

Whitman Unbound: Democracy and Poetic Form, 1912–1931

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. . . the expanded scientific and democratic
and truly philosophic and poetic quality of
modernism . . .

—Walt Whitman,
“American National Literature” (1891)

“**H**AS NOT THE TIME ARRIVED WHEN, (if it must be plain said, for democratic America’s sake, if for no other) there must imperatively come a readjustment of the whole theory and nature of Poetry?”¹ As with so much else in his insistently proleptic writings, Walt Whitman’s urgent rhetorical question leaves the reader with little room for doubt. Here and elsewhere, Whitman aspires to be the foremost theorist of democratic poetics and at the same time its definitive practitioner. In other moments, however, Whitman will write in a more speculative vein, as if he were less sure what it meant to adjust the theory of poetry to the conditions of democracy. He writes more tentatively in his final preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1892): “I consider ‘Leaves of Grass’ and its theory experimental—as, in the deepest sense, I consider our American republic itself to be, with its theory” (657). Writing within this retrospective frame of mind, Whitman implies that his theory of democratic poetry remains only one option out of a range of unspecified possibilities, making room for the rise of democratic bards in the future. In some moods, then, Whitman announces himself as an authoritative literary theorist, while at other moments he seems to realize that embracing democracy entails the evacuation of his own poetic authority: “He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher” (242).

What is to be gained by uncoupling Whitman’s theory of democratic poetics from the force of his poetic example? This essay attempts to answer this question by surveying some alternative accounts of democratic poetics. Without denying his seminal contribution to this general

topic, I want to entertain the possibility of non-Whitmanian theories of democratic poetics, and in so doing, to point the way beyond *Leaves of Grass* as the normative standard for what it means to be “democratic” in poetry. Framing the issue as a theoretical problem serves to reverse the usual critical emphasis on Whitman’s poetic “influence,” which charts the galvanizing effect of his poetry upon such later figures as Carl Sandburg, Hart Crane, and Allen Ginsberg.² Instead, this essay traces a specific moment in U.S. literary history, the decades of the 1910s and 1920s, in order to show how modernist critics applied Whitman’s theory in ways that depart from his original ideas, or, in some cases, how these critics explicitly rejected his views. Whitman’s uneven reception in these years highlights two surprising facts about U.S. literary history and its theoretical foundations: first, that alternatives to Whitman’s theory of democratic poetics were already available in U.S. literary discourse as early as 1912; and second, that a strain of the literary movement known as modernism, often aligned in politics with fascism, authoritarianism, or aristocratic elitism, was actually quite preoccupied with forging a connection between poetry and political democracy.

My claim that democratic poetics has a non-Whitmanian history complements recent work on U.S. historical poetics by Virginia Jackson, Yopie Prins, Eliza Richards, Max Cavitch, and others.³ In *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Jackson describes the historical process whereby various poetic modes—“riddles, papyrae, epigrams, songs, sonnets, *blazons*, *Leider*, elegies, dialogues, conceits, ballads, hymns, and odes”—were gradually assimilated into a single poetic category of “the lyric.” The result of this process of “lyricization,” she explains, is nothing less than “the emergence of the lyric genre as a modern mode of literary interpretation.”⁴ Jackson uncovers this history in order to demonstrate that “the lyric” is not a transhistorical category, but a concept that evolved at a very specific moment in time—beginning in the era of Romanticism, passing through modernism, and continuing up to the present day. Historical perspective is also essential to rethinking the category of democratic poetics. Yet where Jackson teaches us to look beyond the conventions of twentieth-century modernism, which are too often treated as normative for earlier literary history, this essay suggests that we need to look forwards, beyond the major critical authorities of the nineteenth century. Unlike the all-purpose genre of “the lyric,” the problem with “democratic poetics” lies in the fact that this category is often construed too narrowly rather than too broadly. While Dickinson’s stature as a canonical “lyric” poet gradually emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, Whitman’s authority on democracy and poetry has rarely been called into question. In the skeptical account offered

here, to describe a poem as “democratic” does not characterize an object so much as expose a particular way of reading that has become deeply internalized and, thus, unexamined. Twentieth-century readers of Whitman demonstrate that his program was never that coherent in the first place, and could be put to many different uses. Rather than tacitly adopt some version of Whitman’s theory, we need to acknowledge, along with his modernist critics, that there are a variety of models for what it means to read and write democratically.⁵

Whitman’s Theory of Democratic Poetics

As a prelude to my discussion of these alternative models, it will be useful to review the main tenets of Whitman’s poetic theory. Generalizing from scattered comments made throughout his prose, Whitman’s theory consists of three negative doctrines—the rejection of meter, the rejection of rhyme, and the rejection of conventional poetic diction—and one positive one, the use of the plain style. I am using “form” in the broadest sense to cover matters of rhythm and rhetoric. Needless to say, Whitman never described these four doctrines systematically, nor did he ever employ the phrase “democratic poetics.” Yet for the past century and a half, literary critics from Edmund Dowden (1871) to Angus Fletcher (2004) have based their analysis of democracy and poetry on one of these doctrines, and cite Whitman as their authority for doing so.

Out of the four elements that compose his democratic poetics, Whitman is perhaps best known for associating democracy with the rejection of traditional poetic meter and rhyme: “The truest and greatest *Poetry*, (while subtly and necessarily always rhythmic, and distinguishable easily enough,) can never again, in the English language, be express’d in arbitrary and rhyming metre” (1056). Whitman’s scorn for the laws of metrical measurement and rhyme, as we see in this passage from “Ventures, on an Old Theme” (1872), is linked directly to his sense of freedom from the “arbitrary” authority of monarchy and aristocracy. Whitman thus echoes the note on “The Verse” in *Paradise Lost*, where John Milton claims that “ancient liberty” has been “recover’d” from the “troublesome and modern bondage of Riming.”⁶ In the “Preface to *Leaves of Grass*” (1855), Whitman extended this argument to include liberation from meter, too: rhyme and meter allow “abstract addresses” and “good precepts,” he writes, but obstruct the autonomous expression of “the soul.” “Perfect poems” follow a different logic from that used in traditional, rule-based forms: they illustrate “the free growth of metrical

laws” and “take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form” (11). On this view, the absence of “rhyme and [metrical] uniformity” indicates a poet’s commitment to the free expression of (human) nature. The democratic citizen was entitled to “free growth” in his private imagination just as in the public world of politics.

