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The American Revolutionary Spirit

Jefferson's Ward System and Whitman's Poetics

The formation of Whitman's poetics can be explained from various perspectives: mystical experience, Transcendentalism, politics, sexuality, and so on. Among these factors, the essay aims to study Whitman's poetics in the context of politics, especially concerning the continuation of the spirit of '76 – the American Revolutionary spirit. The essay emphasizes the influence of Jefferson on Whitman, particularly Jefferson's ward system – the link so far overlooked – and argues that it has bearing on Whitman's poetics. Jefferson sought the continuation of the American experiment of self-government, and, in this context, proposed a ward system – the county subdivision into smaller units. I will demonstrate that Whitman the Journalist showed great interest in Jefferson's ward system, and that this new link puts Whitman's poetics in a new light; Whitman's "interior American republic" is a further subdivision of Jefferson's "ward republic." Before Whitman sought to solve the paradox of the individual and mass as well as the states and federal government – as the essay argues – Whitman, like Jefferson, needed to grapple with the paradox of the revolutionary spirit which includes contradictory elements, i.e. the spirit of the new and the concern with stability based on it.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, Thomas Jefferson, Ward system, American revolutionary spirit, republic, poetics, politics

Introduction

It is very hard to conduct an exhaustive study on the chronology of the birth of *Leaves of Grass*, 1855 (Miller xiii, 1) since there are two major obstacles. Firstly, Whitman's own remarks are contradictory (4, 37), and secondly, manuscript evidence is "scant and inaccessible" (xiii). Yet, as Matt Miller (36-38) in *Collage of myself: Walt Whitman and the Making of Leaves of Grass* shows, the gestation period of *Leaves of grass* can be narrowed down to the period from 1847 to 1854, with which Whitman himself (Whitman, *Specimen Days & Collect* 278) and his biographer Richard Maurice Bucke (135) agree. Besides, the catalyst for the birth of *Leaves of Grass* 1855 has also suffered from the same problem of uncertainty; the main cause here is that Whitman was manipulative in making his public image (Miller 86), and thus critics' explanations have ranged from mystical experience, Transcendentalism, politics, to sexuality (xiii, 9, 38).

Among these explanations, this essay views the U.S. political crisis as a major cause of Whitman's transformation from a journalist to poet. For instance, Betsy Erkkila (44, 48) in *Whitman: the Political Poet* states that deepening of the political crisis in the 1840s and 1850s — the slavery and the disunion — and Whitman's disillusion about the party politics pushed him to adopt an alternative medium of poetry instead of journalism. In his so doing, Whitman sought to reconcile the paradox of states and federal government as well as private and public realms (Reynolds 112) by resort to the American revolutionary spirit of '76 (Erkkila 22).

The spirit of '76 deserves scrutiny. In general, revolutionary spirit bears twosidedness: the spirit of the new and the concern with stability based on it (Arendt 222-223). In the American Revolution, the mainspring lay in the spirit of experiment of self-government (Wood 326). In the investigation of the American revolutionary spirit, we need to be discriminating so that we treat it as an entity separate from the Revolution itself, though both were interconnected and influenced each other in the course of the events leading up to the establishment of the Constitution (141-142, 183).¹

The American Revolution is distinctive. First of all, after the overthrow of the old government by the Declaration of Independence, the liberated Americans — with the experience of self-government in the colonial era — did not degenerate into the state of nature and, in its stead, moved to establish state constitutions (141, 166). In the course of the Revolution, Americans located the authority in the very act of constituting a new nation; the Founding Fathers themselves were aware that they were the Founding Fathers (204). This common initiative — the revolutionary spirit — is an essential requirement for revolution in general (116), and in the American Revolution, the conversancy with various spontaneously-made compacts in the colonial

¹ For instance, Gordon S. Wood notes that the Revolutionary War itself became a big business, which affected Americans in a negative way. Wood writes that "The wholesale pursuits of private interest and private luxury were, they (The Federalists) thought, undermining America's capacity for republican government. They designed the Constitution in order to save American republicanism from the deadly effects of these private pursuits of happiness." (Gordon S. Wood. *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2011, 138-139).

self-government – the Mayflower compact being one of the best known – came to be the source of strength that helped overcome British rule (167-168, 178). Thus, Jefferson rounds off *The Declaration of Independence* with the phrase “And for the support of this Declaration (...), we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes & our sacred Honor” (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. I* 38, Arendt 130, 213-214).

