

Transcendentalism, Whitman, and the Beats: A Literary Dialogue on Technology and Nature¹

DOI: 10.7311/PJAS.19/2025.05

Abstract: This article examines the philosophical and literary tensions between Transcendentalist ideals and Walt Whitman's embrace of industrial modernity. While Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau emphasized nature as a source of spiritual insight and personal liberation, they expressed ambivalence—and in Thoreau's case, outright skepticism—toward industrialization and mechanization. Thoreau's *Walden* offers a pointed critique of technology's dehumanizing effects and the erosion of authentic living, a critique that remains relevant in contemporary environmental and socio-political discourse. In contrast, Whitman celebrated technological progress and American expansionism, particularly in "Song of Myself" and "Passage to India." His optimism about modernity, however, often overlooked its social and environmental consequences. This study explores how Whitman's vision of progress, though revolutionary, required later literary movements, most notably the Beat Generation, to expose its contradictions. Through an analysis of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs, the article argues that the Beats inherited and critiqued Whitman's legacy, revealing industrial society's dehumanizing aspects. This dialectic underscores the complexities of progress. While Whitman saw modernity as a force for good, he failed to acknowledge how it also served as a mechanism of control and disenfranchisement. The Beat Generation, acting as his supplement, illuminated these limitations, offering a counter-narrative that balanced admiration for human ingenuity with a recognition of its dangers. In doing so, they extended the critical tradition Whitman helped establish, ensuring that discussions on progress, technology, and human freedom remain evolving. Ultimately, this study highlights the necessity of reevaluating literary visions of progress in light of their unintended consequences, urging a more nuanced understanding of modernity's dual nature.

Keywords: Transcendentalism, nature, Walt Whitman, technology, progress, modernity, Beat Generation

Transcendentalism and the Industrial Dilemma: A Return to Nature

In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx explores the cultural and ideological tensions in early American responses to industrialization, focusing on the symbolic clash between pastoral ideals and advancing technology. Through figures like Boswell, Jefferson, Coxe, and Carlyle, Marx traces a historical arc from Enlightenment optimism about mechanization to Romantic and Transcendentalist anxieties about its spiritual and moral costs. He highlights how Jefferson and Coxe

¹ Cette publication s'intègre dans le projet de l'EUR FRAPP (ANR-18-EURE-0015 FRAPP).

tried to reconcile technology with agrarianism, with Coxe especially crafting a vision of harmony between machine and landscape. Yet by the 1830s, as Marx argues, thinkers like Carlyle began warning of mechanization's dehumanizing effects, critiques largely dismissed in America, where industrial progress was equated with national destiny. Figures such as Amasa Walker even envisioned technology as a moral force capable of liberating labor and elevating society. Marx argues that this belief in technological redemption became a central American myth, embodied by the locomotive and echoed in literature by Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, Twain, and others who wrestled with the machine's symbolic power in a rapidly changing world (Marx 145-226).

Among them, Emerson and Thoreau stood at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement, which emerged in the early 19th century as a distinctly American response to Romanticism. Rooted in the ideals of individualism, self-reliance, and spiritual communion with nature, Transcendentalism sought both personal and political liberation through an intimate connection with the natural world. For Emerson and Thoreau, nature was not merely a scenic backdrop but a sacred, living force that offered insight, renewal, and freedom from the constraints of industrial society. Their writings laid the philosophical groundwork for a uniquely American vision of transcendence, one deeply skeptical of materialism yet open to the higher possibilities of human experience.

However, within Transcendentalist thought, views on science and technology were not monolithic. While both Emerson and Thoreau valued nature as a source of spiritual insight, their responses to technological and scientific progress diverged significantly. Emerson stood out among his contemporaries for his optimism about science and invention. In an age of growing industrialization and scientific advancement, he saw technology not as a dehumanizing force, but as a path to intellectual and cultural enrichment. As discussed by Leonard N. Neufeldt, Emerson envisioned science as a means of expanding human consciousness and achieving self-reliance. Neufeldt writes: "Among literary figures Emerson was virtually alone in his endorsement of the possibilities of technology and science for the individual and the culture" (329-344). Emerson believed that technological and scientific discovery could deepen humanity's understanding of its place in the cosmos. Though not a scientist himself, Emerson supported institutions like the Smithsonian and Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology and maintained a philosophical engagement with science in works like *The American Scholar* and *Works and Days*. These writings highlight his belief in the unifying potential of invention, self-discovery, and intellectual growth (329-344).