In addition to rejecting meter and rhyme, Whitman argued that the democratic poet must avoid artificial diction. He explains the third doctrine of democratic poetics in this passage from *Democratic Vistas* (1870): “To-day, doubtless, the infant genius of American poetic expression . . . lies sleeping, aside, unrecking itself, in some western idiom, or native Michigan or Tennessee repartee, or stump-speech—or in Kentucky or Georgia, or the Carolinas—or in some slang or local song or allusion of the Manhattan, Boston, Philadelphia or Baltimore mechanic—or up in the Maine woods—or off in the hut of the California miner . . .” (980). American poetry becomes democratic only when it reproduces the vernacular idiom used in different regions of the nation. A poet who seeks out local dialects and conversational phrases proves his commitment to democracy by transgressing traditional class boundaries. By insisting on rugged, local speech, the democratic poet tears down the barrier between “the coteries, the art-writers, the talkers and critics” and working-class laborers like the “mechanic” or “miner” (980).

Fourth, and finally, Whitman’s commitment to democratic poetics sometimes takes the form of defending the plain style, as when he declares, “I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. . . . What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (14). In this appeal to artlessness, Whitman repeats a standard pastoral trope, one that reaches back to classical poets like Horace. Yet in Whitman’s case, the plain style embodies the principles of equality and transparency that are emphatically linked to the ideals of modern democracy: “The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms, Only then can you understand us, We are no better than you, What we enclose you enclose, What we enjoy you may enjoy” (14). In addition to simplicity of style, then, Whitman’s fourth doctrine of democratic poetics also aspires to immediate intelligibility, the kind of style that can appeal to a mass audience. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman praises “words simple as grass, uncomb’d head, laughter, naivetè, / Slow-stepping feet, common features, common modes and emanations” (231). Whitman idealized a mode of poetic speech that employed a low register of diction and a syntax that avoided hierarchical

constructions like subordinate clauses. The “Preface to *Leaves of Grass*” famously employs a nonnormative style of punctuation, as if to record the movement of thought in real time, without the interference of formal systems of textural organization. Whitman’s acceptance of what linguists call a “descriptive” rather than a “prescriptive” view of grammar means that he embraces ungrammatical phrasing in order to capture the way that people actually speak. Since all American poems partake of the ruffian spirit of the “great radical Republic,” they will need to be delivered in a “loud, ill-pitch’d voice, utterly regardless whether the verb agrees with the nominative” (1017). Whitman believed that the plain style would enable the poet to represent the shared patterns of speech and understanding necessary to a thriving democratic public sphere.

American literary critics between 1912–1931 discussed all four of Whitman’s doctrines, yet they did not necessarily find his doctrines logically consistent with one another, or even defensible on their own terms. Part of the problem is that Whitman’s doctrines rely on multiple definitions of *form*, which lead his readers to talk about different things when discussing how poetry can represent democracy through its style. Sometimes these critics emphasize only one part of Whitman’s theory (for example, his idea of the plain style) while ignoring a different aspect (for example, his view of meter). In other instances these critics will repudiate one of Whitman’s central ideas—arguing, for example, that rhyme is actually more democratic than free verse because rhymed poetry is easier to memorize, and thus easier to pass along to younger generations and disparate social classes. Looked at individually, the critical approaches pursued by figures like Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Harriet Monroe, Josephine Preston Peabody, James Oppenheim, Max Eastman, Louis Untermeyer, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes further confirm Whitman’s authority as a theorist. Yet when these critics are viewed as a group, the variety of their responses serves to call Whitman’s authority into question. As such, these modernist critics can teach us a surprising lesson about the politics of poetic theory. The lesson they collectively teach is that the “democratic” qualities of poetry need not reside primarily in the use of free verse, idiomatic language, plain style, or relationship to mass culture, but can be found in the development of political ideas within an individual career, or even across the stanzas of an individual poem. By the strength of their qualification and dissent, these critics help us to imagine what it might mean to speak of Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, or Charles Bernstein as democratic poets *without* comparing their work to *Leaves of Grass*. Disenchanted with the results of an untenable political formalism, we might consider a more capacious

formulation: that poems articulate democratic beliefs not just through a consistent facet of style, but also by reflecting the complex arguments, images, and shifts in tone and rhythm by which the voice of democracy declares itself on and off the page.

“American poetry today is a rather large democracy”:
Monroe, Pound, and *Poetry*

Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, edited by Harriet Monroe, was the first influential “little magazine” in America to print the kind of verse we now call modernist. Starting with its very first issue in 1912, *Poetry* promoted an inclusive editorial policy that would showcase the broad range of new poetry in America. In order to advertise the magazine’s catholicity, Harriet Monroe appended this slogan to the cover of the magazine: “*To have great poets there must be great audiences, too—Whitman.*” In doing so, Monroe attempted to join an aesthetic ideal of literary quality with a democratic ideal of wide readership. She took it as her mission to expand the scope of poetry being published in the United States regardless of its obedience to established conventions, while at the same time trying to expand the size of the poetry-reading public. In the first issue of *Poetry*, Monroe explicitly linked the publication of modernist poetry to the democratization of subject matter and form:

Many people do not like poetry, in this way, as a living art to be enjoyed, but rather as an exact science to be approved. To them poetry may concern herself only with a limited number of subjects to be presented in a predetermined and conventional manner and form. To such readers the word “form” means usually only a repeated literary effect: and they do not understand that every “form” was in its first and best use an originality, employed not for the purpose of following any rule, but because it said truly what the artist wished to express.