The Declaration of Independence overthrew British rule, and the American Revolution moved to the next phase of founding a body politic through the Federal Constitution. It is generally seen that “Constitutions resolve revolutions” (Ferguson 144). Arendt (142, 232) asserts that the Constitution is here counter-revolutionary; with the resolution of the Revolution the distinctive American revolutionary spirit – the fountainhead of the Revolution – came to be eclipsed by the Constitution which is the result of it. In other words, the only one side of the revolutionary spirit, the concern with stability, was upfronted at the sacrifice of the other side of it – the spirit of something new. Here, Jefferson parted company with other Founding Fathers (235-236); he sought the survival of the initial revolutionary spirit (126). Against the conventional wisdom that the Constitution is permanent and the revolutionary spirit temporary, Jefferson thought the other way around; the Constitution is temporary and the revolutionary spirit permanent (*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. VI* 57-59, *Vol. VII* 459).² Jefferson was fully aware of the revolutionary origin of the new Republic, and thus also aware that the survival of it depends on the survival of the revolutionary spirit (Arendt 126). In this context of perpetuating the revolutionary spirit (234-235) – the spirit of the American experiment of self-government – Jefferson (in vain) proposed a ward system, a county subdivision into smaller units in order to promote the revolutionary spirit through self-government, as a concrete governmental organ (*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 37-38).

Whitman was fully acquainted with the revolutionary origin of America, especially the significance of the revolutionary spirit, as Erkkila (3-24) shows. But, besides the aforementioned circumstances related to the American revolutionary spirit, the temporal (and concomitant, spiritual) gap between the era of the Revolution and of Whitman made it hard for Americans to appreciate the spirit. In the face of these conditions, Whitman, like Jefferson, advocated perpetual revolution. Whitman (Whitman, *Walt Whitman's Workshop* 35) states: “Washington made free the body of America, for that was first in order – Now comes one who will make free the American soul.”

The quote demonstrates two features of Whitman's revolution. The first one is that Whitman embarks on his *own* revolution; Robert G. Ingersoll (13, 25-26) calls *Leaves of Grass* “a Declaration of Independence.” The other is that while Whitman pays tribute to the body politic of America, his revolution is of “the American soul.” In this context, the essay investigates the relation between Jefferson's ward system and Whitman's poetic revolution. Whitman (Whitman, *Talbot Wilson notebook*) wrote:

(...) the people of this state ~~shall~~ [sic] instead of being ruled by the old complex laws, and the involved machinery of all governments hitherto, shall be ruled mainly by individual character and conviction. – The recognized character of the citizen shall be so pervaded

² In the light of generational change, Jefferson was against *permanent* constitution; he was not against constitution per se (*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. VII*, 459).

by the best qualities of law and power that law and power shall be superseded from the government and transferred to the citizen.

The phrase “law and power shall be superseded from the government and transferred to the citizen” — the essence of Jefferson’s ward system — sounds like a *manifesto* for revolution. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that Whitman — in 1846 when he started hatching his poetic enterprise — showed great interest specifically in Jefferson’s ward system. Yet, hitherto, the critics of Whitman have overlooked the link; even *Whitman: the Political Poet* — the canonical work on the political aspects in the poetics of Whitman — does not touch on Jefferson’s ward system.

This essay aims to show that Jefferson’s ward system has bearing on the formation of Whitman’s poetics. It does not aim to solve the issue concerning the evolution of *Leaves of Grass* in a definitive way, but rather to offer a new possibility; it is not about a full unfolding of Whitman’s poetics but about one of its aspects. As Miller (9-10) notes, Whitman might know what to write in 1847 — however vague these things were — but surely not how to write it, and he took time to create his distinctive style in the negotiation between what to write and how to write it (1-160). Still, there are compelling links — centered around the perpetuation of the American revolutionary spirit — between Jefferson’s ward system and Whitman’s poetics, which I will show in this essay.³

1. Jefferson’s Ward System and Whitman’s Poetic Enterprise

The general degeneracy of America at Whitman’s time was foreseen even from the outset; in 1785, Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. II* 225) states: “From the conclusion of this war we shall be going down hill.” Facing this situation, Jefferson exerted considerable efforts to get the U.S. back on the track. The major ones include the Revolution of 1800 — what Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 212) calls “as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form” — and the breaking-down of the bureaucracy during his presidency (Wood 247). Among those efforts of Jefferson, although it was not put into effect, the ward system is noteworthy. Called by Jefferson himself (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XII* 394) “the dawn of the salvation of the republic,” this ward system has a special significance. Michael P. Zuckert (49) views it as “the most remarkable and the most important” in Jefferson’s political philosophy; Hannah Arendt (255) calls it as “a new form of government rather than a mere reform of it or a mere supplement to the existing institutions.”

Intriguingly, Whitman as editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* showed a particular interest in Jefferson’s ward system. Although the term “ward system” or the name of Jefferson are not mentioned specifically, Whitman’s familiarity with Jefferson’s political philosophy enabled him to detect and appreciate the significance of ward systems. In the entry “A Great Principle in a Few Words” dated on May 1846, Whitman (Whitman, *The Journalism I* 374) referred to an article in *The New York Evening*

³ Although this essay expands on Jefferson’s ward system from the perspective of criticism concerning Whitman, Jefferson’s ward system remains as it is: a political theory which never went into effect.