In contrast, Henry David Thoreau approached technology with a much more critical eye. Thoreau, in *Walden* (1854), criticized the increasing dominance of industrial progress, arguing that technology, rather than liberating humanity, often enslaved individuals to materialistic pursuits and artificial lifestyles. He cautioned against allowing mechanization to dictate human existence, believing that true freedom resided in simplicity and a deep engagement with the rhythms of the natural world.

In their article, Claiton Marcio da Silva and Leandro Gomes Moreira Cruz analyze Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as a critical text for rethinking human and nonhuman relationships in the Anthropocene era. While *Civil Disobedience* is widely recognized as Thoreau's primary political work, the authors argue that *Walden* also contains a significant socio-environmental critique. Using concepts from environmental humanities and ecocriticism, they expand Michel Foucault's notion of biopower to include nonhuman entities, challenging the traditional anthropocentric worldview. Thoreau's reflections on indigenous cultures and European settlers highlight the destructive impact of industrial civilization on natural ecosystems. By positioning *Walden* as a foundational text for ecological thought, da Silva and Moreira Cruz suggest that Thoreau's work remains relevant for contemporary discussions on environmental ethics, power relations, and sustainability in the Anthropocene (50-68).

This tension between Emerson's embrace of and Thoreau's skepticism toward science and technology echoes earlier philosophical critiques, particularly those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *The Social Contract* (1762) Rousseau argued that modern civilization and technological development led to alienation, inequality, and the erosion of authentic freedom. He believed that the natural state of humanity was one of autonomy and equality, which had been corrupted by the rise of industry and modern institutions. The Transcendentalists, particularly Thoreau, channeled Rousseau's vision, promoting a return to simpler, more self-sufficient modes of living that aligned with nature rather than industry.²

Therefore, the Transcendentalist approach to technology was far from uniform. While the movement broadly critiqued modernity in favor of natural and spiritual renewal, Emerson and Thoreau exemplified contrasting interpretations. Emerson saw technological progress as a potential ally in the pursuit of transcendence, while Thoreau regarded it as a spiritual and moral hazard that diverted individuals from true freedom.

Whitman's attitude toward technology, particularly the divine allure he bestows upon it, reflects a central aspect of the American spirit during the 19th century. This was a time when Americans began to look at technological advancements with reverence, often likening them to divine gifts that held the potential to transform society and elevate humanity. Whitman's embrace of modern technology, such as the locomotive, was not just an acknowledgment of industrial progress but an almost religious interpretation of the role that technology would play in shaping the future. This sense of awe toward innovation aligns with the belief that technology was part of a larger, divine plan for the nation's progress. Whitman, much like his contemporaries, saw the machine as both a literal and symbolic manifestation of the American experiment, one that was bound to bring people together and propel the country toward greater things.

Whitman's "To a Locomotive in Winter" exemplifies this deep reverence for technology, particularly the locomotive, which was at the forefront of America's industrial revolution. The poem is not just a description of a machine in motion, but

2 For a detailed exploration of Rousseau's critique of modernity and the paradox of technology, see Deneys-Tunney.

a vivid, almost spiritual meditation on its beauty and power. Whitman personifies the locomotive, treating it as an awe-inspiring force that reflects the grandeur of the American landscape and spirit.

From *Leaves of Grass* to Bloodied Fields: Whitman's Faustian Obsession with Progress

Whitman's enthusiastic embrace of modernity, which clashed with the Romantic rejection of technological encroachment, becomes particularly evident in his support for the Union during the Civil War. His celebration of the Union's cause (and by extension, technological advancement) stands in contrast to the Transcendentalists' belief in the spiritual healing power of nature, which they feared was being undermined by the relentless march of industrialization. Whitman, however, was far less concerned with the costs of progress. His unwavering optimism about the future, shaped by the expansionist ideals of American exceptionalism, led him to overlook the dangers of unchecked technological growth, including the devastating consequences of modern warfare.