Monroe’s discussion of poetry as a “living art” that must sometimes disobey the rules of “form” directly echoes the kind of argument that Whitman had made in his “Preface to *Leaves of Grass*.” Like Whitman, Monroe attacks the genteel notion that poetry should honor social decorum, employ a standard rhythm or rhyme, or avoid certain religious or sexual subjects. She viewed the poet’s right to experiment with new subjects as an extension of America’s love of freedom.

Despite her position as editor in chief of *Poetry*, Monroe depended heavily on the advice and contacts of the magazine’s foreign correspondent Ezra Pound. Pound denied that poetry’s value depended in any way on the size of its audience. In an essay entitled “The Audience” in

the October 1914 issue, Pound repudiated Monroe's use of Whitman on the back cover of her magazine: "[T]he artist is *not* dependent upon his audience." Underwriting Pound's critique is a radically undemocratic view of the relation between writer and reader, one that anticipates his authoritarian pronouncements in the decades ahead: "Humanity is the rich effluvium, it is the waste and the manure and the soil, and from it grows the tree of the arts. . . . It is true that the great artist has always a great audience, even in his lifetime; but it is not the *vulgo* but the spirits of irony and of destiny and of humor, sitting within him."⁷ Pound's model of poetic communication is frankly hierarchical. The "great artist" does not write in order to address the audience of "[h]umanity," but solely to please the artistic judge within himself. Whatever satisfaction we, "the *vulgo*," gain from a poet's labor is so much "effluvium" and "waste."

Monroe's response to Pound was sharp and decisive, and served to articulate a vision of modernism that was hospitable to democracy. In part 2 of "The Audience," Monroe interprets Pound's position in highly political terms, accusing him of nostalgia for the "aristocratic ages," when the artist obeyed the directives of a patron or wrote to please a "coterie." In contrast to Pound, Monroe believes that the audience for modern poetry is already at home in the conditions of mass democracy. The modern poet, therefore, must adjust himself to the contemporary political climate: "Of old, when the poet spoke for a few, the response of the few was enough. Today, when he must speak for the many, the many must hear him, must not only hear but understand him in their profoundest secret instincts of sympathy or rebellion; else he can not utter the truth that is in him, and modern democracy must go uninspired."⁸ Whereas Ezra Pound spoke of poetry's audience in largely passive terms, waiting to receive a self-image from the imagination of the great bard, Monroe regards the poet as someone who speaks *for* the people, not *to* it. Her imagery in this passage is lifted straight out of *Leaves of Grass*—the poet is part Hebrew prophet, part congressional representative. If the poet does not "speak for the many" and "utter the truth," then "modern democracy" will lose one of its most valuable public advocates.

Though Harriet Monroe was also a practicing poet, she writes about American poetry from the perspective of an ambitious and ecumenical editor. She wanted her magazine to serve as the spiritual and artistic home for every major poet writing in English, regardless of region, style, or aesthetic school. Thus, she frequently chided those of her contemporaries who valued certain strands of modernism at the expense of others. In a 1917 review, Monroe scolded the critic Amy Lowell for promoting an exclusive view of contemporary taste: "The truth is that American poetry today is a rather large democracy. . . . So in the poetic

movement also it is unsafe to select special groups, and set metes and bounds, for every American poet has a movement all his own.”⁹ Monroe’s commitment to inclusion and stylistic variety earned the admiration of some of her most celebrated contemporaries. Edgar Lee Masters, for example, understood Monroe’s editorial efforts as a kind of civic service to American culture. He credits Monroe with a “noble feeling for democracy, a high vision of the republic’s mission, a passion for justice, an understanding of modern conditions, and a finished art.” Yet Monroe’s attempt to steer contemporary poetry in a more democratic direction turned many of her contemporaries against her. In his letters to Monroe, Pound frequently accused Monroe of timid indifference toward the avant-garde spirit of modernist poetry. In a letter of May 3, 1916, Pound offered this stern warning to Monroe: “Certain definite positions ought to be taken, and certain policy decided on, IF you are going to keep Poetry above the various other new magazines.” William Carlos Williams states his distrust of Monroe’s aesthetic judgment with equal candor: “My frank opinion is that ‘Poetry’ pays too much for its verse and that it is too anxious to be inclusive.”¹⁰

To many of her poetic contemporaries, Monroe’s editorial choices often blurred the line between generous inclusiveness and token diversity. To a cultural elitist like Pound, Monroe’s magazine illustrated the bankruptcy of democratic standards in the realm of art. To a critic like Williams, who remained sympathetic to democracy throughout his career, Monroe’s magazine pointed a different kind of lesson: a properly modernist approach to democratic poetics would demand a more rigorous attention to poetic form than Monroe was willing to adopt.¹¹ As we shall see in the next section, the meaning of democratic poetry in this period often revolved around the political implications of free verse. To remain aloof from this debate, as Monroe tried to do, was to ignore the promise of political liberation that free verse seemed to offer.

“Free Verse Hampers Poets and Is Undemocratic”: Peabody vs. Oppenheim

Debates about the meaning of free verse demonstrate the degree to which writers in this period made a correlation between literary modernism and democratic modernity. Within the U.S. literary context, the justification of free verse (often referred to by its French name, *vers libre*) as an acceptable poetic technique was largely the work of Pound and Amy Lowell. Yet the ideological significance of free verse was not confined to squabbles inside the covers of little magazines. Spurred on

by the moral urgency of the United States' entry into the First World War, free verse soon became the subject of newspaper headlines. An interview in 1916 between Joyce Kilmer and Mrs. Lionel Marks in the *New York Times Magazine* bore the alarming lead, "Free Verse Hampers Poets and Is Undemocratic." Kilmer was a poetry critic and reviewer for this magazine, and the author of the internationally famous poem, "Trees," repeatedly anthologized in poetry collections of this period. Mrs. Lionel Marks was better known to her readers as Josephine Preston Peabody, a poetess and dramatist published in respectable venues like the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *Scribner's*. A discussion about free verse and democracy between important figures like Kilmer and Peabody raised questions of civic duty and national pride in ways that appealed to the concerns of the wartime reader.

