and integrity (artistic or otherwise) do not exist in opposition to the marketplace but are produced by it and contained within it.

42. Macpherson, *Possessive Individualism*, p. 92.



Allen Grossman

## The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln: An Inquiry toward the Relationship of Art and Policy

I



To begin with, I shall suppose that both policy and art are addressed to the solution of problems vital to the continuity of the social order, and, therefore, to the human world. In the period of America's Civil War (the "renaissance" moment both of America's literary and its constitutional authenticity) there arose two great and anomalous masters, the one of policy and the other of poetry: Abraham Lincoln and Walt Whitman. Both men addressed the problem of the reconstruction of their common human world—the Union as a just and stable polity—at a time when the elements necessary to the intelligibility of that world seemed fallen, in Seward's words, into "irrepressible conflict."<sup>1</sup>

The political and constitutional situation, as both men understood it, was clear. The Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had reconciled the equality requirement of the Declaration of Independence with the continuity requirements of the Constitution (among them slavery), was undone between 1846 and 1857 by the outcome of the Mexican War, the Fugitive Slave Law, Kansas-Nebraska, and Dred Scott. In effect, competition between the claims of two incompatible systems of labor with their attendant social structures, precipitated by the acquisition of new territory in the Mexican War and the opening of the Northwest, required deliberated choices, as if in an "original position," among contradictory descriptions of the human world. By the accident of history, these choices involved the staggeringly primitive question as to which human beings were persons.<sup>2</sup> That deliberation was, in the end, condensed upon the figure and discourse of Lincoln, whose "mould-smashing mask" (as Henry James put it) was a bizarre

picture of *concordia discors*, the imagination's conquest of irreconcilables; it was interrupted and restated by the cruel, integrative, and perhaps artificial catastrophe of the Civil War; and at last ironically inscribed in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments.<sup>3</sup>

On the literary side, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman addressed the same problem of the union or connectedness of the human world, which they also saw by deliberated fictions as if for the first time in a new territory where the worth of persons was subject to the risk of finding a form. The long aftermath of the Revolution had destroyed the old America, a confederation of separately constituted religious communities, in which personhood was validated or canceled by reference to the eucharistic mystery of the hypostatic union. Whitman and others worked toward a reconstructive poetics appropriate to a modern political society, in which this same validating function was equivocally provided in the centerless rationality of the Constitution legislated by the secular decree of the people. Authentic American art, as well as true American constitutionality, awaited a solution to the crisis of the establishment of the person.<sup>4</sup>

In America at midcentury, both art and policy confronted a culture that lacked an effective structure (a meter, a genre, an epistemology, a law) between the pragmatic ideal of political unity—the unwritten poem of these states—and the mutually excluding legitimacies for which right and place were claimed in consciousness and the nation—Declaration and Constitution, equality and order, body and soul. Lincoln supplied that structure in the form of a conservative ideology of union based in ethical constitutionalism, promulgated by a rational style of discourse of unfailing adequacy and persuasiveness. He was a *novus homo*, a man impersonated by his language, the structure of whose song of self-invention (a recapitulation of the significant past of America, as he understood it) came in the event to be repeated as America's present, the Civil War. The literary master of union was Whitman for whom also the one justifiable order of the world was the order of the discourse by which he invented himself, his song. ("The United States them-

selves," he said, "are essentially the greatest poem.") Neither of these men could appear, except as a function of their language which bore upon them, and subsequently upon their world, as Emerson remarked of perception in general, not as a whim but as a fate.

The only social role that could make actual the enigmatic particularity of Lincoln's self-invention, speaking the pure language of individual personhood by which he discovered the tragic laws of its social peace, was the citizen presidency. The only social role that could express the function of the person for Whitman—immanent, comedic, doxological, choral—was the poet-nurse, commissioned healer of the violence of language of another sort. At the end of the war, Whitman signified the inclusion of the tragedy of policy within the comedy of his art by receiving Lincoln into the night—"hiding, receiving"—of his elegy, as he had received in his arms so many of the dead of Lincoln's war.

Insofar as the actuality of both policy and poetry require sentences a man can speak, the material upon which poetry works and the material upon which policy works are identical because of the ubiquity of language, and present the same resistances. The reasons that one cannot make just any poem, or just any policy, good are the same. An entailment of any style a person speaks is the structure of a social world that can receive it—a political formation and its kind of conscious life. Consequently, Whitman and Lincoln were autodidact masters. As such, they received the implications of acculturation without interposition of mediating social forms, and restated its structure directly as the structure of the worlds they intended.

Whereas Lincoln was born in the wilderness Thoreau deliberately chose to live there. Lincoln's political literacy derived from personal labor. For Lincoln the crisis of union repeated the enigma of his own socialization. His legendary honesty specifies him as a man of his word, as Whitman's theatrical "nakedness" makes him a man whose self is his song. For Whitman as for Lincoln, the legitimation of his personhood (the crisis of union) involves the justification of a mode of discourse, not merely a particular case of

practice. But the autodidact self-invention of Whitman—his self-commissioning praxis—identified him with the ethos of poetry. In his understanding poetry is the leisure of receptivity, not the rational labor of the will—"I loafe and invite my soul." A poetry that authorizes a personhood reflexively validated by its own discourse can have no category of fictionality. (He who touches this book touches all the man there is.) A poetry that has no category of fictionality is a policy.<sup>5</sup> Correlatively, a policy that intends, as did Lincoln's, the same structure as its discourse is a poetry. In this sense, both Whitman and Lincoln are profoundly conservative figures. Both bind the world, with totalitarian immediacy, to the configurative implication of the central sentences of a cultural instrument.