Post – his favorite paper (81-82) – which featured “ward republics” as “the change that is required.” After Whitman summarized the article by stating: “All that would be necessary is to restrict the powers of government, as far as possible, to the authorities of the township or counties, or school districts. The great evil of our system has been the centralization of political power,” he (374) quoted from *The New York Evening Post* article:

It can only be removed by the dispersion of that power into smaller masses. We believe that nearly two-thirds of the authority now exercised at Albany could be much better applied in rightly organised townships: that the exercise of it would be more effective and less corrupt: that it would bring responsibility much nearer to the people: that it would tend to spread a more enlarged and intelligent spirit of freedom among the electors: that it would extract a great deal of bitterness from our state controversies: and in the end strengthen the attachment of the people to their government, and cement the bonds of peace and order among themselves.

The comparison between the above quote and the content of Jefferson’s letter to Samuel Kercheval in July of 1816 (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 37-38) is revealing. The contents are the same: “rightly organized townships” – from which did Jefferson mold a ward system (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XII* 393) – correspond to “wards” in Jefferson’s letter:

The organization of our county administrations may be thought more difficult. But follow principle, and the knot unties itself. Divide the counties into wards of such size as that every citizen can attend, when called on, and act in person. Ascribe to them the government of their wards in all things relating to themselves exclusively. A justice, chosen by themselves, in each, a constable, a military company, a patrol, a school, the care of their own poor, their own portion of the public roads (...) will relieve the county administration of nearly all its business, will have it better done, and by making every citizen an acting member of the government, and in the offices nearest and most interesting to him, will attach him by his strongest feelings to the independence of his country, and its republican constitution.

It is salient that both Whitman’s summary and the quote from *The Evening Post*, after the decades of Jefferson’s writing, reveal the essence of Jefferson’s “ward republics” and encompass the key notions: “the great evil of our system has been the centralization of political power,” “the dispersion of that power into smaller masses,” “the exercise of it would be more effective and less corrupt,” “it would bring responsibility much nearer to the people,” “a more enlarged and intelligent spirit of freedom among the electors,” and “strengthen the attachment of the people to their government, and cement the bonds of peace and order among themselves” (*The Journalism I* 374). In short, Whitman’s quote from *The Evening Post* is a carbon copy of Jefferson’s notion of the “ward republic,” and Whitman calls it “A Great Principle.”

Moreover, Whitman (Whitman, *The Journalism I* 456), within a month, follows up on the ward system in the entry titled “Cut Away!” Whitman starts the editorial with an irony: “That there are ‘great measures’ before the Congress of the United States, nobody doubts.” Yet, Whitman (457) negates “great measures” by proposing an alternative view: “The great labor of political reform, indeed, is more a labor of cutting away than adding to.” Whitman continues:

The more we think of that idea of small districts, and letting each one manage its own affairs, as to it seemeth best – under the high control of a few simple and general laws – the more we like it.

Unlike the editorial written in May 1846, this one is Whitman's original, and he seems to do some homework of examining Jefferson's ward system at first hand, as the phrase "that idea of small districts, and letting each one manage its own affairs" – the concise summary of Jefferson's writing – shows. Whitman was apparently fascinated by Jefferson's ward system, and this is when he hatched his poetic enterprise.

Here, the aforementioned significance of the American revolutionary spirit for both Whitman and Jefferson helps us to notice that there is a parallel between the goals of Whitman's poetic enterprise and Jefferson's ward system. On the one hand, Erkkila (49) states:

Whitman's poet participates in the act of national creation by carrying on the revolutionary task of transferring power from the government to the individual.

On the other hand, Arendt (251) notes:

Jefferson expected the wards to permit the citizens to continue to do what they had been able to do during the years of revolution, namely, to act on their own and thus to participate in public business as it was being transacted from day to day.

These two quotes illustrate the emphasis shared by the endeavors of Whitman and Jefferson on continuous experience of the American Revolution. Both of them seek to create, in Arendt's words (249), "a new public space for freedom which was constituted and organized during the course of the revolution itself." The doctrine of the ward system is tantamount to that of Paine's revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* – "We have it in our power to begin the world over again" (*Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings* 53).

Whitman (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass Imprints* 8) states that "The interior American republic shall also be declared free and independent." With the aforementioned quote "Washington made free the body of America, for that was first in order – Now comes one who will make free the American soul," we can see that in his revolution, Whitman goes further than the Founding Fathers – beyond the body politic of America into the individual soul of Americans. It needs to be emphasized that these approaches of Whitman are in line with the American revolutionary heritage. John Adams (*The Adams-Jefferson Letters* 455) states that "The Revolution was in the Minds of the People." Whitman, after the decades of the Revolution, sought to bring it back "in the Minds of the People."