In the course of her interview with Kilmer, Peabody posits several different claims about the relation of democracy to poetry in the contemporary moment. When Kilmer asks whether modern poetry is becoming "less an art practiced and appreciated by the chosen few," Peabody strikes a pose of unabashed populism: "Certainly, poetry is becoming more democratic. . . . Most poets of genuine calling are writing now with the world in mind as an audience, not merely for the entertainment of a little literary cult." As the interview progresses, however, Peabody qualifies her initial enthusiasm. In order to remain democratic in its appeal, contemporary poetry needed to treat universal subjects and avoid obscure poetic techniques. According to Peabody, the Imagist movement failed to meet this need because they had turned their backs on previous literary traditions: "The canon of the vers libristes is essentially aristocratic. They contend, absurdly enough, that all traditional forms of rhyme and rhythm constitute a sort of bondage and therefore they arbitrarily rule them out. . . . Also they arbitrarily rule out what they call, with their fondness for labels, the 'sociological note,' 'didacticism,' 'meanings'—any ideas or emotions, in fact, that may be called communal or democratic."¹² Peabody here distances herself from those theoretical positions that equate metrical freedom with political freedom. To the contrary, she argues, it is the "vers libristes" who place shackles on the artist's liberty, since their rigid attention to technique leads their followers to dismiss the overt subject matter of any particular poem.

Peabody believed that poetry needed to employ meter and rhyme if it is to support democracy. She defended this view by saying the properties of poetic rhythm were encoded in the human cardiovascular system: "You see, the commonest thing there is, I may say the most democratic thing, is the rhythm of the heart-beat. A true poet cannot ignore this." Free verse fails to conform to the rhythmic patterns of human biology,

appealing instead to the latest intellectual fashions. Given these premises, Peabody denies that anyone writing in free verse can be a genuinely democratic poet. This includes Walt Whitman: "Whitman was a democrat in principle, but not in poetic practice. He loved humanity, but he was kept from reaching his widest audience because his verse lacked music, lacked strongly stressed, intelligible, communal music." In making this distinction between democracy in principle and democracy in poetic practice, Peabody attacks one of the central theses of Whitman's democratic poetics—the correlation between freedom from meter and rhyme, and freedom from arbitrary, nonelected political power. Whitman's failure to write democratically is confirmed by the fact that the poems he wrote "that really reached the hearts of the people are those which are most nearly traditional in form."

The contemporary poet James Oppenheim attacked Peabody's arguments in an editorial entitled "Democracy in Verse and Art" printed in the following week's edition of the *New York Times*. Oppenheim was a New York-based poet and novelist with over ten works to his name in 1916; later that year he would go on to edit *The Seven Arts* (1916–1917), an influential journal of politics and the arts. Oppenheim was deeply invested in the legacy of Walt Whitman, and he hoped to renew the idea of democratic poetry in light of twentieth-century currents of thought, especially psychoanalysis. His 1917 volume of poems, *The Book of Self*, was essentially an attempt to write a modern-day version of "Song of Myself" in the wake of the psychic discoveries of Freud and Carl Jung.

Oppenheim objected to the literary and political premises that informed Peabody's view of contemporary poetry. Her notion of democratic art was that which was most widely read, regardless of its quality. For Oppenheim, to conflate democratic poetry with popular taste was to cheapen the spiritual dimension of democratic art: "Mrs. Marks seems to think that democratic art is that art which makes direct appeal to the largest number of people. It seems to me that in just this lies the fallacy which has done much to hamper and cripple American art. If numbers are to be the guide, then art in America must remain on the level of advertising, motion pictures, and ragtime."¹³ In order to shift the discussion away from the size of a poet's audience, Oppenheim poses a series of questions about democratic style: "When shall we call style democratic? When it appeals to the kindergarten age, the primary age, the high school age? . . . It seems to me, however, that even in a democracy education is deemed of importance. . . . Interpreters have always been necessary to stand between the work of art and the audience. The

Bible, simple as its style is, has proved to be preeminently the book that needed interpreting." In Oppenheim's view, a vital democracy depends on the informed judgments of its citizens. A democratic poetry is to be known by its aesthetic quality rather than its sociological significance or its origins in human biology.

Both Peabody and Oppenheim advance arguments against formalism in the name of democracy, but they diverge as to which kind of formalism is to be avoided. Whereas free verse is the locus of Peabody's anxiety, Oppenheim finds the question of meter wholly irrelevant: "[C]an we say that Walt Whitman was an undemocratic poet because of his style? . . . Form? What has that to do with it? The main thing is that Whitman freely and fully expressed himself in the medium he found best suited to his needs. Had his temperament been different, prose would have done just as well . . . or, had he had the gift, rhyme might also have done." Oppenheim asks the reader to abandon any correlation between politics and literary style. In his view, both metrical and free verse can serve as useful techniques to the democratic poet. One locates a writer's commitment to democracy in the degree to which they achieve "an indigenous expression of America."

The newspaper articles by Peabody and Oppenheim highlight the limitations of Whitman's theory of democratic poetics. As Peabody's interview demonstrates, a political view of form can cut more than one way: one can develop a democratic justification for traditional metrical poetry, citing its capacity for memorization, just as easily as one can argue for the freedom implicit in free verse. In Oppenheim's case, we glimpse what it would mean to relate poetry to democracy without basing that inquiry upon a poet's formal choices. Though he sets out to defend Whitman's reputation as a democratic poet, Oppenheim ends up rejecting the theoretical premises upon which Whitman's democratic poetics were erected. He honors Whitman's spirit but abandons the specific teachings of his prose. Yet Oppenheim's misreading of Whitman reveals that modernist poets lived at a moment in literary history when formal decisions about meter no longer had a necessary correlation to an author's professed politics. Oppenheim's perspective unsettles our standard ideas of Whitman's poetic influence. The fact that Oppenheim's arguments sound so unusual today points out the degree to which we remain wedded to a narrow (Whitmanian) understanding of democratic poetics.