Therefore, one may ask the question whether, as between Lincoln's politics and Whitman's poetry, there are two policies of union, or only one insofar as they are representative of two distinct cultural modes? Does poetry know anything that policy does not? One may also ask, given the singular nature of these two figures, both of whom practice language that intends as a function of its structure a just order of the human world, whether there really is a nontragic, open-form, egalitarian version of the reconciliation of justice and order, or only the brilliant, closed, individualist, logic-based Lincolnian version so profoundly implicated with our world as it has come to pass.

## II

The supposition, with which I began, that art and policy are addressed to the same problems, assumes that prior to both art and policy is the common intention of an order of the human world, and that the world has a stake in knowing (and criticism a means of inquiring) what art and policy cannot do.

Lincoln's strategy of order was an amplification of a legal grammar (Blackstonian) adapted to political use, the structure of which was based in the Aristotelian laws of thought—identity, non-

contradiction, the excluded middle. He judged the world that he constructed by a hermeneutic criterion of intelligibility, modeled on Euclid. A house divided against itself, like a sentence that asserts contradictories, cannot stand because it makes no sense and accords with no possible state of affairs.<sup>6</sup> He judged the substantial moral world similarly, according to the criterion of simplicity. Lincoln accepted as self-evident the distinction between good and evil, implied as a restriction on choice by the Declaration of Independence (all men are created equal), and assumed that there was a state of fact in accord with the criterion that the two authoritative documents of his reality (Declaration and Constitution) meant the same thing. Correspondingly, the meaning of the law, for Lincoln, was "the intention of the law-giver," and all the givers of authentic law, including God, intended the same thing.<sup>7</sup> "The will of God," he notes in 1862, "prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time." Hence, Lincoln's speaking induced a sentiment of what Marianne Moore called his "intensified particularity," deriving first from a willed overcoming of complexity and consequent clarification of the world, and second from the indissociability of that clarification from his own person.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Lincoln's policy subordinated and conserved an ineradicable autochthony against a reality of immense complexity. In its severest form, the form given it in history by the hands of Grant and Sherman, his rhetoric was oblitative. "Both may be, and one must be, wrong."<sup>9</sup>

In the crossing of kinds of discourse in history, poetry situates itself where other instruments of mind find impossibility. Thus, Walt Whitman found his truth, and the unity of his world, precisely at the crisis of contradiction where Lincoln found disintegrative instability. Unlike Lincoln's God, who cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time, Whitman's "greatest poet" inferred from the traditional fame-powers of his art a fundamental principle of undifferentiated representation, which constituted a massive trope of inclusion. Representation (the class of all classes)

was itself an implicit unification, the fame of the world; and the great bard, "by whom only can series of peoples and states be fused into the compact organism of a Nation," promulgated the goodness of simple presence as human state of affairs. Of *his* legislator Whitman says in the "Poem of Many in One": "He judges not as the judge judges but as light falling round a helpless thing." Whitman's originality consisted in the discovery of a regulative principle that permitted an art based in the representative function itself, and organized in its ideal-typical moments (for example, the world-inventories in #15 and #33 of "Song of Myself") as a taxonomy of which the sorting index is mere being-at-all. The argument that made the meter of Whitman was the unification of the world in the one power of language, the secret authority of the poet (his "Santa Spirita"), the bestowal of presence across time. The theater of that presence is the poetic line; and the poetics of the line is the multiplicative logic of presence by which Whitman replaces, and contradicts, the world-dividing logic of argument of Lincoln's rational sentence.

The English poetic line, as Whitman found it, was the synergetic outcome of two orders of form: an abstract and irrational pattern of counted positions, on the one hand, and the natural stress characteristics of language heightened and articulated by the semantic concerns of the reader, on the other. But the repertory of abstract patterns that the reader received was, in his view, indelibly stained by the feudal contexts of its most prestigious instances, and in addition required the subordination of the natural stress characteristics of language, and therefore an abridgment of the freedom of the speaker. Whitman was an end-stopped line-writer. And the abstract patterns (the "mechanical" aspects of structure) served, at the least, two indispensable functions: the provision, first of all, of an external and (by convention) timeless *locus communis* where the "I" and the "you" could meet, a principle of access; and, second, the establishment of a finite term which sealed utterance against silence and granted form. Whitman compensated his deletion of the metrical aspect of the line by revising the mechanism of access on the basis of the "transparence," or reciprocal internal-

ity, of persons one to the other ("What I shall assume you shall assume"), and by the hypothesis of a world composed of a "limitless" series of brilliant finite events each of which imposed closure at the grammatical end of its account. But it is opposition to the meaning-intending will by the resistance of abstract form that produces, in the English poetic line, the sentiment of the presence of the person as a singular individual; and this Whitman could not restore.

We see, therefore, the paradox: the logic of poetic construction posed to Whitman, the ideologist of union as happiness, is analogous to the logic of clarification posed to Lincoln, the ideologist of union as "fairness." In Lincoln's case the unification of the world required the dissolution of one term of any set of contradictories in order to obtain the thereby inherent simplification required by truth—a totalitarianism of hypotaxis. In the poet's case, the abandonment of abstract pattern put in question the validity of the instrument of fame itself by dissolving its subject—a totalitarianism of parataxis. The problem for both Whitman and Lincoln was how to preserve the ends of the enterprise from the predation of the means.