The American Civil War (1861–65) was a four-year conflict between the United States and 11 Southern states that seceded to form the Confederate States of America. Tensions leading to the war stemmed from deep sectional divides over slavery, with the North's rapidly industrializing economy contrasting sharply with the South's reliance on slavery and large-scale plantations. The debate over the extension of slavery into new territories intensified during the 1850s, culminating in the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. His victory, coupled with Northern opposition to the spread of slavery, led to the secession of Southern states. The war began in April 1861 when Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter, marking the start of a brutal conflict. Despite early calls for military service and initial Confederate mobilization, the war would become the deadliest in U.S. history, reshaping the nation's political and social landscape (Hassler and Weber).

Henry Miller, writing seventy-five years after the American Civil War (1861–1865) in his book *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, portrays the southern regions of America in the following manner: "The South is crumbling under the heel of the conqueror. From Rome to Savannah, along the old wagon routes, one can still trace Sherman's march to the sea. It is the path of a vandal, the path of a soldier who said that war is hell and who demonstrated it by the use of fire and sword. The South will never forget Sherman, never forgive him" (232). Miller's condemnation of Sherman's scorched earth tactics during his march in late 1864, when Union forces decimated civilian infrastructure and economic resources in Georgia, evokes a devastating picture of modern warfare's unchecked violence. This scorched earth policy aimed to cripple the Confederate economy and expedite its collapse but left scars on the Southern landscape that would persist long after the war's conclusion. In this context, one might see a direct line between Miller's critique and Whitman's celebratory, even ecstatic, embrace of war's transformative power.

Perhaps the warriors who inflicted such devastation in the South were the same “bridegroom” referenced by Whitman in his poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” who no longer had time to enjoy marital bliss due to the outbreak of the Civil War.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
 Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
 Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
 Into the school where the scholar is studying,
 Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride,
 Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
 So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow. (419)

This twenty-one line poem, first published in the September 1861 issue of *Harper's Weekly* and the *New York Leader*, was widely reprinted in newspapers across the United States. In 1865, it was included in Whitman's *Drum-Taps*, a collection of poems through which he sought to capture the essence of the Civil War. The poem opens with a forceful imperative: “Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!” The repetition of this command does not signal sorrow or warning but rather the sheer, mechanical power of war. The rhythm evokes the ceaseless motion of industrial machinery, underscoring the poet's belief in progress as an unstoppable force. War, in Whitman's view, is a mechanism that overrides all human concerns. The bridegroom's disruption of his marital bliss, the farmer's abandoned plow, the scholar's interrupted studies, all are casualties of war's indomitable forward motion. Whitman seems to see this intrusion not as a tragedy but as a cleansing: an upheaval necessary for the future of the nation.

What motivated Whitman to fervently support the Union during the Civil War? Was it a commitment to democracy and the defense of anti-slavery efforts, as is often assumed, or was there another driving force? Whitman is known as the poet of American democracy, a poet who apparently accompanies men and women, master and slave, and black and white. George Kateb, the political theorist and the author of *Utopia and Its Enemies*, describes Whitman as “the greatest philosopher of democratic culture” (545-571). But we should answer to this question that, as the poet of American democracy, how could Whitman write these racist lines in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* (6 May 1858), just three years after publishing the first version of *Leaves of Grass*: “Who believes that the Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so? As long as the Blacks remain here, how can they become anything like an independent and heroic race? There is no chance for it” (Turner 705-718).

Jack Turner examines Whitman's vision of westward expansion, arguing that it was shaped by racial exclusion. Turner contends that while Whitman supported universal suffrage, his writings suggest that he assumed Black people would remain in the South and eventually disappear, much like Indigenous peoples (705-718).

David S. Reynolds delves into the parallels between Whitman and Abraham Lincoln, highlighting their shared views on race and slavery. Reynolds points out that even Lincoln took a cautious stance on these issues. Reynolds notes that until the second year of the Civil War, Lincoln held colonizationist views, believing that slaves, once freed, should be gradually shipped out of the country. He also expressed doubts about the successful integration of races in America. While Lincoln avoided overt racism displayed by many of his contemporaries, he occasionally used derogatory terms and engaged in racially insensitive jokes. Reynolds suggests that Whitman's views on race and slavery shared similarities with Lincoln's. Both expressed doubt about the successful integration of races. Reynolds observes that, in some respects, Lincoln was more conservative than Whitman in their approaches to these issues (165-166).