Another difference between the two revolutions is that while the American Revolution means a joint venture, as shown in the Introduction, Whitman's revolution is an individual venture, rather quixotic one. Still, Whitman's lonely revolution is justified. The vital thing is to show that an individual – Whitman, just an obscure New Yorker – can rise and act. The self-publishing of *Leaves of Grass*, on the Independence Day of 1855, intended to set a new precedent; the act itself has significance. Just as the Founding Fathers were aware that they were the Founding Fathers so Whitman was aware that he – through his own act of revolution – joined the band of the Founding Fathers.

I argue that Whitman's "interior American republic" is a further subdivision of Jefferson's "ward republic." The American revolutionary spirit needs to be nurtured anew at the deeper level, in the mind of individual Americans. Jefferson's statement: "Each ward would be a small republic within itself" (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XVI* 46) translates into Whitman's assertion that each *individual* would be a small republic within himself. Like Jefferson's ward system, the poetics of Whitman obliges each individual to re-embrace the American revolutionary spirit. In the next section, Jefferson's ward system will be explored.

2. Jefferson's Ward System

For Jefferson, Shalhope (533) notes that "the two great guarantors of liberty are the good character of the people and the proper structure of government," but both of which betrayed the sign of degeneration. The ward system is a measure with the potential to regain, at once, both the proper structure of government and the good character of the people.

As regards the checks and balances for the government, there are two ways: horizontal, i.e. division of the power among legislature, executive, and judiciary as well as vertical, i.e. division of the power among the different levels of authorities such as national, federal, county, and "ward republic." Jefferson is unique because he put the vertical approach above the horizontal one, which Montesquieu (163) espoused. Furthermore, in this vertical "gradation of authorities," he values most the "ward republic." In the letter to Joseph C. Cabell from February of 1816, Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XIV* 421-422) said:

(...) the secret will be found to be in the making himself the depository of the powers respecting himself, so far as he is competent to them, and delegating only what is beyond his competence by a synthetical [sic] process, to higher and higher orders of functionaries, so as to trust fewer and fewer powers in proportion as the trustees become more and more oligarchical [sic]. The elementary republics of the wards, the county republics, the States republics, and the republic of the Union, would form a gradation of authorities, standing each on the basis of law, holding every one its delegated share of powers, and constituting truly a system of fundamental balances and checks for the government.

Jefferson asserts that his vertical approach to checks and balances for government beats the horizontal one. Also noticeable is that the flow of the delegation is from the bottom – ward republic – to the top – national government. For example, a ward republic delegates "only what is beyond its competence" to a county. Most importantly, this way of delegation goes a long way to preventing the concentration of the power at the higher-ups. About this, Jefferson (423), in the same letter to Cabell, said:

(...) "divide the counties into wards." Begin them only for a single purpose; they will soon show for what others they are the best instruments. (...) as I am sure they have the will, to fortify us against the degeneracy of one government, and the concentration of all its powers in the hands of the one, the few, the well-born or the many.

Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 37-38), in the aforementioned letter to Kercheval, also enumerates the benefits of the ward republic:

first of all it provides the citizens with the opportunity to experience self-government by doing the municipal tasks at hand; secondly, those tasks are better handled by the citizens, which leads to alleviation of the county burden; and thirdly, through the experience of self-government, they can develop the affection to the independence of their country and its republican constitution. In the letter to John Cartwright from June of 1824, Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XVI* 46) repeats the advantages of the ward republic: "Each ward would thus be a small republic within itself, and every man in the State would thus become an acting member of the common government, transacting in person a great portion of its rights and duties."

Here the comparison between the two letters – to Kercheval in 1816 and to Cartwright in 1824 – gives us the food for thought since the Missouri crisis occurred in 1820, so after 1816 and before 1824. The Missouri compromise draws the line along the latitude of 36°30', which divides the U.S. into Northern free-states and Southern slave-states. Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 249) called the Missouri compromise "a fire-bell in the night" because of the federal government's encroachment on the right of State to self-govern (Shalhope 548) and because of the sectional division it caused (Onuf 113). Shedding light on "ward republics" with an eye on the comparison of these letters helps us to grasp Jefferson's perspective on self-government against a background of changing socio-political circumstances.

The main thrust on "ward republics" in the letter to Kercheval from 1816 and the letter to Cartwright from 1824 mostly overlaps, but the contexts under which they were written differ before and after the Missouri compromise of 1820. Whereas the tone of the letter to Kercheval written in 1816 is rather positive and the main thrust is on equal representation, the tone of the letter to Cartwright written in 1824 is less positive with its exclusive focus on the Constitution and the structure of government.

In the letter to Kercheval from 1816, Jefferson begins with the importance of the equal representation in republicanism, and moves to the legislature, executive, and judiciary at the national level and then to the county level. Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 33) said that "governments are republican only in proportion as they embody the will of their people, and execute it," and that "our first constitutions had really no leading principles in them." Yet, his appraisal of the overall political scene is positive: "Owing to this spirit (of our people), and to nothing in the form of our constitution, all things have gone well" (35). In this context of heightening of the equal representation, Jefferson (38) proposed "marshalling our government into four levels: the general federal republic, that of the State, the county republics, and the ward republics." Importantly, while Jefferson was developing his argument, he only surveyed the status quo and recommended his ideas, without directly attacking the structure of government.