### III

When Matthiessen named Whitman "the central figure of our literature affirming the democratic faith," he did so because he saw Whitman as the champion, not only of liberty and equality, but also (unlike Emerson, Thoreau, and even Melville) of fraternity—the master of union as social love.<sup>10</sup> But Lincoln was the great speaker of the American Renaissance whose imagination empowered the democratic faith. Its way, he said, is "plain, peaceful, generous, just." In the 1850s, both Whitman and Lincoln held more or less the same politics, including the view that slavery *and also abolition* were barbarisms: abolition because it interrupted contract and exchange without which there was no social world in which anyone *could* be free; slavery because, as an impermissible

variation of the practice of liberty (you cannot choose to enslave), it destroyed the value both of labor and leisure without which freedom was empty of praxis.<sup>11</sup> Lincoln's characteristic strategy for freeing slaves was *compensated* emancipation, the completion of the Revolution by the co-optation in its service of the constitutional principle of contract—the justification, in effect, of logical discourse. Whitman supposed that the same result could only be obtained by a more fundamental revision of the central nature of relationship—the establishment of a new basis of speaking in the counterlogic, and infinite distributability, of affectionate presence. Both Lincoln and Whitman intended the same thing. The two systems (the closed and the open) that they sponsored aspire each to specify the inclusion of the other as the best outcome of its own nature. The limits of each of these two systems in view of their common goal becomes plain in the two related issues of hierarchy, the constraints upon variation consistent with union as structure, and equality, the management of access of persons one to the other consistent with union as value.

In Lincoln's "First Inaugural," a performative utterance at the moment of oath-taking, which he described as an account of his own worthiness of credence, Lincoln identified secession as a transgressive practice of freedom—a disordering variation—inconsistent with the intactness of the organic law of the nation; and he defined by contrast the true democratic sovereign:

Plainly, the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. A majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks, and limitations, and always changing easily, with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments is the only true sovereign. Whoever rejects it does of necessity fly to anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible; the rule of the minority, as a permanent arrangement is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism is all that is left.<sup>12</sup>

Oath-taking is Lincoln's peculiar form of honesty. At the moment of the "First Inaugural" he identifies himself with the union, grown suddenly abstract with the secession of seven states, and establishes himself as its regulative presence by articulating the grammar of the one authentic sentence that expresses both equality and

intelligible structure.<sup>13</sup> But the world it describes is organized around the conservation of the singular person by the concession of totalistic right—excluding despotism, anarchy, *and also unanimity*. By the principle of majority rule, equality is delegated and unanimity eternally postponed. This delegation takes the form of an exchange whereby autonomy is given up, and social life, the human scale of the person, received in return. Lincoln's true sovereign is a collectivity less than the whole, a "majority held in restraint" by a regulative principle external to itself which by its measure produces freedom in the form of resistances to the will structured to conserve its own nature. At the heart of Lincoln's conception of constitution is a commutative process: life is given up for meaning, the significance of the whole sentence; and the interest of all persons (and, therefore, potentially the whole interest of each) is exchanged for a rational sociability based in a hierarchy of ends of which the highest term is external to the person, and not within his power of choice. Paramount among these exchanges, and implied in all, is the exchange of life for meaning, an idea that Lincoln repeated as a hermeneutic principle in his explanation of the war (e.g., "From these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion"). Since secession was a transgressive exercise of choice (the repudiation of the social bond) on behalf of slavery, and slavery a perversion of contract to repudiate rather than affirm personhood, the urgency of restoring Union was doubly driven by the ethical motive, not only (and perhaps not primarily) to establish all human beings as persons, but also to revalidate the principle of the whole social world. Secession made inescapably apparent the inherently conflictual character of the legal understanding of the Constitution by making unmistakable the incompatibility of the freedom of the individual with the order of the state—the inherently imperfect inclusion under rational auspices of the many in the one.

Whitman's motive was to get death out of sociability, to devise "death's outlet song." The bard is the better president because he is the "perfect" agent of human presence—the voice's announcement,

prior to all other messages, of the presence of the person prior to all other characteristics. As such, the bard distributes the value of personhood which is the value commuted in all other economic transactions. The poem is of the same nature as central value, because the whole function of its discourse is acknowledgment. Consequently, universal access to the poem is a policy to overcome scarcity. To effect this, Whitman devised a "song" that would reconcile variety and order, equality and constitution, one and many without compromising either term. Once again Whitman situates his new American organic law and true sovereign precisely where Lincoln finds impossibility, at the zero point of unanimity.

The destruction of the constitutional settlement of the 1820s precipitated the crisis of the Union in the form of the scarcity of personhood. A characteristic recuperative episode of the 1850s is the Dred Scott decision which solved the problem of such scarcity by ruling the African slave out of the human community by a distinction as severe and of the same effect as that between the redeemed and the unregenerate.<sup>14</sup> In the slave codes of the South the chattel slave must call every man "master." By his uncanny difference—a human being who is not a person—the slave precisely specifies and thereby generates and maintains (this is his work) the boundary between the nonperson and the person upon which the distinction of the person is established.<sup>15</sup> The refounding of personhood, the historical function of the poet, was the deferred business both of the American Revolution and of American literature. But the perfect equality of all human beings requires, as Whitman understood, an infinite resource of fame.

Whitman's policy was to establish a new principle of access that would effect multiplication, or pluralization (the getting many into one), without the loss entailed by exchange—the glory of the perfect messenger. In the chronology of Whitman's work, the "open" line as formal principle appears simultaneously with the subject of liberation, and is the enabling condition of the appearance of that subject. That is to say, his first poems in the new style are also his first poems on the subject of slavery and freedom (specifically, "Resurgemus," "Blood-Money," "Wounded in the

House of Friends'). His first lines in the new style altogether (so far as I can tell) are recorded in a notebook as follows:

I am the poet of the slave, and of the masters of the slave  
 . . . . .  
 I am the poet of the body  
 And I am the poet of the soul  
 I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters  
 And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,  
 Entering into both, so that both shall understand me alike<sup>16</sup>

In another early notebook Whitman gives an account of what he calls "translation," the power he uses in place of the Coleridgean poetic "imagination." (He sometimes, as in the Lincoln elegy, calls it "tallying.")