Objectivity for the Masses: Max Eastman's Radical Conservatism

Like Josephine Preston Peabody, the poet and critic Max Eastman also hoped to reconcile his democratic beliefs with the discipline of traditional poetic craft. Eastman's adherence to traditional forms coexisted alongside his strong leftist commitments. A founding editor of *The Masses*, a leading journal of socialism and the arts, Eastman participated in intellectual controversies on free love, anarchism, censorship, and the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti. Despite his allegiance to revolutionary politics, however, Eastman's literary tastes remained strictly traditional. In his first two volumes of poems, *Child of the Amazons* (1913) and *Colors of Life* (1918), Eastman composed in rhyme, uniform stanzas, and archaic forms like the sonnet.

In "American Ideals of Poetry," the preface to *Colors of Life*, Eastman addresses those readers who have wondered why "my poetry has never entered even so deeply as it might into those tempests of social change that are coloring our thoughts today."¹⁴ Eastman recognized that his blend of progressive politics and traditional aesthetics was out of step with the fashions of the day: "Poetry that has life for its subject, and democratic reality, is rather expected to manifest that irregular flow and exuberance of material over structure with which Walt Whitman challenged the world" (14). Like Amy Lowell, Eastman denied the resemblance between Whitman and the Imagists. Whereas many modernists regarded free verse as a conscious poetic technique, Eastman claimed that Whitman used free rhythms in order to shock his readers, writing lines of conspicuous vulgarity: "Walt Whitman, however he may have been deceived about the social and democratic character of his form, was not deceived, as the modern eulogists of free verse are, about its subtlety" (30). Whitman broke up his lines and abandoned meter because he aimed to convey his democratic message in the most transparent and direct way possible, not to create a new style in art. His desire to reach a popular audience led him to advertise "a grand contempt for beauty, and for the effort to attract or gratify a reader with 'verbal melody,' a contempt for everything that savors of deliberate technique in art" (20).

Eastman cites Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" as a useful alternative to Whitman's free verse poetics. While Whitman saw the poet as a prophetic seer, Poe characterized the poet as an engineer or magician. For Poe the aim of poetic composition was not self-expression, but manipulating the emotions of the reader through specific formal mechanisms. Poe has nothing but "contempt," Eastman writes, for Whitman's belief "that the technique of art is not deliberate,

that poets are not seeking to attract and gratify, that truth or moral or meaning instead of beauty is the portent of the poem” (21). Eastman thus positions Poe as a protomodernist literary theorist—a native writer who cared as much for beauty and craft as contemporaries like Pound and Lowell. But Poe was not only the more refined stylist; he was also the more authentic democrat. Eastman credits Poe’s theory of poetic impersonality with a democratic motive. To Poe, “a poem was an objective thing,” while for Whitman it remained “an act of subjective expression” (21). Despite Whitman’s sentiments of comradeship and brotherly solidarity, his poetics remained fatally self-centered and solitary. “The rebel egoism of democracy was in him the lordly and compelling thing,” Eastman writes, “and though his love for the world was prodigious, it was not the kind of love that gives attention instinctively to the egoism of others” (24). Whitman’s visionary impulses are essentially private, mystical experiences, rendering his poetry inaccessible to the common reader. He remained too satisfied with the role of prophetic visionary to shape his lines into controlled thoughts and measured rhythms. According to Eastman, Whitman’s sprawling free verse betrays the marks of a ravenous, egotistical will that is directly opposed to social life in a democratic community.

By contrast, Poe’s poems were designed to be intelligible to a wide range of readers. Though “[t]here may be no grand passion in the idea,” Eastman concedes, “there is a natural companionship with the fact of ‘democracy,’ in Poe’s statement that he ‘kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable’” (24). By shifting the analysis from ideas to poetics, Eastman positions Poe as a more authentically political poet than Whitman. Poe need not explicitly address the topic of democracy in order to articulate a truly democratic poetics; he simply has to “mould [his] poems objectively” in order to be “in social communion with humanity” (24). To forge a democratic poetics, then, no longer depends on the content of a poem, but rather on the degree to which traditional forms provide a rhythmic template through which to share a reading experience. Without meter, that is, readers will “rebuild out of [the poet’s] phrases their own different poem,” reveling in “values practically incommunicable to others” (25). In Eastman’s account, free verse has nothing to do with democratic freedom. It is the freedom of solipsism.

Max Eastman constructs this alternative genealogy of American literature because he has a distinctive notion of what makes poetry “democratic,” one that has little to do with a poem’s explicit reference to politics. Rather, a truly democratic poetics will mould “an object towards external perfection,” thereby allowing the poem to be “experienced in

the same form at different times and by different persons” (24–25). For Eastman, poetry becomes democratic when an author designs a poem such that it produces a single, accessible, and repeatable meaning. Although most contemporary scholars would prefer to avoid such homogeneity in the act of reading, Eastman offers yet another instance of democratic poetics that do not follow in Whitman’s footsteps.

Brutal Words: Untermeyer’s Democratic Diction

Near the beginning of *American Poetry Since 1900* (1923), his popular survey of modern poetry, the poet and critic Louis Untermeyer writes that the growth of poetry’s audience proves that political democracy had spread throughout the American literary establishment: “[P]oetry has suddenly torn away from its self-imposed strictures and is expressing itself more in the terms of democracy. It is no longer composed chiefly by scholars for scholars. It is democratic in the sense that a great part of it is written of the people, for the people and evidently—judging from the number of magazines devoted exclusively to its practise—by the people.”¹⁵ With its conspicuous allusion to Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Untermeyer’s rapturous summary reminds us of an aspect of modernism’s history that is often forgotten. To early advocates like Untermeyer, Lowell, and Monroe, the modernist movement was America’s first opportunity for a genuinely popular art. To these critics, poetic modernism was simply one more sign that democracy was in the process of transforming every aspect of cultural discourse.