So it was not Whitman's seemingly egalitarian tendencies, as is often assumed, that led him to defend the Union against the Southern Confederacy. Rather, the conflict between North and South stemmed from divergent paths of development and conflicting economic interests: the agrarian South relied on slavery for agricultural prosperity, while the industrializing North, much like Goethe's *Faust*, was driven by an insatiable desire for expansion and progress.³ Whitman's enthusiasm for modernity and technological advancement led him to overlook the potential dangers of unchecked industrialization. His support for the North during the Civil War was rooted more in his belief in progress than in abolitionist convictions. Just as *Faust* turned a blind eye to the costs of his relentless ambition, Whitman largely ignored the calamities inflicted by the North during the war; calamities that, even after seventy-five years, Henry Miller would recognize with a more critical eye.

Unveiling Whitman's Blindness: Modernity's Challenges in Beat Literature

Whitman's "Song of Myself" stands as a vibrant celebration of individualism, human progress, and the unfolding power of modernity. The poet exalts "positive science," singing praises of technological achievements and rational thought. In particular, Whitman extols the "exact demonstration" of scientific discoveries, with a passionate optimism about the forward march of knowledge. Yet, paradoxically, in his embrace of modernity, Whitman turns a blind eye to the destructive consequences that the very same progress could unleash. Whitman's vision of modernity in "Song of Myself" is saturated with an unwavering belief in scientific progress and rationalism:

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

3 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808), a tragic play, explores the quest for knowledge, power, and fulfillment through the character of Faust, who makes a pact with the devil in exchange for worldly experiences and unending ambition. Faust's insatiable desire for progress and expansion mirrors the industrial drive of the North during the Civil War, as both are characterized by a relentless pursuit of advancement without fully considering the consequences.

A word of the faith that never balks,
 One time as good as another time . here or
 henceforward it is all the same to me.
 A word of reality . materialism first and last imbueing.
 Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration!
 Fetch stoncrop and mix it with cedar and branches of lilac;
 This is the lexicographer or chemist . this made a
 grammar of the old cartouches,
 These mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas,
 This is the geologist, and this works with the scalpel, and
 this is a mathematician. (49)

In these lines, Whitman's exuberance for technological and scientific innovation is palpable, presenting science as a force for liberation and enlightenment. Yet, as we delve deeper into Whitman's life and work, we see a tension between his celebration of progress and his refusal to confront the darker facets of modernity that unfolded around him, particularly the civil war and its devastating effects on humanity.

In *Memoranda during the War*, Whitman writes, "Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors, (not the few great battles) of the Secession War; and it is best they should not" (778). This passage reflects Whitman's awareness of the traumatic human costs of modern warfare, particularly within the military hospitals, which he terms "interiors." While Whitman highlighted the individuality of injured or wounded soldiers in some of his *Drum-Taps* poems and his notes in *Memoranda during the War*, he deliberately refrained from disclosing certain crucial details that should have been conveyed to future generations. For instance, he did not mention how field hospitals during the Civil War transformed into laboratories for the development of modern medicine or the instances where doctors, empowered by the hospital institution, would sometimes perform surgeries while under the influence, leading to fatal outcomes for their patients (Adams 54-55).

Whitman's ambivalence toward the darker aspects of modernity becomes clear in his portrayal of the hospital as a place of both healing and dehumanization. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault describes the emergence of the hospital as a space where the human body is reduced to an object of scientific observation. Although Whitman often praised the achievements of modern science in lofty, celebratory terms, he largely avoided addressing how medical institutions increasingly treated individuals as mere subjects of clinical inquiry. The Civil War, while accelerating medical progress, did so at a staggering human cost, providing thousands of bodies that served as material for experimentation and advancement.

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault explores the transformation of medical discourse in the late 18th century, highlighting how the clinic restructured both the perception and verbalization of disease. Before the major discoveries of the