Every soul has its own individual language, often unspoken, or feebly spoken; but a true fit for that man and perfectly adapted for his use—The truths I tell to you or to any other may not be plain to you, because I do not translate them fully from my idiom into yours.—If I could do so, and do it well, they would be as apparent to you as they are to me; for they are truths. No two have exactly the same language, and the great translator and joiner of the whole is the poet.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of a "poetic language" (always a mimetic version of the language of one class) Whitman has devised a universal "conjunctive principle" whose manifest structure is the sequence of end-stopped, nonequivalent, but equipollent lines. By it he intends the power of the God to whom (as in the "Collect for Purity" which opens the Mass) "all hearts are open . . . desires known . . . from whom no secrets are hid." His poetic authority is J. S. Mill's "overheard" soliloquy of feeling, and his physicalist basis is the phrenological continuity between inner and outer mind. The drama of translation is enacted at the beginning of an early poem, "The Answerer":

Now list to my morning's romanza, I tell the signs of the Answerer,  
 To the cities and farms I sing as they spread in the sunshine before me.  
 A young man comes to me bearing a message from his brother,  
 How shall the young man know the whether and when of his brother?  
 Tell him to send me the signs.

And I stand before the young man face to face, and take his right hand  
 in my left hand and his left hand in my right hand  
 And I answer for his brother and for men. . . .

By curing the human colloquy, the poet (the translator, answerer, perfect messenger, better president) intends to establish a boundless resource of the central acknowledgment-value, and to rid sociability of death by overcoming the scarcity of fame, a process that requires the mechanical checks and balances (reifications of the competing will of the inaccessible other) in the poetics of Lincoln's constitutionalism. But Whitman's new principle of access—his line—is not “organic” in Matthiessen's Coleridgean sense. It has the virtuality of a paradigm; and the negotiation of its actualization against the resistances of history and mind is Whitman's major subject.

The primal scene of that negotiation is the “transparent morning” of part 5 of “Song of Myself.” It is the inaugural moment of Whitman's candor, and as such it recapitulates the first subject matter liberated by his line. The form is the confession of a creed:

I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you  
 And you must not be abased to the other.

The rewriting of hierarchies—soul/body, collective/individual, nation/state—as equalities, and the rewriting as identities of conventional dualities, above all the self and the other, is the task of the “translator,” whose goal is union as the fraternalization of the community. In the Nicene Creed that follows is, of course, the hypostatic union. What follows in Whitman's creed is the greater mystery of the mortal union of two, the competent number of acknowledgment, and the archetype of all political relationship. For Lincoln, labor is prior to capital and is the praxis of the individual will by which all selfhood, and therefore all value, is produced.<sup>18</sup> It is indistinguishable from the act of clarification (the intention of the lawgiver) by which univocal meaning is derived, many made one. To loaf (“Loafe with me on the grass . . .”) is to exchange the posture of hermeneutic attention for the posture of receptivity, the unity of all things in the last sorting category of

mere consciousness prior to interpretation (“the origin of all poems”) of which the voice is the “hum,” the sound of the blood doing the cultural work of God (a further secularization of the “sound of many waters” of Revelation, repeated by Wordsworth as the mystically integrative speaking of the Leech Gatherer), the doggerel of life. What follows, then, is the sexual union reconstructed as a moment of primal communication, the tongue to the heart. The principle of the language of the soul is the deletion, as in Whitman's metricality as a whole, of centralizing hypotactic grammar, and the difference-making prosodies both of individual meaning-intention and abstractly patterned (stress/no stress) metricality. What is obtained is an unprecedented trope of inclusion—the sign, embodied in that revision of primary human relationship (“gently turned over upon me”), of which the greater inclusions of emancipation and union are the things signified:

And limitless are the leaves stiff and drooping in the fields  
 And brown ants in the little wells beneath them  
 And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,  
 mullein and poke-weed.

But what is created, paradoxically, is a new slave culture. The Whitmanian voice, like the slave, is uncanny—a servant of persons, but not itself personal—a case of delegated social death: “A generalized art language, a literary algebra” (Sapir). “Comradeship—part of the death process: The new Democracy—the brink of death. One identity—death itself” (Lawrence). “To put the paradox in a nutshell, he wrote poetry out of poetry writing” (Pavese).<sup>19</sup> There is truth in these judgments. The logic of presence, Whitman's “profound lesson of reception,” has its own violence. The Whitmanian convulsion (“And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stripped heart”), attendant upon the reduction of all things to appearance, is the counter-violence to that which flows from the logic of clarification, the reduction of all things to univocal meaning. The tongue of the soul is the principle of continuity figured as the “hum” of subvocal, absorbed, multitudinous, continuously regulated “valved voice,”



or "this soul," as Whitman elsewhere says, ". . . its other name is Literature."<sup>20</sup> The tongue sacrifices the subject of justice in the interest of a personal immediacy that overcomes the difference of the social body, but at the same time destroys (tongue to bare-stripped heart) the destiny of the secular person which the social body is.