Yet, taking a broader survey of Untermeyer’s criticism in these years, one discovers that his understanding of democratic poetics was not based primarily on the size of the audience. Rather, modernism stood, above all, for the aspiration to democratize *language*. Contemporary poets, he writes in 1919, “have rediscovered the beauty, the dignity, I might almost say the divine core, of the casual and commonplace. They are bringing to ordinary speech a new affection and interest, calling forth its natural warmth, its original power.”¹⁶ For poetry to become properly democratic, he tells us, it needs to capture the rough-hewn texture of the American idiom, forged out of “the rude and raucous tumble of life” (*NE* 17). Untermeyer hopes that poetry will overturn the hierarchies of grammar and vocabulary that reproduce, on the linguistic level, hierarchies of social class. Untermeyer’s modernism will be a genuinely egalitarian literary movement not just because it aims to reach a mass audience, but also because it will employ the rhythms and vocabularies spoken by the masses themselves.

Untermeyer's interest in the democratic implications of language reflected an important critical trend of this period. In 1904, Whitman's literary executor, Horace Traubel, published the poet's notes on American slang and usage, originally written in the 1850s. *An American Primer* presents a somewhat different side of Whitman's poetics from that captured in later editions of *Leaves of Grass*. This posthumous text rarely mentions rhyme or meter. Instead, Whitman focuses on a theory of democratic diction: "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. . . . The new world, the new times, the new peoples, the new vista, need a tongue according—yes, what is more, will have such a tongue—will not be satisfied until it is evolved."¹⁷ The delayed publication of *An American Primer* meant that Whitman's ideas about the vernacular were easily accessible to the early figures of U.S. modernism; indeed, this text is referred to in passing by Eastman, Monroe, and, most famous of all, H. L. Mencken, in his influential study *The American Language* (1919).¹⁸ Given the popularity of Whitman's views, it comes as no surprise to find Untermeyer quoting from *An American Primer* in order to declare his belief that "'Leaves of Grass' was mainly a gigantic language experiment, an effort towards a democratic poetry" (NE 12).

Because Untermeyer's theory of democratic poetics focuses on idiom rather than meter or rhyme, he tends to evaluate the achievement of modernism rather differently from his contemporaries. Thus, he has little respect for such poets as Wallace Stevens (a favorite of Monroe), Ezra Pound (celebrated by Lowell), or Edna St. Vincent Millay (praised by Eastman). Untermeyer's modernist canon transcends questions of rhythm and rhyme: he praises the metrically inclined Robert Frost in almost the exact same terms that he celebrates free verse poems by Carl Sandburg. By the 1930s and 1940s, Frost was excluded from the high modernist canon, but in 1917 Untermeyer regards Frost as one of the central figures of a burgeoning revolution in vernacular poetry. To Untermeyer, Frost's *North of Boston* is a quintessentially modernist work because "there is a total absence of fine feathers and fustian, of red lights and rhetoric, of all the skilful literary mechanics we are used to" (NE 22).

Despite his strong attraction to poetry written in the American vernacular, Untermeyer is nearly overwhelmed by the verbal "brutality" of Carl Sandburg's early work (NE 95). He describes Sandburg as a poet who "make[s] the words on the printed page sing, dance, bleed, rage, and suffer with the aroused reader." These harsh linguistic tactics startled Untermeyer, but he finally embraced such extreme measures, on the

grounds that Whitman also “loved the violence in language” (*NE* 95, 100). Untermeyer writes that Whitman must have been “praying for future Sandburgs” when he jotted down these notes from *An American Primer*: “Words are magic . . . limber, lasting, fierce words. Do you suppose the liberties and the brawn of These States have to do only with delicate lady-words? with gloved gentlemen-words? Ten thousand common, idiomatic words are growing, or are today already grown, out of which vast numbers could be used by American writers, with meaning and effect” (quoted in *NE* 98). Like Whitman, Sandburg refused to allow the parameters of poetic language to be determined by the narrow tastes of the upper classes. Sandburg’s “To a Contemporary Bunkshooter,” a poem that Untermeyer judges a “startling experiment in the use of words,” embodies exactly this argument about language and class. The poem attacks an evangelical preacher for missing the revolutionary implications of Jesus’s class-conscious message:

You come along squirting words at us, shaking your fist and calling
us all dam fools so fierce the froth slobbers over your lips . . .
always blabbing we’re all going to hell straight off and you know
all about it.

.....

He never came near clean people or dirty people but they felt
cleaner because he came along. It was your crowd of bankers
and business men and lawyers hired the sluggers and murderers
who put Jesus out of the running.

I say the same bunch backing you nailed the nails into the hands of
this Jesus of Nazareth. . . . (quoted in *NE* 99)

When he writes of Sandburg’s verbal “brutality,” Untermeyer is thinking of the highly alliterative “f” and “s” sounds in lines such as “shaking your fist and calling us all dam fools so fierce the froth slobbers over your lips”—a line that almost forces the reader to spit in anger. And Sandburg’s use of American idioms (“going to hell straight off,” “it was your crowd,” “same bunch”) suggests that he not only wants to speak *for* the people, he wants to speak *like* them, too. Sandburg enacted Whitman’s idea of language emanating from “the national blood” (*NE* 98).

In a manner not congenial to our traditional definitions of modernism, Untermeyer appreciates the use of slang and idiom because it enables the poet to communicate an explicitly didactic message. Oppenheim meets with Untermeyer’s approval precisely because his idiomatic language indicates an overt commitment to American democracy. Oppenheim

achieves a “blend of violence and vision” by clothing his “colloquial words with ancient dignity” (*NE* 45). Untermeyer is prepared to defend didactic political poetry against those who regard it as “a betrayal of the true functions of art”: “The artist, cry these literary bourbons, should not try to prove anything; his sole business is to see, to record or create beautiful and precious things. The growth of a democratic spirit disturbs these aristogogues” (*NE* 49). Those who object to the rough and rugged diction of contemporary poetry, Untermeyer argues, are merely dressing up their conservative political beliefs in the language of aesthetic discrimination. The democratic task of contemporary poetry opposes the “affectations of idiom and twisted lines” of aesthetes like Pound, who has led his contemporaries down a “literary blind-alley” (*NE* 104). While Pound remains indispensable to our current definition of modernism, to Untermeyer he seemed merely one more “aristogogue” left over from the Age Before Democracy. Poets like Frost, Sandburg, and Oppenheim, by contrast, pointed towards a new, authentically democratic future because they used the language of the common people.