To the contrary, the letter to Cartwright in 1824 is filled with the sense of urgency. Jefferson (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XVI* 42-43) starts from the analysis of the Constitution, which dates back to the old history of England, and proceeds to the American Constitution. He (45) said, "The constitutions of most of our States assert, that all power is inherent in the people; that they may exercise it by themselves, in all cases to which they think themselves competent (...) or they

may act by representatives, freely and equally chosen." In this way, the topic of the equal representation in the letter to Kercheval becomes merely a part of the larger theme of the exercise of the power by people themselves. Jefferson (46), in this context, presents his proposal; "My own State has gone on so far with its premiere ebauche; but it is now proposing to call a convention for amendment. Among other improvements, I hope they will adopt the subdivision of our counties into wards." Furthermore, after this proposition of "wards," Jefferson (47) moves to the theme of the proper structural relation between the States and federal government. First of all, Jefferson categorically denies the subordination of the States to the federal government. He explains:

To the State governments are reserved all legislation and administration, in affairs which concern their own citizens only, and to the federal government is given whatever concerns foreigners, or the citizens of other States; these functions alone being made federal. The one is the domestic, the other the foreign branch of the same government; neither having control over the other, but within its own department.

What made Jefferson revisit the topic of the proper structure of government and thus what made the difference between the two letters salient is the Missouri compromise of 1820. In Jefferson's view, it is about "the power of the central government to regulate the internal affairs of the states" (Shallhope 548). Consolidation — concentration of the power — is the anathema of Jefferson. He (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 341) said this "by consolidation first, and then corruption, its necessary consequence." For Jefferson, the Missouri compromise could become the precedent in which Congress could impose its will upon states as it appears fit and have a deteriorating effect on the American self-government. Jefferson (249) called the Missouri compromise "the knell of the Union." With the solidarity felt in the Revolution gone and the Northern-Southern demarcation line drawn, Jefferson foresaw what would happen, namely the Civil War in the 1860s. Here, as Onuf (129) points out, for Jefferson the stake is "the legacy of the American Revolution, and of his whole political career." The American revolutionary spirit expressed in *The Declaration of Independence* is in danger of becoming a dead letter.

These contexts make the "ward republic" all the more attractive. Its benefits are appealing: to enhance both the character of the people and the power relations between the local and central governments through direct participation in the self-government of the ward republic. Thus, people could learn to exercise their power and protect their freedom from the encroachment by centralization. In this way, American republicanism would become more robust and the bulwark of liberty against the consolidation by the federal government could be strengthened. The solid establishment of self-government by a system like the ward republic — the vertical checks and balances of the government — might prevent a national crisis such as the Missouri compromise. Yet, Jefferson's ward republic went no further than being a theory; it never went into effect. In the meantime, the ills of America came to take more pernicious forms in the age of Jackson. Both the horizontal checks and balances — the structure of government — and the vertical aspects — as good character of people — showed the symptoms of degradation, which I will present in the next section.

3. Whitman: A Man of Jeffersonian Principles Turned into a Poet

Whitman became attracted to the ward system with good reasons. He owned a set of *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, published in 1853-1854, as Erkkila (19) notes, but he had been conversant with Jefferson's political philosophy long time before. On August 1846,⁴ in the entry titled "The principles we fight for," Whitman (Whitman, *The Journalism II* 36-37) lays out Jeffersonian principles. He wrote:

Jefferson lays down the following principles:

The People — the only source of legitimate power.

The absolute and lasting severance of Church from State.

The freedom, sovereignty, and independence of the respective States.

The Union — a confederacy, a compact, neither a consolidation, nor a centralization.

The Constitution of the Union; a special grant of powers, limited and definite.

The civil paramount to the military power.

The representative to obey instructions of his constituents.

Election free, and suffrage universal.

No hereditary office, nor order, nor title.

No taxation beyond the public wants.

No national debt, if possible.

No costly splendor of administration.

No proscription of opinion, nor of public discussion.

No unnecessary interference with individual conduct, property, or speech.

No favored classes, and no monopolies.

No public monies expended, except by warrants or a specific appropriation.

No mysteries in government inaccessible to the public eye.

Public compensation for public services, moderate salaries, and strict accountability.

The lengthy list — which reminds us of the parallelisms of Whitman the poet — contains two pieces of information. Firstly, Whitman had a firm grip on Jefferson's political philosophy, represented by "The People — the only source of legitimate power" and "The Union — a confederacy, a compact, neither a consolidation, nor a centralization." Secondly, Whitman equated the Democratic party's principles with Jefferson's principles. Yet, this equation would invite trouble for Whitman the Party journalist; the actuality he faced was different. The relation between the government and people at the time were under the sway of the expansion of both popular government and industrialization, which in turn exposed people to more risk of corruption in the structure of government and the character of them (Nelson 9-10).