19th century, medical knowledge changed its methods more than its fundamental forms. The clinic, as Foucault argues, introduced a new way of organizing and perceiving the body, marking a shift from general, abstract concepts of disease to a more localized and detailed understanding of symptoms and their effects on the individual. The clinic's emergence replaced the broad medical questions of the past, such as "What is the matter with you?" with the more precise inquiry, "Where does it hurt?" This shift reflects a deeper change in the relationship between the body, the disease, and the medical profession, wherein disease is no longer understood as a general malady but as a localized, three-dimensional phenomenon tied to specific causes and effects. Foucault underscores that the significance of the clinic lies not just in its empirical focus but in its reorganization of medical discourse, which allowed for a new, systematic understanding of disease (xviii- xix). This shift laid the groundwork for the rise of modern medicine and its approach to the body as an object of scientific analysis, a transformation that Whitman, in his enthusiastic embrace of medical progress, failed to fully acknowledge. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault discusses the silent, emerging contract between the hospital, where the poor received treatment, and the clinic, which became a place for medical training. He raises a critical moral issue: the patient who seeks help at the hospital, driven by poverty, is transformed from a subject of care into an object of clinical observation. Foucault highlights the ethical dilemma in this shift, where the patient's body is no longer solely for treatment but becomes a source of knowledge for the benefit of others. The clinic's focus on research and discovery exposed it to risk, as doctors in hospitals were not constrained by the reputation concerns that private practitioners faced, allowing them to experiment more freely. This transformation of hospital aid into a site for medical experimentation fundamentally altered the relationship between the patient and the care they received. This change in medical practice aligns with Whitman's celebration of the clinic's role in modern medicine, but he overlooked the potential exploitation of the poor in this new system. Foucault writes:

The most important moral problem raised by the idea of the clinic was the following: by what right can one transform into an object of clinical observation a patient whose poverty has compelled him to seek assistance at the hospital? He had asked for help of which he was the absolute subject, insofar as it had been conceived specifically for him; he was now required to be the object of a gaze, indeed, a relative object, since what was being deciphered in him was seen as contributing to a better knowledge of others. (83)

As the decades passed and modernity continued to unfold, the complexities and contradictions of technology and progress came under sharper scrutiny. The Beat Generation writers, who emerged in the mid-twentieth century, offered a profound critique of the very technological advancements that Whitman had hailed as the markers of human progress. While they celebrated some of modernity's achievements, such as transportation systems and the ability to traverse roads

and highways, the Beats also voiced deep reservations about the consequences of unchecked technological growth and the social control it enabled.

For writers like Jack Kerouac, technology was not merely a symbol of freedom; it was also a tool for potential domination. In his dystopian short story *cityCityCITY*, Kerouac imagines a future in which a technocratic elite uses technology to manipulate and control a subjugated population (129-134). Similarly, William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* paints a chilling portrait of a world governed by technology and state-sanctioned control. In one of its most chilling scenes, Burroughs introduces Doctor "Fingers" Schafer, who envisions a future where the human nervous system is reduced to mechanical components: "Gentlemen, the human nervous system can be reduced to a compact and abbreviated spinal column ... I give you my Master Work: The Complete All American De-Anxietized Man" (87).

In these narratives, the potential for technology to act as a dehumanizing force is laid bare. Whereas Whitman had viewed scientific and technological progress as a beacon of human achievement, the Beats recognized that it also posed a serious threat to individuality, autonomy, and basic human rights.

Allen Ginsberg, in "Howl," captured this disillusionment with modernity, especially as it intersected with technology. Ginsberg's portrayal of Moloch, a monstrous, machine-like figure, symbolizes the destructive power of modern technology. Moloch represents the dehumanizing force of industrialization and technological growth, a threat Whitman could not have foreseen. In Ginsberg's vision, technology was not a liberating force but a harbinger of barbarism (Ginsberg). This critique of modern technology is echoed in Amiri Baraka's *Somebody Blew Up America*, which uses the lens of technology to comment on the violence and terrorism of the post-9/11 era, further expanding the critique of technology's darker side (Baraka).

While Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), pinpointed the issues that Whitman overlooked, they argued that the exaltation of reason by 18th-century Enlightenment thinkers, coupled with technological advancements, gave rise to oppressive and inhumane forms of governance. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment's celebration of reason and instrumental rationality had inadvertently become instrumentalized itself, leading to the domination and manipulation of nature, society, and individuals. In essence, the suppression of nature and its subjugation by humanity eventually led to the suppression of humanity itself and its subjugation by fellow humans. While Whitman's mention of "positive science" carries a broader and potentially more ambiguous meaning than "positivism," his optimistic and one-sided stance toward modernism and technological development is exactly what Adorno and Horkheimer criticize. According to the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the concepts of myth and positivism share a common origin rooted in the human desire to explain and exert control over the world. Positivism, similar to myth, perceives reality as governed by fixed mathematical laws, disregarding the significance of abstract concepts.