In a tract Whitman wrote in 1856 on behalf of Fremont (whom Lincoln also supported), Whitman produces his model of "The Redeemer President" whose way will be "not exclusive, but inclusive."<sup>21</sup> Lincoln was not Whitman's redeemer president. Lincoln was the type of the "unknown original" (Sapir's expression) from which, as from the utterance of the hermit thrush of the elegy, Whitman translated his song. Whitman's taxonomic line runs "askant" history (the abstract pattern he deletes is precisely the element of the line that has a history).<sup>22</sup> That variation produces the infinite access he required for his "peace that passes the art and argument of earth." In Lincoln's terms such a variation is as transgressive (and of the same nature) as Douglas's "squatter sovereignty," or slavery itself.

Lincoln's sentence, by contrast, prolongs the history of each soul beyond mortality in a never-darkened theater of judgment. In the midst of an argument in his "Second Annual Address" (1862) in support of compensated emancipation, Lincoln inserts the following sentence: "In times like these men should utter nothing for which they would not be responsible through time and in eternity."<sup>23</sup> In the straitening of choice, Lincoln in his language grows thick with character, the pure case of tragic personhood enacting the indissolubility of a moral identity that persists across eschatological boundaries in continuous space and time (the cosmological expression of ethical contract)—unmistakable, eternally situated, judged. The peroration of the same speech begins: "Fellow citizens, *we* cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us. The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor

or dishonor, the latest generation,"<sup>24</sup> By deleting the abstract pattern of internal marks that closes the traditional line and carries is across time, Whitman deleted history, founded an infinite resource of acknowledgment, dissolved the moral praxis of the singular individual, and "launched forth" (as he says at the end of the "Song of the Answerer") into the desituate universe of transparent minds, generated by an open metrical contract, "to sweep through the ceaseless rings and never be quiet again." Lincoln's language, unlike Whitman's, is empowered because it is of the same nature as the institutions that invented him, and his space and time are institutional space and time. In such a world, judgment and acknowledgment are inseparable; and the economy of scarcity is reconstituted in the oldest economic terms of our civilization—honor or dishonor.

Both Whitman and Lincoln are captives of a system of representation, which they are commissioned to justify and put in place as an order of the human world—a policy for union. Are there two policies, or only one? On the one hand, a Whitmanian policy—open, egalitarian, in a sense socialist (as Matthiessen thought it to be), generalized from the fame-power of art, and darkly qualified by that abjection of the subject of value which is the other side of receptivity; and, on the other hand, a Lincolnian system—closed, republican, capitalist, a regulative policy driven by the logic of clarification, and darkly qualified in its turn by the oblitative implications both of moral exclusiveness and the delegatory economies of labor? We have seen that the centered, hierarchical, Lincolnian ethical rationality is precisely the enemy element from which Whitman is bent upon exempting his human world. We see also that the resonant, scale-finding, integrative vocality of Lincoln is the most severe criticism our literature affords of Whitman's indeterminate realization of the person—"You whoever you are." Whitman's "Word over all, beautiful as the sky" reconciles what Lincoln's ethical dualism drives into division, yet only at that distance; Lincoln's sentiment of ethical difference cruelly specifies the limit of variation in which regulative-rationality can produce

the actual life of all men. But despite the reciprocally canceling nature of Whitman and Lincoln as liberators, the gravity of representation itself unites them in a common conservatism.

In the "Preface of 1855" Whitman lays down his own regulative sentence: "Nothing out of its place is good and nothing in its place is bad."<sup>25</sup> For Whitman the final sorting category of presence, the place of good life, is (as I have said) mere existence of which the dwelling is the open air, and the poetic structure the internally unmarked line manifesting "as amid light" the natural stress characteristics of language in the natural order, determined at the end by the objectively finite plenitude of each of an infinite number of facts of being *caught in a brilliant virtuality from which it cannot depart*: "Passing the yellow-speared wheat, every grain from its shroud in / the dark-brown fields uprisen."<sup>26</sup> For Lincoln that same place of good life is "the national homestead"—a boundless, mastered autochthony specified, rendered continuously intelligible and therefore free, by the internal markings of superordinate measure. It is Lincoln who says: "There is no line, straight or crooked, on which to divide."

#### IV

One reason we turn to criticism of poetry is to bring to pass projects that become possible only when we make statements about poetic texts. We do criticism because we are busy about something else. In this sense, we do not intend the poem; we intend the intention that brought the poet to poetry, which is not the poem but the reason for taking poetry in hand. Our judgment upon the poem is an assessment of the likelihood of the coming to pass of what is intended. And our judgment, or the poet's, upon poetry itself is an assessment of its usefulness as an instrument of our urgent, common work.

In "a society waiting," as Whitman says of his America, "unformed . . . between things ended and things begun," Whitman intended a revision of all "conjunctive relations."<sup>27</sup> Of this revision

the "great poet" was the sign, and also the incarnation of the regulative principle of his own signifier, the poem—man of his word. As the world over which Lincoln presided darkened through the Civil War, Whitman saw the defeat of fraternity which was the substance of his policy. The seal of that defeat, the murder of the president, he inscribed with his great reconstructive "Burial Hymn," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." During that period, Lincoln in his speeches drew the world with justificatory intensity and comprehensiveness ever deeper into the system of representation whose structure was expressed in his political and strategic judgments, as in the "Second Inaugural": "Until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the Sword." Whitman, on the other hand, tended more and more to modify his regulative principles to release the world from the over-determination of all systems of representation, as in the consummatory cry of perfect translation: "I spring out of these pages into your arms—decease calls me forth."<sup>28</sup>

As is the case with pastoral elegy in general, "When Lilacs Last" is, first of all, a gesture of riddance of a prior representational dispensation unable to "keep" its children. (Whitmanian celebration by pluralization extinguishes all personhood which has *only* singular form—["Nor for you, for one alone / Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring."])<sup>29</sup> Second, the elegy effects the reconstitution of the world on the basis of the new supersessory system (in "Lycidas" the "unexpressive nuptial song," in Whitman's poem "yet varying ever-altering song"). Finally, it investigates the implications of a "passing," or paratactic transcendence, of that new system of representation toward a right state of the world undeformed by any mediation of discourse. One reason for the fullness of articulation of Whitman's poem lies in the complexity of its judgment, not only on the failed predecessor system of which all that survives is love without an object, but also on itself as a policy toward the consummation of that love—a union not broken by the means of its accomplishment. In this judgment of the judge whose justice does not divide consists the final profundity of Whitman, his "delicacy" as the late James Wright called it.