In *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics & Belief*, Marvin Meyers (7) maintains: "The political machine reached into every neighborhood, inducted ordinary citizens of all sorts into active service." On the surface, it seems that people became empowered as in Jefferson's ward system, but this came with the degradations in the aforementioned Jefferson's "the two great guarantors of liberty" — proper

⁴ This editorial was published a few months after Whitman was exposed to the idea of Jefferson's ward republic. If the exposure to this concept, serving as an eye opener, led Whitman to write this editorial, the ward republic had all the more significance for Whitman.

structure of government and character of the people. As regards the structure of government, William E. Nelson (40), in *The Roots of American Bureaucracy, 1830-1900*, states:

All institutions of government – legislative, executive, and judicial – had come to be perceived at bottom as political institutions making inevitable policy choices as a matter of will. One consequence of this perception was to blur distinctions among the ways in which different governmental institutions functioned – distinctions that had been important to the revolutionary and Jeffersonian generations and that underlay the doctrine of separation of powers.

Here we see two deviations from the Founding principle: the diminution of checks and balances by the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial institutions, and the consolidation of power through the emergence of bureaucracy. For instance, judicial review, which Jefferson adamantly opposed (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XV* 212-214), came to be generally accepted (Nelson 38). Apart from that, based on “a matter of will” (of people), the Jacksonians built up the federal bureaucracy with the presidency as the most powerful office in the nation (Wood 248).

An important factor to consider is America’s industrial revolution, which began during the age of Jackson (Nester 189), and ensuing expansion of the private realm. Arendt (252-253), who praises Jefferson’s caliber to foresee the risk of the corruption of people and to take the precaution against it, namely his attempt to introduce the ward system, points out:

Under conditions (...) of rapid and constant economic growth, that is, of a constantly increasing expansion of the private realm (...) the dangers of corruption and perversion were much more likely to arise from private interests than from public power.

The expansion of the private realm gave rise to reconfiguration of the public realm so that the latter could cope with the improvement in industry and transportation (Nelson 9). In a sense, the Jacksonians responded to these socio-economic changes, but with the result of estrangement from Jeffersonian principles, i.e. with the corruption of the structure of government and of people. In terms of people’s character, with the development mentioned above, mutual *dependence* emerged between government and people via *interest*, exemplified by the spoils system (Wood 248).⁵ This is diametrically opposite to Jefferson’s view of the good American character – virtuous and independent (Yarbrough 48). Whitman (Whitman, *The Journalism II* 301), in the entry “New light and Old,” deploras:

In plain truth, “the people expect too much of the government.” Under a proper organization (...) the wealth and happiness of the citizens could be hardly touched by the government – could neither be retarded nor advanced. Men must be “masters unto themselves,” and not look to presidents and legislative bodies for aid. In this wide and naturally rich country, the best government indeed is “that which governs least.”

⁵ Through the spoils system, “the Democrats controlled the growing bureaucracy and rewarded many supporters with patronage jobs” (Paul Finkelman and Peter Wallenstein, eds. *The Encyclopedia of American Political History*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2001, 122).

Whitman was on to something; something is wrong with America. Here, with the help of political science, we can have a more refined understanding of Whitman's discomfiture. Here, Nelson's insight is profitable. He (2-3) states:

In antebellum America the democratic ideal of popular self-rule was translated into a reality of party government through the medium of yet a third concept – that of the rule of the majority.

Nelson emphatically makes a distinction between 1) democracy: "any polity in which the people freely select their rulers," 2) majority rule: "a system of government in which at least the members of the legislative branch are elected to office by one more than half the people who are eligible to vote and who do in fact vote," and 3) party government: "a system of government in which officials are selected and maintained in office by a political organization, usually from among its members." The antebellum America witnessed an emerging form of party government by the Democratic party, exemplified by the spoils system of an unprecedented degree (Nester 299). Whitman's discomfiture stems from a paradox. On the one hand, Whitman the party journalist took party government as a given; on the other hand, he adhered to Jeffersonian principles.

Whitman's involvement in the Wilmot Proviso controversy⁶ and ensuing excommunication from *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Rodgers xxx-xxxi) threw the discrepancy between his ideal and the actuality into sharp relief. Whitman (Whitman, *The Journalism II* 348) called the Wilmot Proviso the "Jeffersonian proviso" and stuck to it in the face of the party platform which rejected it (Morrison 80-81). Whitman became aware that party loyalty precedes (his understanding of) party principles. For Whitman, the rejection of the "Jeffersonian Proviso" is the rejection of Jefferson, which in turn meant that the Democratic party abandoned its own principle. His personal experience in the Wilmot Proviso controversy brought home to Whitman the actuality of party government in which party politics precedes the popular opinion on the extension of slavery. In other words, Whitman became aware that he had overestimated the Democratic party. He (Whitman, *The Journalism II* 228) had stated: "true liberty could not long exist in this country without our party" (original emphasis). Whitman (347) had viewed the Democratic party as a party of Jefferson's doctrine, the safeguard of the revolutionary spirit (Erkkila 19-20), but in fact it was not. Thus, disillusioned Whitman was forced to reflect on his life and reconstruct his *raison d'être* – something different from the Party journalist. Yet, for Whitman the fact remains that he himself overcame the temporal barrier to inherit the Republican virtue which Jefferson intended to foster among people. These developments concurred around 1847 when Whitman embarked on his poetic enterprise.