The Problem of African American Dialect: Johnson, Brown, Locke, Hughes

The poets of the Harlem Renaissance faced a slightly different set of challenges when articulating a theory of democratic poetics. Unlike their white contemporaries, these poets had to confront a tradition of racist literary conventions that mimicked African American dialect. In popular forms of black minstrelsy and “Uncle Remus” tales, white performers and authors parodied the lilting inflections and idioms of black speech. Whereas a poet like Untermeyer conceived of democratic diction in terms of social class, these poets approached the question of language in light of race. In response, these poets abandoned the artificial patois used in poems written to entertain white audiences. Instead, these poets resolved that an African American democratic poetics had to capture the accents and cadences of the genuine black vernacular.

This was precisely the argument offered by James Weldon Johnson in his preface to the *Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). In Johnson’s view, nothing would do more to raise the status of blacks in their native land than “a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of art.”¹⁹ Yet Johnson recognized that the African American poet faced a massive linguistic hurdle. Imagined by his readers as a “happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, [and] banjo-picking being,” the black poet was forced to use words that conformed to “a certain artistic

niche." He was expected to write poems about "possums [and] watermelons" set "in a log cabin amid fields of cotton or along the levees" (xxxix–xl). Because of this restriction, "negro dialect" had become "an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos." Johnson recognized how the constraints of language also constrain genre and subject matter. Rather than be imprisoned by these linguistic shackles however, Johnson encourages contemporary black poets to adopt "a form that is freer and larger than dialect," a poetic style that is "capable of giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology" (xli). It is only by breaking away from the artificial conventions of dialect that African Americans will begin to make a distinctive contribution to their national culture. Doing so, Johnson implies, is more than simply a matter of aesthetic achievement: "It is a matter which has a direct bearing on the most vital of American problems" (vii).

Sterling A. Brown advanced a related view in his *Outline to a Study of the Poetry of the American Negroes* (1931), a pedagogical supplement to Johnson's anthology. Through a series of questions aimed at the student, Brown tried to pinpoint the differences between the "old" Negro poetry and the "new." Commenting on a poem written by James Edwin Campbell, Brown directs his reader to "[n]otice the inversions" and "the 'poetic' diction." Brown disliked these artificial techniques, and advises his pupils to measure poetry by the standard of "folk speech" rather than the standards of poetic convention. For Brown, as for Johnson, poetic form has larger sociological implications: "The weakness of this work [Sidney Lanier, Joel Chandler Harris, etc.] is not, as has been suggested, that treatment of the lowly Negro has been too often done, but that it has been done too often according to the stereotype and not often enough according to the truth. Contemporary literature is attempting to right this wrong." Even a white critic like Louis Untermeyer, Brown writes, understands "that traditional dialect [is] an 'affectation' to please a white audience."²⁰

Among the many African American literary intellectuals of this period, no poet encapsulated this new approach to democratic poetics better than Langston Hughes. In his review of *The Weary Blues* (1926), the philosopher and critic Alain Locke praised the fidelity of Hughes's poems to the verbal patterns of daily black experience: "A true 'people's poet' has their balladry in his veins; and to me many of these poems seem based on rhythms as seasoned as folk songs and on moods as deep-seated as folk ballads."²¹ Hughes's vernacular poems gained their authority through their faithful reflection of longstanding ("seasoned," "deep-seated") forms of communal speech. To Locke, Hughes represented a new advance beyond the derivative clichés of the "dialect school." By

attending to the real language of men and women, Hughes's poems joined an emerging group of contemporary democratic poets, bringing "to his portrayal of his folk not the ragged provincialism of a minstrel but the descriptive detachment of a Vachel Lindsay and a Sandburg and promises the democratic sweep and universality of a Whitman."²²

Locke's comments point to a truth about the sources of Hughes's poetic theory. In a 1927 speech in front of Whitman's home in Camden, New Jersey, Hughes described modern free verse, and his own poetry, as descending from Whitman's example: "I believe that poetry should be direct, comprehensible and the epitome of simplicity."²³ Hughes eventually assembled three separate anthologies of Whitman's poetry, calling *Leaves of Grass* the greatest expression of "the real meaning of democracy ever made on our shores."²⁴ As George Hutchinson has documented, Hughes's poems applied Whitman's insights about poetic speech to advance the cause of racial justice.²⁵ In Hughes's eyes, poems like Whitman's "Song of the Answerer" proved the white poet's capacity to reproduce the idiomatic speech of black field workers. "Every existence has its idiom," Hughes quotes from Whitman's poem, showing readers how to listen to the field hand and "know that his speech is right" (130). Like many other writers in this period, Hughes isolated one aspect of Whitman's poetic theory and adapted it to his own unique, contemporary purposes. Along with James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, and Alain Locke, Langston Hughes viewed the authentic use of the black vernacular as the key doctrine of a democratic, modern poetics.

Beyond Democracy and Form

As we look back over these theoretical arguments, it becomes clear that the meaning of democratic poetics in the modernist period was far from settled. In many cases, these writers did not even agree on the terms of the debate. Most found it necessary to cite Whitman as a figure of authority, but even when they did so, they often interpreted Whitman so selectively as to develop a view of democratic poetics more narrow—and in some ways more coherent—than Whitman himself. This leads me to the conclusion that the various *theories* of democratic poetry are finally less compelling than the specific *practices* and *beliefs* that these theories attempted to justify. Despite their apparent indebtedness to Whitman's poetic doctrine, many of these writers were making claims about the nature of democratic progress, and about how best to represent that progress, that Whitman had barely considered. The pretext of poetic style served to disguise an ongoing struggle over how to define the aims and methods of democratic reform.