"When Lilacs Last" repeats the millennial archetype of the death of the Beloved Companion whose *nostos* is complete ("Nothing out of its place is good; and nothing in its place is bad"). The elegy returns to the West; Lincoln had departed four years earlier on his journey from West to East (displacing an autochthonous power in the service of an alien rationality) with the great sentences of farewell at Springfield, Illinois (11 February 1861), which begin with double negatives that seal, at the moment of deracination, untranslatable individuality into irreducible space and time: "Friends: no one not in my situation, can appreciate my sadness at this parting. . . . Here I have lived . . . , and have passed from a young to an old man. Here my children have been born, and one is buried."<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Whitman's correlative rehearsal of departure in the opposite direction, from East to West (his revision in 1862 of the opening stanza to "Starting from Paumanock") sets the self at large in the field of consciousness—at the other end from Lincoln of the truth table for the particle [or]:

Aware of the fresh free giver the flowing Missouri, aware  
of the mighty Niagara,  
Aware of the buffalo herds grazing the plains, the hirsute  
and strong-breasted bull,  
Of earth, rocks, Fifth-month flowers experienced, stars, rain,  
snow, my amaze . . . ,

released from the rational justice of situation, inclusive of many places at once (here and also there) not as seeing is but as light is. And yet "Solitary, singing in the West." The old situated world of unexchangeable Euclidean marks provided the object of love—the Beloved Companion—to Whitman as elegist; but the new world of the open principle provides the elegy. It springs forth at the death of the loved person, released from the hermeneutic bondage ("O the black murk that hides the star!") which invented that person and destroyed him—a supersessive culture of keeping as union one and many ("each to keep and all"), by its nature requiring his loss. The loss of the companion precipitates the speaker in the poem upon a new autonomy—a searching of the boundaries of

representation ("dusk and dim") for an instrument of sociability that does not produce the disappearance of its object.

At the heart of Whitman's elegy is the scene of the reading of the song of the hermit thrush named "Solitary," the "loud human song" of the unknown original, the singular person. This scene is a repetition of the inaugural action of translation (as pluralization) by which in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" the poet received his commissioning ("Now in a moment I know what I am for . . . / And already a thousand singers . . . have started to life within me, never to die"). To accomplish this katabasis requires a re-fraternalization by which the poet becomes the conjunctive term between the "thought" of death and its "knowledge," general and particular, many and one—the hand in hand of union mediated only by the consciousness of continuous vitality. In this relationship, the poet becomes the "Answerer," who addresses the central question of freedom which is suffering, as recognition itself, the signifier of nothing. From the renewal of his central originality Whitman receives the vision of things as they are with the living and the dead. He translates Lincoln's death without exchanging it for any term whatsoever, and the "slain soldiers of the war" without the commutation of any rational value:

I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,  
I saw debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,  
But I saw they were not as was thought,  
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,  
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,  
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,  
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.

Through the establishment of difference between the living and the dead—a laying of ghosts, including Lincoln and his meanings—the elegist recovers the perceptibility of his world, as Lincoln had established the difference between persons and things by the emancipation of the slaves, and thus restored the rationality of the polity. But the act of perceptual autonomy ("free sense") finds Whitman, at the moment of his greatest originality, at the greatest

distance also from the social world in which alone his intention can have meaning, that world over which Lincoln presided as emancipator, accounting for the same facts of suffering (at Gettysburg, for example, or in the "Second Inaugural") according to compensatory economies of theodicy, those of dedication, sacrifice, and the vengeance of God.

Both Whitman (poet citizen) and Lincoln (citizen president) intended a "just and lasting peace" in a polity that had lost regulative stability and consequently postponed the antinomy of those two terms. Each took in hand a millennial instrument of representation the nature of which he articulated as policy with singular fidelity: in Lincoln's case, the political principle of sociability based in commutative justice, the logic of noncontradiction, singular identity, and the hierarchy of rational order—the language of tragic personhood; in Whitman's case, the poetic principle of sociability, based in an abstraction from the representational function of art, and organized in accord with a redistributive counterlogic of presence as pluralization and the transference of affection—a comedy of justice without exchange. But the Whitmanian distributive politics of "transference" fails to obtain unanimity because it has no natural standpoint (there is no transference consistent with the social life of the person), and thus obtains only justice without constitution. Likewise the Lincolnian poetics of fairness does not obtain fairness because the nature of the person on whose behalf it acts limits the systemic change possible to the institutions that represent it—constitution without justice. Both men succeeded in mastering their instrument, but not (as each so profoundly intended) in overcoming its nature. The contradiction between equality and perpetuation—Declaration as justice, and Constitution as structure—was more powerful than the systems of representation that invented these men (and which they sponsored) could conciliate, because the contradiction is of the same nature as the system.