I propose that the change in Whitman's self-perception is revealed in how he employs his trope "door" in his editorial and in "Song of Myself." On the one hand, in

⁶ Introduced in August of 1846, the Wilmot Proviso aimed to ban slavery within the land acquired as a result of the Mexican War; it is an amendment attached to a bill appropriating money to be used in negotiating the Treaty with Mexico (Cleveland Rogers and John Black, eds. *The Gathering of the Forces: Vol. I*. New York: Putnam, 1920, 182). The Wilmot Proviso caused Northern-Southern sectional controversy on the slavery all over the nation (Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic politics and sectionalism: The Wilmot proviso controversy*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967, 31-34).

July of 1846 – before the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso, and thus his disillusionment about the Democratic party – Whitman (Whitman, *The Journalism I* 481) wrote an editorial titled “Swing Open the Doors!” in which he states: “We must be constantly pressing onward – every year throwing the doors wider and wider – and carrying our experiment of democratic freedom to the very verge of the limit.” On the other hand, in “Song of Myself,” Whitman (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 32) wrote:

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!

Although it is Erkkila (43) who pays attention to the import of Whitman’s trope “door” and compares the above two writings of Whitman, I propose to go beyond her by taking the opposite position on the relation between Whitman the journalist and Whitman the poet. In other words, in arguing how Whitman employs his trope “door,” whereas Erkkila emphasizes the continuation between the two Whitmans, I accentuate the break between the two. In the comparison between the two writings of Whitman, Erkkila states that “his phrases (the quote in ‘Swing Open the Doors!’) roll with the participial rhythms of his later free-verse poems, and his open-door image anticipates the democratic challenge he hurls at his readers in ‘Song of Myself.’” In her stress on the continuation between the two Whitmans, Erkkila also notes that “Whitman’s *Eagle* editorials were a prose dress rehearsal for the political text of his poems.”

Although I agree with Erkkila in principle, I propose that a close attention to Whitman’s usage of the “door” shows not the continuation but the break between the two Whitmans. The difference in his perspective is salient: one within the existing institutions and the other outside of them. On the one hand, in his editorial of 1846 – before his disillusionment about the Democratic party – Whitman says about “every year throwing the doors wider and wider.” The comparative form (wider and wider) indicates that Whitman based his idea on the existing institutions. He still had a unified vision on the American Experiment, the Democratic party, and himself. On the other hand, the lines: “Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” in “Song of Myself” suggest that there was no such unified vision anymore. Whitman became more radicalized and demanded to uproot the existing systems by the spirit like that of Jefferson’s “ward system.” The above lines in “Song of Myself” reflect Whitman’s urge to continue the American Experiment of self-government in its original spirit.

I argue that Whitman’s awareness of the significance of the revolutionary spirit plays the key role in his becoming a poet. Generally, as Wolosky (148) notes: “Poetry is conceived as actively participating in the national life” at Whitman’s time. And more specifically, in the context of the Revolution, Tang (138) states: “A whole body of poetry on revolutionary participants appeared in popular literature during the late 1830s and early 1840s.” Whitman was not alone to choose the medium of poetry to retrieve the revolutionary spirit and thus fill the generation gap in this respect. As regards the role of poets here, Arendt’s insight (280), though she does not refer to Whitman, is helpful:

This, and probably much more, was lost when the spirit of revolution – a new spirit and the spirit of beginning something new – failed to find its appropriate institution. There

is nothing that could compensate for this failure or prevent it from becoming final, except memory and recollection. And since the storehouse of memory is kept and watched over by the poets, whose business it is to find and make the words we live by (...).