This moment in U.S. literary history is instructive to contemporary criticism in several respects. First, it helps us to revise our understanding of Whitman's "influence" on modernism. There is certainly some truth to the claim that Carl Sandburg wrote lines that resemble those of Whitman (and is thus a "democratic" poet); we might even extend this argument to more difficult poets such as William Carlos Williams or Hart Crane. But rather than view U.S. modernist poetry from beneath Whitman's shadow, a more productive line of inquiry might ask how the poetry of Williams and Crane attempts to embody democratic life in ways that do not resemble Whitman. To offer a brief example, consider Williams's method of social description. Whereas Whitman tends to flit from social type to social type—"the pure contralto . . . the carpenter . . . the pilot . . . the mate . . . the duck-shooter . . . the deacons"—Williams often focuses on a single character in his poems (39). In Williams's "To Elsie," for instance, we encounter an extended description that is closer to the short story than to Whitman's epic catalogues and apostrophes. This choice illustrates Williams's fundamentally different approach to democratic poetics, one that aims to describe the particular lives of embodied subjects rather than enumerate idealized social types. A non-Whitmanian definition of democratic poetics might provide a new vocabulary in which to understand the fresh practices of representation and feeling that poets like Williams and Crane make available.

Second, these critical debates suggest that modernist style became firmly incompatible with democratic politics at a late stage in the history of the movement. The relation of politics and poetry was hotly debated in U.S. literary criticism throughout the 1930s and 1940s, and during the 1950s and 1960s that relation came to seem essentially irrelevant (or even harmful) to the aesthetic concerns of any serious poet. Moreover, the historical forces of international communism, the rise and fall of the Popular Front, and the events of World War II, helped to drive a conceptual wedge between the difficult experiments of modernist poetry and the heated immediacy of political commitment. But this antipathy was the product of specific literary and historical contexts rather than an inherent opposition between democracy and modernist style. Even today, the politics of modernism continue to be characterized as authoritarian, fascist, or aristocratic—and often with good reason. Yet the diversity of democratic poetics in the 1910s and 1920s asks us to revise this longstanding consensus about the political implications of modernist style.

Lastly, these debates invite us to reconsider the significance of poetry in the self-expression of a democratic culture. For despite my relentless insistence that there is no stable relation between democratic politics

and poetic form, this does not mean that we should ignore the palpable and intriguing connections between democracy and modern American poetry. And though I have focused in this essay on the early stages of literary modernism in the United States, I hope that its claims may also serve to illuminate theoretical problems likely to be faced by poets in democratic contexts outside the United States and across different time periods. In order to accommodate this expanded archive and global future, however, we must first disentangle ourselves from the myth, to quote Whitman against himself, that democracy requires a unified account of “the whole theory and nature of Poetry.”

YALE UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1 Walt Whitman, “A Backward Glance O’er Travelled Roads,” *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 662 (hereafter cited in text).

2 For general overviews of Whitman’s reception in U.S. poetry, see Ed Folsom, “Talking Back to Walt Whitman: An Introduction,” *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1998), 21–78; Andrew C. Higgins, “The Poet’s Reception and His Legacy,” *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald Kummings (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 439–54; and Alan Trachtenberg, “Walt Whitman: Precipitant of the Modern,” *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Ezra Greenspan (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 194–207.

3 See Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005); Virginia Jackson, “Who Reads Poetry?” *PMLA* 123, no. 1 (2008): 181–87; Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, “Lyrical Studies,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 2 (1999): 521–30; Eliza Richards, *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe’s Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004); Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007).

4 Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*, 6–7.

5 In a recent article, Nick Bromell describes a mode of reading that draws on the concept of “deliberative democracy” in contemporary political theory. See his “Reading Democratically: Pedagogies of Difference and Practices of Listening in *House of Mirth and Passing*,” *American Literature* 81, no. 2 (2009): 281–303.

6 John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 210.

7 Ezra Pound, “The Audience,” *Poetry* (October 1914): 29–30.

8 Harriet Monroe, “The Audience: II,” *Poetry* (October 1914): 31–32

9 Harriet Monroe, “Miss Lowell on Tendencies” *Poetry* (December 1917): 155.

10 The comments by Masters, Pound, and Williams are cited in Ellen Williams, *Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance: The First Ten Years of Poetry, 1912–22* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977), 114–15, 178, 185.

11 See William Carlos Williams, “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry,” *Poetry Journal* 8, no. 1 (November 1917): 27–36 [reprinted in *William Carlos Williams Review* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 1–4].

- 12 Joyce Kilmer, interview with Josephine Preston Peabody, "Free Verse Hampers Poets and Is Undemocratic," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 23, 1916, 14 (hereafter cited in text).
- 13 James Oppenheim, "Democracy in Verse and Art," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1916, 21 (hereafter cited in text).
- 14 Max Eastman, *Colors of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1918), 14 (hereafter cited in text).
- 15 Louis Untermeyer, *American Poetry Since 1900* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1923), 7–8 (hereafter cited in text).
- 16 Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919), 11 (hereafter cited as *NE*).
- 17 Whitman, *An American Primer*, ed. Horace Traubel (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1904), viii–ix.
- 18 See H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York: Knopf, 1919), 73.
- 19 James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), vii (hereafter cited in text).
- 20 Sterling Brown, *Outline to a Study of the Poetry of the American Negroes* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), 11–12 (hereafter cited in text).
- 21 Alain Locke, "Review of *The Weary Blues* by Langston Hughes" (1926), *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New York: Garland, 1983), 41.
- 22 Locke, "The Poetry of Negro Life" (1927), *Critical Temper*, 47.
- 23 Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I: 1902–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 146.
- 24 Quoted in George Hutchinson, "Langston Hughes and the 'Other' Whitman," in *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman*, ed. Robert K. Martin (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1992), 17.
- 25 Hutchinson, *Continuing Presence*, 18.