This concern with the darker consequences of modernity is also central to the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. These thinkers critiqued the optimistic faith in reason and technological progress, which can be seen as similar to the ideals embodied by Whitman. While Adorno and Horkheimer did not directly address Whitman, their critique resonates with the mythic perception of science and progress that Whitman held. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment's reverence for reason and instrumental rationality paradoxically led to the creation of oppressive and inhumane systems of control. Technology, they argued, had not been the liberating force Whitman imagined, but had instead been turned against humanity. They claimed that the celebration of "positive science" resulted in the domination of nature and, ultimately, the subjugation of humanity itself. As they write: "Magic like science is concerned with ends The 'unshakable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world' which Freud anachronistically attributes to magic applies only to the more realistic form of world domination achieved by the greater astuteness of science" (7).

Whitman's unshakeable belief in technology's potential for control aligns closely with this critique, even if he was unaware of its potentially oppressive implications. His mythologizing of science and technological progress bears a striking resemblance to the "magic" that Horkheimer and Adorno describe—an uncritical belief in human ability to master and control the world, no matter the consequences.

Burroughs, who would later be hailed for his prophetic insights into the dangers of technology, shared a similar concern. In *Naked Lunch*, he describes American society's obsession with control: "Americans have a special horror of giving up control, of letting things happen in their own way without interference. They would like to jump down into their stomachs and digest the food and shovel the shit out" (107).

For Burroughs, technology represented a deep-seated desire for control over every aspect of existence, an impulse that Whitman had romanticized but which Burroughs recognized as a pathway to dehumanization. Whereas Whitman saw technology as a liberating force, Burroughs acknowledged its darker, more oppressive potential. He recognized that the very technological systems that promised to improve life could also be used to constrain and control.

The parallels between Burroughs' work and Whitman's earlier, utopian view of technological progress are stark. Where Whitman saw science as a force for liberation, Burroughs saw it as part of an all-encompassing system of control, one that threatened to eradicate humanity's most basic freedoms. The difference between Whitman's mythologizing of modernity and Burroughs' critique highlights the profound shift in literary and philosophical attitudes toward technology and progress over the course of a century.

Ultimately, while Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* embodies the optimism of a newly industrialized world, it also reveals the limitations of his vision, particularly in its failure to confront the potential harms of unchecked technological growth.

In contrast, the Beat Generation writers, through works that critique technology's darker side, provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of modernity. They were able to see that the promise of progress could quickly turn into a force of oppression, as the very technologies Whitman celebrated became tools of control and dehumanization. Thus, while Whitman's blind optimism about science and progress reflects the era in which he lived, the Beat Generation's more cautious, critical stance reveals the challenges that modernity posed not only to the individual but to the very fabric of society itself.

Some Supplements for Whitman and the Transcendentalists

Whereas the Transcendentalists viewed the natural world as the ultimate source of truth and insight, Whitman's poetic vision was more aligned with a dynamic, evolving America, one increasingly shaped by industrial forces and technological advancements. Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, who saw nature as the foundation of personal and philosophical enlightenment, Whitman embraced the rapidly changing landscape of modernity, celebrating industrial progress as a defining aspect of American identity. His poetry reflects a belief that technology and mechanization were not merely tools of efficiency but vital expressions of human potential, offering a new kind of spiritual transcendence—one rooted not in nature, but in the collective energy of modern life.

For Whitman, progress was an essential force, inseparable from the democratic spirit of the United States. He viewed industrialization as a unifying element, fostering opportunity and individual freedom. However, in doing so, he often overlooked the darker consequences of that same progress, including the dehumanizing effects of mechanization, the alienation of workers, and the environmental toll of unchecked expansion. His celebration of technology, particularly in poems like "Passage to India," exemplifies his belief that engineering marvels such as the Suez Canal and transcontinental railroads were embodiments of human ingenuity and the boundless potential of democracy. Yet, in idealizing these achievements, he failed to address the exploitative labor conditions and imperialistic underpinnings that accompanied such projects.