Without “appropriate institution” such as Jefferson’s ward system with the aforementioned disqualification of the Democratic party, poetry is the “second-best” institution to retain the revolutionary spirit. Yet, unlike other poets, Whitman sought to do more than to prevent it from wearing thin with time. It is probable that Whitman was aware where the problem lay. This is not just a matter of the generation gap, but an inherent paradox of the revolutionary spirit appeared to be important – two-sidedness of the spirit of the new and the concern with stability, and thus it can be experienced only in revolution itself without remove – without even the mediation of the Founding Fathers. Just as the ward system is a continuous revolution for Jefferson, the poetry is the same for Whitman. Furthermore, this paradox inherent to the revolutionary spirit is the Original Paradox with the capitals of O and P – like the Original Sin – which precedes other paradoxes such as the relation between the individual and the mass, between the states and the federal government. The critics of Whitman note that he sought to solve this paradox through his poetry (Reynolds 112). With the help of the medium of poetry, Whitman sought to have it both ways – the spirit of the new and the durability based on it, two sides of the revolutionary spirit – and then cope with other paradoxes. (Re) gaining the revolutionary spirit for himself and other Americans is the first thing to do. Whitman intended *Leaves of Grass* to be “the salvation of the republic” (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. XII* 394).

This – Whitman’s poetic “salvation of the republic” – takes greater significance in the context specific to the U.S. in 1850s, the Northern-Southern sectionalism over the slavery issue. The American Revolution was thought to best express the American national idea (Grant 25), but its legacy was far from consensual and became the point of contention between the North and the South (28-29). Two founding documents – the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution – came to signify the opposition between the North and the South; the North prioritized the Declaration over the Constitution, and the South vice versa (Hattem 40, 43). In the slavery controversy, the North forefronted equality expressed in the Declaration, and the South right to property in the Constitution (34, 48). While putting the Declaration above the Constitution (Erkkila 19, 46), Whitman the poet shied away from taking sides; thus he had recourse to the medium of poetry so that he could convey a unifying, de-sectionalized rendering of the American Revolution.

Arendt (166) states: “What the American Revolution actually did was to bring the new American experience and the new American concept of power out into the open.” Likewise, in his revolution, Whitman brought “the new *individual* American experience into the open.” Here the phrase “into the open” reminds us of Whitman’s key phrase – “in the open air.” He (Whitman, *Unpublished Prose Manuscripts: Volume IV: Notes* 264) wrote:

We have had man indoors and under artificial relations – man in war, in love (both the natural, universal elements of human lives) – man in courts (...) but never before have we had man in the open air, his attitude adjusted to the seasons and as one might describe it, adjusted to the sun by day and the stars by night.

Whitman brought “man in the open air” into the open; ordinary people are at the center of his poetry. Ordinary people’s act of telling about themselves, telling about “interior American republic,” has significance. Ingersoll agrees; he (13) states: “The glory of simple life was sung; a declaration of independence was made for each and all.”

Whitman linked the revolutionary spirit with a cure for the issue of individual morals at his time. In the editorial (March 1846) on the License Law, with the title “You Cannot Legislate Men into Virtue,” he (Whitman, *The Journalism I* 289-290) states:

It is amazing, in this age of the world – with the past, and all its causes and effects, like beacon lights behind us – that men show such ignorance, not only of the province of law, but of the true way to achieve any great reform. Why, we wouldn’t give a snap for the aid of the legislature, in forwarding a purely moral revolution! It must work its way through individual minds.

Later, in his preparatory note for the future *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman (Whitman, *Notes and Fragments Left by Walt Whitman* 30) expands on this theme:

What would it bring you to be elected and take your place in the Capitol?
I elect you to understand; that is what all the offices in the Republic could not do.

Interestingly, unlike the aforementioned break in Whitman’s self-perception, the comparison between the two writings of Whitman here shows a continuation in his view on morals. From the outset, Whitman maintained that “a *purely* moral revolution must work its way through individual minds (emphasis mine),” not through political institutions. The saying of Whitman in the preparatory note that what his poems convey is more potent than the sum of governmental power constitutes the expansion of his editorial of the past. In his continual emphasis on “Moral revolution,” Whitman followed in the footsteps of Jefferson, who maintained that spirit of people precedes systems of government (Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Vol. II* 230). At Whitman’s time, “Moral revolution” became crucial in republican self-government. The Founding Fathers’ concern that popular power must be limited by popular rights (Nelson 5) markedly resurfaced in the slavery controversy (Erkkila 61). The aforementioned socio-economic-political changes made the redemption from the corruption of people an urgent task, and through his poetry Whitman sought this redemption.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the revolutionary spirit, this study has tried to illustrate the relation between Jefferson’s ward system and Whitman’s poetic enterprise. Jefferson was anxious about the degradation of the structure of government and character of people, and proposed the ward system to halt the degradation. The ward republic is a space where people can experience the revolutionary spirit whereby Jefferson sought to stem both the consolidation of power and the corruption of people. Although the ward republic was not put into effect, it is intriguing that Whitman showed great fascination with it. The goals of both enterprises – Jefferson’s ward

republic and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* — share the significance on continuous experience of the American Revolution. Like Jefferson, Whitman intended *Leaves of Grass* to be “the salvation of the republic,” and Whitman's “interior republic” — with more focus on the mind of individual Americans — can be called the further subdivision of Jefferson's ward republic. Like Jefferson's ward system, the poetics of Whitman sought to oblige each individual to re-embrace the revolutionary spirit.

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