Thus, having made one out of many, the common work of policy and poetry, Lincoln and Whitman left behind the inherently unfinished, reconstructive task of making many, once again of one—the

creation of a real world consistent with its principles both of value and of order. Near the close of his "Second Annual Message" in which he promulgated the Emancipation, Lincoln distinguished between imagining and doing, and between the present and the past:

It is not "Can any of us *imagine* better?" but "can we all *do* better?" . . . The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.<sup>31</sup>

Both men, together with most of their literary contemporaries, saw the historical moment as one requiring new structures of response; both deprecated the category of the imaginary, and both intended to "disenthrall" the self in the interest of national authenticity. In the end, however, the freedom conferred by Whitman and Lincoln remained, as I have suggested, virtual and paradoxical. The empowered master, Lincoln, was unable, by the very nature of his power, to legislate a social world in which his intention could become actual. Whitman, the master of social love (the better president as he understood it), was unable, by the nature of his fundamental revision of personhood, to enter the world by any act, except the deathwatch of the wounded in Lincoln's war.<sup>32</sup>

The fate of Whitmanian policy brings to mind the observation that words in poetry are only as effective as the institutions in which they have meaning. More particularly, "bad faith" attaches to open form in that it anticipates, by the radical nature of its truth, no institution in which its words can have effect, no world in which its text is transmitted, and yet no presence of the self-authorized person it liberates except the image or eidolon of the poem. Correlatively, we note from the fate of Lincolnian policy, which is our history: that the language of closed form is empowered because it is of the same structure as human institutions; but that such institutions, or for that matter such poems (Yeats's for example), are only as moral as the grammar of their construction, and powerless to mediate by secular means the irrepressible conflict of legitimacies which is the principle of their life.

Are there then, as between Whitman and Lincoln, two policies of union or only one? There is, on the showing of this argument, only one—with this qualification: A faithful response to Whitman's originality will be a continual critique, in view of a policy toward institutions, of the structures of representation, in the light of the revelation of personhood unmistakably presented in Lincoln's language and countenance—the archetype of the doomed companion laboring in history, whom we now know and hope to love. The open road is the one line that is not imaginary.

## NOTES

1. The argument of this paper is extensively indebted to James Buechler, "Abraham Lincoln, American Literature, and the Affirmation of Union" (1955), a Harvard Honors essay.

2. See Arthur Bestor, "The American Civil War as a Constitutional Crisis," in Lawrence M. Friedman and Harry N. Scheiber, *American Law and the Constitutional Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 234:

But the abstractness of Constitutional issues has nothing to do, one way or the other, with the role they may happen to play at a moment of crisis. Thanks to the structure of the American Constitutional system itself, the abstruse issue of slavery in the territories was required to carry the burden of well-nigh all the emotional drives, well-nigh all the political and economic tensions, and well-nigh all the moral perplexities that resulted from the existence in the United States of an archaic system of labor and an intolerable policy of racial subjection.

3. The analysis of Lincoln's meanings that follows is not psychological in method. I have, however, greatly benefited from the findings of Dwight G. Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln, The Quest for Immortality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); also, George B. Forgie, *Patricide in the House Divided* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), and Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

4. The destruction by the Revolution of the older "prestige order," based on inherited class or status, was accompanied by the development of an "indigenous class structure . . . based upon property." See Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 282, 283. The loss of feudal status-criteria, and the loss also of the model of the hypostatic union (the union of persons in

the Trinity), were correlative shocks contributing to the crisis. Emerson and Whitman attempted to recuperate the former development by reconstructing on a secular basis the empowerments lost as a consequence of the latter.

5. See John T. Irwin, "Self-Evidence and Self-Reference: Nietzsche and Tragedy, Whitman and Opera" in *New Literary History* 9, no. 1 (Autumn 1979):177-92. I fully agree with his notion of the "endlessly oscillating grounding" of self and text in Whitman, but not with his assimilation of Whitman's song to Schopenhauer's music.

6. In a conversation with the Reverend J. P. Gulliver in 1860, Lincoln specified two biographical moments in which his style was formed. As a child, he says:

I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. I don't think I ever got angry at anything else in my life. I was not satisfied until I had repeated it over and over, until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was a kind of passion with me. . . . I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, till I have bounded it North, and bounded it South, and bounded it East, and bounded it West.

The other moment he describes as the discovery of a means to make *demonstration* result, as Webster's dictionary promised, in "certain proof." He supplied the means by secluding himself in his father's house "til I could give any proposition in the six books of Euclid at sight." Gulliver's report was published in the *New York Independent*, 1 September 1864, rpt. in James Mellon, *The Face of Lincoln* (New York: Viking Press, 1979). Lincoln's source for the "house divided" image as a logical contradiction is Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, 1:8 of *The Complete Writings*, ed. Philip Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1945).

7. The centrality in Lincoln's mind, and the minds of his audiences, of the hermeneutic proposition—"the intention of the law-giver is the law"—is attested by its place in "The First Inaugural." Roy P. Basler et al., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1954), 4:263; hereafter cited as Basler.

Much of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and other central arguments of Lincoln, notably "The Cooper Institute Address," are efforts to infer from indirect indications the intentions of the fathers who become archetypes of the hidden meaning-intending will of the singular person. Lincoln's God is also such a person. Divergence of interpretive inference is one of the obstacles to unanimity which, as I shall suggest, Whitman undertakes to abolish: "Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems? / Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems." "Song of Myself," 11.32, 33 in Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodget, *Walt Whitman: Leaves of Grass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973); hereafter cited as Bradley.