Whitman's vision of democracy differed from the liberal democratic ideals associated with equal rights and social justice. Instead, he conceptualized democracy as an individual's full participation in the modern, industrialized world. This notion placed emphasis on action, movement, and progress, rather than structural equality or the rectification of systemic injustices. In his exaltation of the mechanized world, Whitman aligned himself more closely with the ideology of American expansionism than with the egalitarian principles of his Transcendentalist predecessors. His poetry suggests that through work and participation in the industrial machine, individuals could achieve a sense of fulfillment and self-actualization. However, this perspective largely ignored the realities of exploitation, class struggle, and the environmental degradation that accompanied rapid industrialization.

Whitman's perspective can be examined through Paul de Man's theory of blindness and insight, which posits that any celebration of an idea inevitably involves an inability to perceive its contradictions.⁴ Whitman's great insight lay in his ability to recognize the transformative power of modernity, but his blindness was his failure to see the suffering and alienation it produced. He equated technological advancement with progress and democracy, assuming that the march of industry would lead to greater freedom. However, this perspective ignored the oppressive mechanisms embedded within industrial capitalism, including the commodification of human labor and the reduction of individuals to mere cogs in a vast economic machine. Whitman's optimism about modernity, therefore, reflected an incomplete vision, one that required later writers to fill in the gaps and confront the darker consequences of technological advancement.

The Beat Generation writers of the mid-20th century emerged as a direct counterpoint to Whitman's vision of modernity. Figures such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs saw industrial progress not as an instrument of liberation, but as a force of alienation and control. Where Whitman found transcendence in the rhythm of machines and the expansion of cities, the Beats sought escape from the dehumanizing effects of industrial society. Their works emphasize themes of spiritual searching, resistance to societal norms, and a rejection of the mechanized world. Ginsberg's "Howl," for instance, paints a grim picture of industrial America, exposing the suffering of those crushed under the weight of economic and social expectations. In contrast to Whitman's celebration of progress, the Beats questioned whether technological advancement truly equated to human fulfillment.

This dialectic between Whitman and the Beats can be understood through Jacques Derrida's concept of the supplement. In Derrida's framework, a supplement both completes and undermines the thing it supplements, revealing its inherent insufficiencies. Just as Whitman supplemented the Transcendentalists by embracing modernity rather than retreating into nature, the Beats supplemented Whitman by exposing the contradictions within his optimism. Their work does not simply reject Whitman's vision but expands upon it, showing that progress is not inherently liberating and that industrialization can serve as a tool of both empowerment and oppression. The Beats' critique of modernity functions as a necessary addition to Whitman's narrative, challenging his uncritical celebration of technology and offering a more nuanced understanding of progress.

Robert Bernasconi's exploration of Derrida's "logic of supplementarity" further illuminates this dynamic. Derrida, drawing on Rousseau, demonstrates how Western philosophical traditions rely on binary oppositions, such as speech versus writing, while simultaneously undermining them (Bernasconi 19-22). The supplement, in this context, is not merely an addition but an indication of something already lacking in the original. Whitman's poetry, though seemingly self-sufficient in its praise of modernity, contains within it an absence, a failure to fully grapple with

4 For further study, see de Man.

the costs of progress. The Beats' response to Whitman serves as this supplement, revealing the gaps in his vision and challenging his assumption that technological advancements automatically lead to human liberation.

Whitman's legacy, then, is one of both insight and limitation. He broke from the Transcendentalists by embracing industrial progress, but he failed to anticipate the full scope of its consequences. The Beat Generation, in turn, engaged with his work dialectically, both drawing from and resisting his vision. This ongoing conversation between literary movements underscores the complexities of progress, demonstrating that every celebration of an ideal comes with an inherent blindness to its contradictions. Whitman's work remains a foundational text in American literature, not because it provides definitive answers, but because it opens the door for ongoing critical engagement. His vision of modernity, though incomplete, serves as an essential point of departure for later writers who sought to interrogate and expand upon his insights.

Ultimately, Whitman's faith in progress was as much an act of optimism as it was an act of omission. While he saw modernity as a force for good, he overlooked the ways in which it could also function as a mechanism of control and disenfranchisement. The Beat Generation, acting as his supplement, exposed these limitations, offering a counter-narrative that balanced admiration for human ingenuity with a recognition of its potential dangers. In doing so, they continued the critical tradition that Whitman himself helped to establish, ensuring that the conversation on progress, technology, and human freedom remains an evolving discourse.

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