8. Marianne Moore's "Lincoln and the Art of the Word" in *A Marianne Moore Reader* (New York: Viking Press, 1965) characterizes him as a "Euclid of the heart." The standard essay on Lincoln as a writer is Roy P. Basler, "Lincoln's Development as a Writer" in *A Touchstone for Greatness* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973). See also, Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 119ff.

9. Lincoln's identification of the deontological distinction between right and wrong with the rhetorical authority of "logic" can be seen in the following reply to Douglas at Alton (Basler 3:315): "He says he 'don't care whether it [slavery] is voted up or voted down' in the territories. . . . Any man can say that who does not see anything wrong with slavery, but no man can logically say he don't care whether a wrong is voted up or voted down. He may say he don't care whether an indifferent thing is voted up or down, but he must logically have a choice between a right thing and a wrong thing."

10. F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 90.

11. For Whitman on abolition, see Whitman's essays in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1846 and 1847, reprinted in Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, *The Gathering of Forces* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1920) 1:179-238. Note also Whitman's essays in the same volume on union. Whitman and Lincoln held the same political views, except that Whitman's attitude toward government and political parties displayed his aversion to units of social organization other than the individual and the whole. For the development of the Transcendental writers of the period toward the acceptance of abolition, see Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973).

12. Basler, 4:264.

13. "I therefore declare that, in view of the Constitution and the laws, the Union is unbroken; and, to the extent of my ability, I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all the States" (Basler, 4:265).

14. Taney in *Dred Scott* makes plain the primary function of the Constitution as a regulative document which creates by secular means rights-bearing human beings, according to the principle of difference: "The words 'people of the United States' and 'citizens' are synonymous terms, and mean the same thing. . . . It is true, every person, and every class of persons, who were at the time of the adoption of the Constitution recognized as citizens in the several States, became also citizens of this new political body; but none other; it was formed by them, and for them and their posterity, but for no one else" in Henry Steele Commager, *Documents of American History* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), pp. 339-45.

15. This was a conscious and practical matter. E. Merton Coulter (*The Confederate States of America, 1861-1865* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950], p. 10) cites a Georgia editor (*Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, 25 October 1862) who says of slavery that it made "the poor man respectable." It gave the poor "an elevated position in society that they would not otherwise have." For the specific legal requirement of respect by slaves see the *Code Noir* of Louisiana, cited in John Codman Hurd, *The Law of Freedom and Bondage* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1962) 2:157, 158. More generally, "Slavery was seen as a model of dependence and self-surrender. For Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine this meant that it was a necessary part of a world that required moral order and discipline; it was the base on which rested an intricate and hierarchical pattern of authority" (David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966], p. 90; hereafter cited as Davis).

16. Emory Holloway, *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921), 2:69; hereafter cited as Holloway. For the functional analogy between body/matter/slave, and soul/spirit/master, see Davis, p. 304.

17. Holloway, 2:65.

18. See "Fragment on Free Labor" (Basler 3:462), and "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin," 30 September 1859 (*ibid.*, pp. 471ff.).

19. Edward Sapir, *Language: an Introduction to the Study of Speech* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 224; D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classical American Literature* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 170. For Cesare Pavese, see Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. 317.

20. In "Democratic Vistas" at p. 981, *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982).

21. "The Eighteenth Presidency" in Clifton Joseph Furness, *Walt Whitman's Workshop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), p. 109.

22. Cf. 15.171 of "When Lilacs Last . . .": "And I saw askant the armies." The "crossing" moment, as in "Calvary Crossing a Ford," or the crossing of bodies in #5 of "Song of Myself," signifies for Whitman immediacy of access, unqualified by space or time. So, also, in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "I see you face to face."

23. Basler, 5:535.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 537.

25. On honor and dishonor as a zero-sum transaction see the "Epilogue" to Gregory Nagy, *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 261.

26. Bradley, p. 714, 11.123-24.

27. The expression is William James's. James's "radical empiricism" is fundamentally explanatory of Whitman's epistemology.

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is not directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system. . . . Radical empiricism, as I understand it, does full justice to conjunctive relations, without however treating them as rationalism always tends to treat them as being true in some supernal way, as if the unity of things and their variety belonged to different orders of truth and vitality altogether.*

William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism and a Pluralistic Universe* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971) pp. 25, 26.

28. Whitman's equivocation of the difference of sign and signified, word and thing, body and soul, "I" and "you" expresses an intention to rid conjunctive transactions (whether seeing, loving, speaking, or political bonding) of all representational mediations. This is the reason of his use of Lucretian optics (as in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"), his interest in phrenology, his dislike of political parties, poetic diction, mythology, and so on.

29. "Celebration" in Whitman (as in "I celebrate myself") invokes the meaning of pluralization which inheres in all cognates of Latin *celebrare*. Pluralization as a solution to the bad faith of speaking at all (where silence signifies fraternal union, and speech interrupts that union) is vividly expressed by George Fox in *A Battle-door for Teachers and Professors to Learn Singular and Plural*: "All languages are to me no more than dust, who was before Languages were, and am redeemed out of Languages into the power where all men shall agree" cited by Richard Bauman in "Speaking in the Light: The Role of the Quaker Minister" in Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 146.

30. Basler, 4:90.

31. Basler, 5:537.

32. My discussion of Whitman is intended to show that a serious political poetry (like a serious policy of any kind) is not merely an advocacy, but an addition to the given repertory of conjunctive relationships such that "literary" judgment about the poetry's success or failure constitutes an assessment (or problematic) of the coming-to-pass, as an actual state of affairs, of the life which is its "subject." In this sense, a poetic structure is a political policy. Whitman identified for modernism, and for our time as well as I believe, the heuristic primacy of the structural features of poetry.



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